

**Popular music careers:
Arguing contemporary
strategy for the hybridised but
disempowered Akademi
Fantasia musicians in the
Malaysian music industry**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the
requirements of the University of Liverpool for
the degree of Doctor in Philosophy.

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Declaration

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. The research described here was conducted under the supervision of Dr Michael Jones and Dr Holly Tessler at the Department of Music between November 2017 and January 2022. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Committee on Research Ethics at the University of Liverpool. I hereby certify that this thesis has been composed by me. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it is my own work that contains no previously published material written by another person, except where due reference is available in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted or concurrently submitted for a degree, diploma, or qualifications in any other tertiary institution.

Part of this work has been presented at the following conference:

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Title: Popular music careers: Arguing contemporary strategy for the hybridised but disempowered *Akademi Fantasia* musicians in the Malaysian music industry

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Abstract

This thesis examines pop musicians' career experience by focusing on Malaysian music reality television 'graduates', namely Akademi Fantasia's (AF's) musicians. The show, which is a remarkable music television hybrid, holds the national record as the 'Longest Running Singing Reality Television Show' in the 2017 Malaysia Book of Records and has remarkably produced over 170 pop music stars in its 13 series. This cultural production phenomenon is interesting in its own right but is made particularly distinctive by the contrast between AF's core proposition – that the show offers access to existing music industry star-making practices ('talent spotting' and career 'nurturing') – and the fact that the show's 'graduates' are often represented as 'instant noodles', as individuals with low 'staying power' in the Malaysian music industry. Hence, this thesis begins with an enquiry through a practice-led approach, namely the author's autoethnographic appraisal as a former AF graduate and a practising industry professional; and is supported by interviewing selected AF graduates. As the popular music career is neglected in the scholarly discourse, especially in the Malaysian context, this thesis fills that gap whilst offering a contemporary career strategy for the hybridised but disempowered pop musicians who the AF hybrid seems to be exploiting. In addition, it provides insights to such musicians, which will help them to prosper after leaving the show and survive in the increasingly disempowering music industry.

Keywords: pop music industry, music career, music reality television.

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What a journey!

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Abbreviations

<i>AF</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i>
<i>AF1</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 1
<i>AF2</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 2
<i>AF3</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 3
<i>AF4</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 4
<i>AF5</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 5
<i>AF6</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 6
<i>AF7</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 7
<i>AF8</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 8
<i>AF9</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 9
<i>AF2013</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 10
<i>AF2014</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 11
<i>AF2015</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 12
<i>AF2016</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 13
<i>AFMegastar</i>	<i>Akademi Fantasia</i> Season 14 (final)
MBNS	Measat Broadcast Network System
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia

**Chapter 1:
Reflection on the self**

1. Introduction

This chapter embarks on the thesis enquiry by reflecting on the Malaysian music reality show and its phenomenon, namely *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*. The chapter sets out with self-reflection from myself, being a follower of the show since its first inception in Malaysia. As one of the music hopefuls amazed by the *AF* pop music star machinery and its cultural production phenomenon, I will reflect on the music reality television show, illustrating its effectiveness that, to an extent, works at the level of its 'stargazers'. Secondly, I will consider my own experience that is ultimately positioned within the phenomenon, namely as a show participant, thus reflecting the impact that I had as an *AF* graduate. That once-in-a-lifetime experience that I had illustrates the process of a music hopeful, namely the transition from being a stargazer to a 'star' in the *AF* phenomenon. From these contexts, I will set the research framework by problematising the overarching topic and issues that arise with *AF* in the context of the cultural production of pop music identity and its incorporated turmoil pertaining to the show's participants, who have been offered a music career as part of the show's life transformation ethos. In general, the capability of *AF* in the sense of cultural production and phenomenon is profoundly fascinating when viewed just in terms of *AF* but somewhat problematic when viewed as part of the music industry as a whole.

2. My self-reflection: *Akademi Fantasia (AF)* phenomenon

"One hope, one purpose, one destination and we at the *Akademi Fantasia* strive to transform their dreams into reality." (Aznil Nawawi, 2005¹)

¹ "Satu harapan, satu tujuan, satu destinasi dan kami di *Akademi Fantasia* berusaha merubah impian mereka menjadi realiti." See Ieiyadila (2008) and Ismail (2011).

I can still remember how the above slogan was heavily romanticised by *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*, “one of the most iconic”² Malaysian music reality TV shows, in its third season in 2005. As articulated enthusiastically by the TV host in the live telecast, the slogan reflected the predominant role of the show, which is to sell dreams and music careers to young hopefuls by offering them a fast track to accessing the mainstream music scene. The slogan was embedded in the atmosphere of stardom and reflected through the event site at Stadium Malawati Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia, in a concert setting: the cheering crowd filled the massive space and held up placards with their favourite contestants’ names; the line-up of professional judges sat in the front row of the audience; and well-known and important industrial figures such as artists and musicians made up the guest audience.

Such an atmosphere underlined that the *AF* stage was an important one, an event that would create the next singing sensation, one wholly (and uniquely) determined by popular vote. In that case, the ‘stars’ that *AF* produced definitely have their own fans and supporters as this type of star mechanism truly trusts its audience to decide its outcome – who stays and who goes home in weekly elimination rounds, until the winner is crowned at the end of each *AF* season. Apart from creating the stars solely based on the viewers’ vote, the rewards that await the lucky individuals literally signify that *AF* is a remarkable pop star mechanism that further proposes that it is more than just a reality television or a talent show. The winner was entitled to lucrative prizes worth a total of RM321,854 (£58,134) sponsored by prominent local and global brands. The prizes consisted of an apartment at A’Famosa Resort, Melaka, worth RM175,900

² As reported in the renowned entertainment and lifestyle magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, “whatever it is, *Akademi Fantasia* is one of the most iconic reality shows ever produced in Malaysia” (Jow, 2018).

(£31,772); a 1.5 Suzuki Swift, a subcompact car worth RM78,000 (£14,089) sponsored by DRB Hicom, a holiday package to London and Paris sponsored by a local travel agency; cash worth RM20,000 (£3,612.46) sponsored by Hotlink, a local telco company; and some household and electronic products from IOWA, Gintel, Samsonite, Olympus and many more³.

What is definitely included in the prizes and makes the show look fascinating to young aspirant musicians is that *all* contestants are offered a record deal by Maestro Records – a subsidiary company of Measat Broadcast Network System (MBNS), which happens to be the company that owns a television station named Astro, the TV station that produces and airs the show. In that agreement, the *AF* graduates are offered the opportunity to have their own single or album produced, which can be seen as validating such individuals for becoming professional recording artists. For instance, the winning contestants (the winners and the finalists) would be getting an album deal, whereas the non-winning contestants (the ones that have been eliminated in the show) are entitled to a single deal as the ‘reward’ for their *AF* participation. In this respect, the record deals can also be considered an ‘official’ entry into the mainstream music market, allowing *AF* graduates to compete for recognition and, hopefully, consistent success in the professional ‘league’.

³ See Jalan (2005).



Figure 1. The AF 'graduates' singles and albums (Akademifantasia.legasi, 2021)

Akademi Fantasia

12 bakal bintang yang akan membuat anda jatuh cinta.

KEFLI, YAZER, REZA, AMYLEA, FUAD, AKMA, EMIN, FELIX, ABDIL, IDAYU, AMY, ELLIZA

Akademi Fantasia

Melangkah ke Persada Seni
Konsert Reunion
C2020 AF LEGACY COLLECTION

31 Ogos, Taman KLCC, Kuala Lumpur, 8.30 malam

Selama 10 minggu bahana AF melanda. Ada yang puas mengesat air mata, tidak kurang pula yang tidurnya tidak lena. Ada yang balik cepat berebut tempat, ada juga makan minum pun tak sempat. Jutaan terima kasih kami ucapkan. Datanglah beramai-ramai ke Konsert Reunion, khas untuk anda semua. Masuk adalah PERCUMA!

efa, Malay Mail Online, astro RIA

Figure 2. AF3 and AF4 'stars' (Akademifantasia.legasi, 2021)



Figure 3. AF stars appear on the front cover of a variety of entertainment magazines (Akademifantasia.legacy, 2021)



MENUJU PUNCAK BERSAMA

vanilla Coke

Akademi Fantasia

KEEMASAN SEHARI BERSAMA

MENUJU PUNCAK BERSAMA

MENUJU PUNCAK BERSAMA

MENUJU PUNCAK BERSAMA

MENUJU PUNCAK BERSAMA

Akademi Fantasia astro

Akademi Fantasia astro

Akademi Fantasia astro

Akademi Fantasia astro

©2020 AF LEGACY COLLECTION

Rebutlah peluang keemasan sehari bersama pemenang AF3

Miliki 4 Koleksi Bintang AF3/Vanilla Coke 325ml Edisi Terhad. Kumpulkan semua hari ini!

Untuk maklumat lanjut, layari www.vanillacoke.com.my
Tempoh Promosi: 1 Jun 2005 - 31 Julai 2005

Akademi Fantasia astro

Figure 4. AF stars as product ambassadors (Akademifantasia.legasi, 2021)

All of the *AF* specificities explain, and the pictures above illustrate, how remarkable *AF* is in the Malaysian popular music scene, especially in terms of the privilege that the aspirant music hopefuls would be entitled to if they were lucky enough to be chosen to participate in the show. With the prospects of stardom and a professional career trajectory that are obviously being offered to such individuals, the *AF* pop music identity production or 'star machinery' is deemed a credible pathway for hopefuls who want to be in the pop music industry. To put it simply, most aspiring young musicians look forward to this golden opportunity via the music reality TV route. To an extent, this economic opportunity offered to such individuals has cultivated a celebrity culture among youngsters as the show has arguably led them to "fantasiz[e] about becoming a celebrity" (Maliki, 2008, p. 73). As such, this can be reflected in the show's capacity to draw in the large numbers of hopefuls who turned up for the early seasons' audition stage. Although the first season in 2003 had 400 applicants,

"...the number increased 20 fold for the second season with 8,000 applicants. For the third season of *AF*, the number of applicants tripled to 26,000 in 2005. For its fourth season, *AF* had emerged as the most popular reality TV show in Malaysia when it received more than a million applicants in 2006" (Maliki, 2008, p. 32).

The premise of a life transformed by this music reality television strongly embodies the celebrity culture that *AF* highlights to its prospective participants. It is indeed an effective formulation that makes *AF* a music reality television phenomenon and was 'a huge craze' (Wahab, 2010) in Malaysia, especially in terms of audience reception. This further demonstrates that the show is "an influential pioneer in the national television industry, inaugurating the trend of local reality shows and weathering intense competition from similar shows to

remain at the top of the ratings chart over the last decade” (Shamshudeen and Morris, 2014, p. 142). The show has had such an impact on the television landscape that it has posited itself as a “national cultural phenomenon” (Shamshudeen and Morris, 2014, p. 143). For instance, its second season gained a total voting figure of 15 million, and succeeding seasons have continued to gather millions of votes (Ibrahim and Idris, 2005). Most notably, the show was recorded as the “Longest Running Singing Reality Television Show” in the 2017 *Malaysia Book of Records* (Zainalabidin, 2017; Chaw, 2017), and has remarkably produced over 172 pop music stars in its 13 years of production.⁴

Apart from that, the extended phenomenon associated with *AF* is that it had changed the Malaysian broadcasting landscape when it also broke a record in that it was the first music reality show of its kind produced by a satellite TV network, *Astro*, and became a notable success – it should also be noted that the audience needed to subscribe to the network in order to access the show. MBNS’s first experiment with this music reality television show has been an enormous success. It apparently created a new form of cultural consumption for the Malaysian audience, who had previously consumed content from free-to-view TV channels dominated by public and private broadcasters. By acknowledging the proliferation of this format and its achievements, *AF* as a music reality television can be seen as a hybrid in the sense that it has proposed novelty in terms of cultural consumption in the Malaysian television audience. At the same time, it is an effective motor that runs the production’s efficient creation of popular music identities.

The functions of *AF* and its impacts on the Malaysian cultural aspects are indeed praiseworthy, especially regarding

⁴ This excludes the last-ever *AF* season in 2017 named *AF Megastar – a season* that saw past *AF* winners and contestants to compete for the top prize. See appendices for the full list of all the *AF* participants.

how *AF* proposed the novel format and presented it in an unprecedented manner through a hybrid blend of music and television in a reality TV format. In creative industries contexts, such a novelty somewhat attempted to replicate the music industry regimentation of the pop star machinery. In this case, *AF* as a hybrid media text (Kraidy, 2005) that results from joint-industrial practices, namely the co-production between music and television corporations, can be seen as a 'killer application' in media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) that is chiefly and finely tuned in pursuit of profit (Kraidy, 2005) for both stakeholders. As such, *AF* has proposed a new vehicle of cultural production that is an unconventional 'talent-spotting mechanism' (as ever ritualised by music companies), demonstrating its hybridity whilst attempting to cater for a range of cultural production aspects in cross-industries – it is not difficult to discern the capability of *AF* in that respect.

Nevertheless, the long-term impact it may propose, especially for aspirant music hopefuls, is the dimension that seems important to discuss in detail. That being said, the fate of the *AF* graduates appears to be less focused on, and has been overshadowed by the reality show's phenomenon. This further demonstrates that *AF* participants or stars are likely to be isolated in the sense of the *AF* phenomenon discourse, particularly with regard to their 'real' fate post-*AF* participation. Although some individuals may appear in the entertainment media (e.g. television, radio, magazines, newspapers, etc.) with their achievements in the music or entertainment industry being covered and 'celebrated', many of them still remain 'missing'. The inaccessibility of *AF*'s participants, especially in the pop music scene, in a way proposes that they have failed to still be in the music economy and industry.

In that respect, this suggests that it is noteworthy to explore the given context, especially when *AF* is seen as the

entertainment phenomenon in Malaysia that somehow produces the unwanted cultural production phenomenon that can be reflected specifically in its participants' fate in the music industry. In exploring such a phenomenon, it is useful to reflect on the experience of the individuals *before* and *after* their *AF* participation (which I will be further discussing in the next section). This mainly concerns the process of the individuals being *AF* participants that are allowed via the music reality television route to access the music industry and continue their musical career as professional musicians. This is to study the industrial process(es), specifically concerning how both success and failure could appear in their career experience outcome, in which both outcomes have their own impacts that help or harm the musicians' career trajectories.

As such, I will first set out this exploration by reflecting on my personal encounters, being a former *AF* participant and currently a practising professional in the music industry. In doing so, I will unpack my experiences that can be regarded as 'thick descriptions', namely the autoethnographic dimension, to understand the *AF* through the lens of being an *AF* participant and *AF* graduate (see for examples Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015 for the 'thick descriptions' in autoethnography). To support this autoethnographic dimension, I will provide empirical evidence, namely the industrial discourse on the given topic.

2.1. Being an *AF* participant

"Stars and celebrities do matter: they 'house' our dreams and fuel our fantasies..." (Redmond and Holmes, 2007, p.11)

As a viewer and fan of the show, it was fascinating to witness the *AF* 'dream machine', namely the burgeoning life transformation

of music hopefuls, which resonated with the show's slogan and premise. Plus, it was interesting to me to watch the hopefuls' transition from ordinariness into the extraordinariness exhibited by the *AF* hybrid production. As such, the *AF* 'magic' does house my dreams and fuel my fantasies whilst being an *AF* 'stargazer' phenomenon, in which this particular experience is apparently similar to Redmond and Holmes's observation in their star studies account (2007) quoted above. The *AF* show's narrative and premise led me to follow it based on the specificities that I observed, namely that the show simplifies how one can ease one's way into the music market, which was useful for a music hopeful like myself who had ambitions to develop an amateur music career into a professional level. Furthermore, I was amazed by the show's outcome in that it helped young hopefuls materialise their dreams instantly with the essence of stardom, which represented such a market entry as a breakthrough into the mainstream music scene.

Being a follower of the show since its first debut in 2003 and finally a participant three years later, there are two peculiarities of the *AF* format that I was drawn to. Firstly, it is a televised pop music academy that is unprecedented in the Malaysian context in that it instantly links young aspiring music hopefuls to the 'dreamland' that is the mainstream music market. In selling a music career to these hopefuls, the *AF* format has shaped its participants' 'star text' (Dyer, 1998), which is always extensive, multimedia and intertextual. In other words, individuals from unknown backgrounds become well-known and larger-than-life figures – by optimising the 'star vehicle' (the show) that enables the star text to appear in multiplatform media in multiple industries such as music, television and radio (see also Dyer, 2002 for an entertainment stardom account). To an extent, the stars that *AF* produces work beyond the media industries as they have been appointed by big international and

local consumer brands as product ambassadors. This was something fascinating to a stargazer like me, someone who has watched the star phenomenon and inevitably fantasised about it. In addition, the strong integration between the music and TV industries in creating the *AF* hybrid production has signified a credible route to a music career for its hopefuls. This is the most fascinating aspect of the *AF* hybrid production, and I was totally preoccupied with this dynamic.

Secondly, such an academy measures its students' performance through "a unique hybrid blend of an Idol-style talent contest and Big Brother observational spectacle" (Shamshudeen and Morris, 2014, p. 142). Most importantly, this voyeuristic and televised academy allows people 'outside' the academy to evaluate the students' progress. This may sound weird, but it was actually exciting to this prospective academy student, as students are exposed to the real market in the popular music and the broader entertainment industry, even though they are still in the training phase in the academy. Nevertheless, the academy provides training to 'students' with the required knowledge, although the training is in a 'crash course' mode. During the training, there will be students leaving the academy due to the voters' power until a champion is crowned at the final concert or the phase in the academy that can be considered the graduation ceremony.



Figure 5. *The AF3 graduation 'ceremony' in 2004* (Begum, 2018)

As an *AF* participant, usually addressed in the show as an 'AF student' or 'AF star', I had the opportunity to learn basic knowledge about the performing arts from the most well-known and reputable industrial figures at the designated training site, the Akademi. The Akademi is led by a principal and teachers from related fields. At the site, the learning activities are recorded, edited and aired on *Diari AF* – a half-hour show broadcast twice daily on weekdays (in the afternoon and evening). The show exhibits the students' daily activities and life in the Akademi – this is where the audience gets the opportunity to learn more about the students in terms of their personalities and aspects other than their artistic talents. Although the students are in a well-monitored and recorded environment, they still have privacy during bedtime as their hostel is located separately from the Akademi and segregated by gender.

The students are given a weekly task in the Akademi. They are assigned to learn a song (or two) that is usually outside of their music repertoires. With the guidance of the teachers, they are required to perform the task assigned to them at the Saturday evening concert, which is adjudicated by the professional judging panel. One student (or occasionally two) with the lowest vote will be sent home by viewers' popular vote. The judging panel has absolutely no power to interfere in the democratic judging system. Instead, they are only required to give feedback on the students' performance to examine their progress and thus influence the viewers' decisions before the votes are cast.

From my own experience, it was fascinating to experience this televised pop music academy. This pre-introductory music market exposure is indeed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and a unique one, as I had the chance to learn from the right performing arts source of knowledge whilst still in the development stage of my own pop music identity. The best part of this experience was learning music and vocal performance – the areas I am interested in. Additionally, that is why I was keen to be on this music reality television show that I perceived had the elements to help develop my musicianship. With guidance from the experts, I believed that I could create a relatively strong music identity that was probably in line with the music industry expectation or the typical industry standard, which would be helpful for my post-*AF* participation. In addition to that, this was the starting point for me in creating a network with key industry people, and, at the same time, it was an early attempt to establish my reputation as a pop musician.

Nevertheless, the major downside of this televised pop institution is the democratic discretion awarded to the public, who have the means to decide who is the most promising student and Malaysia's next singing sensation. Indeed, the

formatted lifecycle of *AF* hopefuls within the *AF* hybrid system is devastating as progress does not entirely reflect the ‘meritocratic utopianism’ (Stahl, 2004) that values the students’ effort and performance. Hence, music reality television participants such as *AF* students are actually signed to something that requires them to exhibit character beyond talent and effort in such a setting, which is definitely a burden to the students. They are not only expected to perform tasks that are sometimes not their preferences, but they are also burdened with additional pressures and responsibilities in relation to their experiences of the Akademi’s learning process. This particular *AF* idiosyncrasy would be classified as ‘extraordinariness’ – a characteristic that the show demands from its contestants. This happens to be against what most music reality television shows are all about, as they have been perceived as chiefly ‘selling’ ordinary people based on their ordinariness (see Stahl, 2002; Holmes, 2004; Turner, 2010). In addition, the extraordinariness, to an extent, can refer to the excessive obligation that the participants need to fulfil that is beyond their capability, which ultimately contradicted their pre-informed knowledge about the show that they probably gained by watching the show – what has been aired on the show is the edited visual and planned narratives according to the show producer’s creativity. All of this is ultimately a pressuring experience (and confusing too) for the *AF* participants when the show requires them to exhibit elements that beyond musicality alone, whilst they have to go through the constant auditions that are the weekly ‘examination’ (Stahl, 2004; see also Meizel, 2011) and which seem to be stressing musicality, especially when the students are predominantly being reviewed by the professional judges in terms of their vocal performance.

From my perspective, I felt the pressure of being ‘watched’ because I needed to do more than learn at the

Akademi; I was asked by the show's producer to always interact with the cameras and not be such a serious person. Apart from that, I was told to style my hair according to the producers' preferences. It was difficult for me to meet such requests as I was just trying to be myself in that environment. Not only that, at the weekly concerts, not only was the performance direction (in terms of stage and costume choreographies) decided on and rehearsed three times before the live show, some of the dialogues with the show's host were also planned beforehand. This meant that the communication was scripted, and the students had to react to and follow pre-set questions and answers determined by the producer, including personal ones. There was one event where I was 'forced' by the producer to announce my status as an engaged person to someone at one of the early weekly concerts. I was reluctant to do so as I knew that the announcement would affect my voting percentage, especially at the early stages of the competition. The producer was not happy with my decision, but this was how I could at least try to protect myself from being over-exploited, as every artistic element seemed to be wholly fashioned by the production team.

Unfortunately, my *AF* journey ended in the sixth week of the competition, only two shows away from the final. I am not sure whether this elimination was scripted or not, but I am very certain that the show is capable of 'determining' its finalists. I found out about this ugly truth four years after graduating from the show in a casual chat with one of my *AF* teachers. It was really frustrating to know that I was part of the 'game' created by this televised pop music academy. I can still remember the feeling of being evicted from a show that aired on national television: I felt embarrassed, rejected, unwanted and unappreciated. The eviction seemed to kill my drive to continue on my musical journey. To an extent, my musical dreams were just turned into a nightmare. Nonetheless, all the negative vibes

faded away when I realised that I had supporters and fans, namely, a bunch of people that formed a fan club called Diddy FC, the establishment of which gave me a sense that I still had an opportunity to strive for success although I was unwittingly 'graduated' and forcibly 'removed' from my enrolment in the televised pop music training programme.

Overall, what I am trying to propose here is not simply my grievance that I have failed in *AF*. Instead, my participation in *AF* has pros and cons. The pros are likely to be the *AF* hybrid production system itself – the excitement of being associated with the pop star mechanism that is a Malaysian entertainment phenomenon. Moreover, the experiences that *AF* offers are valuable: to have training courtesy of experts in the performing arts; to appear on national television; and have the opportunity to perform in weekly concerts at which well-established pop musicians have often had this type of opportunity especially in the Malaysian context. On the other side, the cons actually highlight the *AF* hybridity that somehow explains the struggle that I had in trying to fit myself into such a hybrid system, which is apparently the opposite of what I imagined.

2.2. Being an *AF* graduate

Based on my personal experience, I still think that *AF* is a wonderful experience that is useful for young aspirant musicians and acts as a way of entering the music market despite the unfair treatment that I seemed to experience. The problem that I had with the show indicates how unprepared I was in managing the 'risk' that I was unaware of. It somehow signifies my naivety – that is why I do not blame *AF* for my failure as a participant on the show. Despite the failure, *AF* did help me in the sense of offering quite extensive visibility of my pop music identity and granting me market entry in the music industry. It is a privilege to be associated with such a profound cultural mechanism as the

musicians produced by the *AF* hybrid production are likely to be readily marketable in a wider entertainment market.

In the Malaysian music industry, I was initially known as Diddy *AF4* – the early-stage name by which I was probably familiar to those Malaysian households who watched and followed the music reality TV pop phenomenon. As an *AF* graduate, I carried that name for quite some time. A couple of years later, I ‘rebranded’ myself as Diddy Hirdy in an attempt to move away from the *AF* labelling. As mentioned, my association with the *AF* brand in relation to my industry status has had pros and cons. On the positive side, it reflects the ethos of *AF* as a pop phenomenon that is ‘cool’ to be associated with. More negatively, it reflects the given musician’s position in the music industry hierarchy, namely one reflecting a rather sad, disposable, low-class status. This further demonstrates that such musicians are being regarded as *artis mee segera* (instant noodles artists) – a conspicuous branding that reflects a negative judgement of certain pop musicians’ music industry longevity and credibility (see Utusan Online, 2009, 2010, 2014; Kosmo, 2015).

The ‘instant noodles’ connotation derived from industry-based enquiries and critiques, namely from the entertainment media and influential industry figures, that seemed to raise red flags regarding the pop musicians’ industry status. Such a notion first circulated in the media, almost like defining the *AF* graduates’ character solely based on the media perception. To include all of the media discourse on that here would involve a long and exhaustive list. Thus, the source that will be primarily referred to is Utusan Online, one of the digital media platforms owned by Utusan Malaysia, the oldest media company in Malaysia (established in 1939):

“It is kind of a nuisance when most of them seem to be more prominent in terms of their popularity than the artistic talent that is supposed to be the cornerstone of their respective careers” (Utusan Online, 2009).

“...the *AF* stars are just like instant noodles that are quite ‘appealing but less nutritious’” (Utusan Online, 2010).

“The talented and passionate winners seem to be topsyturvy in terms of steering their careers towards the industry” (Utusan Online, 2014).

The notion of ‘instant noodles’ has been mass-circulated by entertainment media, particularly by Utusan Online (2009, 2010, 2014), and can be seen as a way of classifying pop musicians in terms of how the media encouraged them to be perceived. Adding tension to this unfortunate situation for the *AF* graduates is the dynamic whereby some of the key figures in the music industry have explicitly expressed worries about the hybrid’s negative impact on the career launches of aspirant musicians via the hybrid media text mechanism. Such key industry figures have also elevated their condemnation while also inadvertently pointing out some glitches in the *AF* hybrid format:

“...the quality of new talent produced by the music talent show via contemporary reality television programmes is not convincing as most judges are not the right individuals to be judges... please consider the effect on the industry in the long run, not just to generate popularity [for the show].” (Dato’ Ahmad Nawab, Malaysian music maestro)⁵

“They [the *AF* participants] are selected not because of their singing ability.” (Datuk Aznil Nawawi, Astro’s Talent

⁵ See dBOS-fm (2008).

Development Division Vice-President, Popular TV host:
AF host)⁶

“When I was chosen as one of the judges, I hoped to see that the programme produced the ‘right’ winner. Most of the previous seasons’ results are disappointing for me.” (Datuk Syafinaz Selamat, vocal coach, soprano soloist and academic)⁷

“Sometimes the eliminated ones are much better than the winners.” (Ziana Zain, award-winning pop singer and actress)⁸

Most of the perspectives from the industry, including key media and key industry figures, demonstrate similar concerns, especially in shaping conceptions of hybrid pop musicians (except for one shocking assertion from Datuk Aznil Nawawi that reflects how exploitative the *AF* hybrid has been in relation to the hopefuls). With regard to the media perspective, their view on this issue might sound rather judgmental, whilst the key figures themselves raise a rather rational perspective commenting on this event. With such a branding associated with *AF* graduates, it further proposes that the presence of *AF* graduates in the music industry seems to be ephemeral whilst the musicians lack industry staying power and are not ‘built to last’.

As one of the *AF* graduates who apparently felt this impact of the ‘instant noodles’ labelling, it is in some ways limiting me in having a long-term music industry career. As the nature of *AF* is that it ran its star machinery annually, it produced a bunch of music reality television graduates who would then be released into the music industry. As such, the industry is likely to be saturated with this kind of music ‘star’, in which individuals with

⁶ The quote is from an interview session conducted during fieldwork in Malaysia.

⁷ See Mohd. Tahir (2017).

⁸ See Mohd. Tahir (2017).

such a pop music identity status need to be highly competitive to ensure that they will have sustainability in the music industry. However, they are prone to failure in most cases as very few survive in the music industry.

This failure somehow is apparently not unusual in the Malaysian music industry and in most non-Malaysian contexts (see Jones, 1997, 2002, 2012; Stahl, 2013; Tschmuck, 2017; Frith, 1983, 2018; for examples of music industry scholarly accounts). In the context of *AF* and the Malaysian music industry, the 'survivors' who usually have sustaining power in the music industry are likely to be the centre of attention, further exemplifying that they are worth more attention than the failures. The dynamics of this cultural production outcome are interesting in their own right, especially from a music reality television phenomenon that is unprecedented in the Malaysian context. It is interesting to see how the musicians can create success and face failure, which further indicates how they manage such outcomes and thus strategise their careers accordingly in the music industry. Having said that, it is noteworthy to further scrutinise the *AF* musicians' experiences in establishing a pop music identity, starting from the first stage of entering the industrial system, namely *AF*, until they have experienced the later industrial system that is the music industry itself.

3. Research framework

This thesis aims to explore the Malaysian music industry career by focusing on *AF* graduates' career experience. It is an exploratory account of the *AF* phenomenon that focuses on its cultural production of pop music identity through *AF* as the hybrid media text. In exploring the phenomenon that closely links with phenomenological principles, as noted by Moustakas (1994), it "seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences

through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings” (p. 52). In that respect, this exploration of the *AF* phenomenon is based on my own experience of *AF* in the context of contemporary strategies and practices associated with the creation of popular music ‘stars’.

This emergent phenomenon is interesting in its own right but is made particularly distinctive by the contrast between *AF*'s core proposition – that the show offers access to existing music industry star-making practices (‘talent spotting’ and career advancement platform) – and the fact that the show’s graduates are often represented as ‘instant noodles’, as individuals with low ‘staying power’ in the music industry. In addressing such a problem, the industry processes and their interrelations and outcome will be further examined. First, reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of the musicians participating in *AF* enables this research to understand the real experiences of such individuals within the music reality television show. Second, examining their experiences in post-*AF* participation, namely their music industry experience, illuminates the low staying power issue that is typically associated with the musicians’ music industry careers. This then enables this thesis to establish the notion of the sustainability of pop music career for such musicians who graduated from the music reality television show, most notably, the musicians produced by a pop star mechanism that is a hybrid media text of music and television synergy. These research objectives further address the key question of this thesis exploration namely on how *AF* can be perceived as a help or harm to its graduates’ career trajectory.

Table 1. Research framework

Aim	Exploring the Malaysian music industry career by focusing on <i>Akademi Fantasia</i> graduates' career experience.
Problem statement	The contrast between <i>AF</i> 's core proposition, which is to offer access to the existing music industry star-making practices, namely 'talent spotting' and career advancement, and the fact that the show's graduates were often represented as 'instant noodles' stars, or individuals with low 'staying power' in the Malaysian music industry.
Objective	To examine the industrial processes and their interrelations and outcomes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. By exploring the experiences of musicians <i>within</i> the <i>AF</i> hybrid production. 2. By exploring the experiences of musicians <i>in</i> terms of post-<i>AF</i> participation, namely their music industry experience.
Key question	How can <i>AF</i> be perceived as a help or harm to its graduates' career trajectory?

As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, this research has been established by the empirical evidence of industrial discourses and supported by the lived experience in the given context. In that respect, this research will provide experiences from other *AF* graduates, gathered from interviews, set against my autoethnographic dimension. Five individuals have been identified who are useful for this research – their career experiences are dynamic, where they have obtained success at some point of their career and also have encountered failure in the music industry. Most importantly, the individuals have exhibited the necessary durability that helps to create career

sustainability (I will discuss further the rationale of using five respondents in Chapter 3: Methodology). In that respect, this research is an application of cultural practice to cultural theory. In other words, it is the theorisation of the industrial processes that will be analysed through the understandings of the individuals that have had and are still experiencing the industrial systems and practices. Such a theorisation then will be useful for the musicians to reflect on what and how are the best possible ways to create a sustainable career in the contemporary music industry.

4. Conclusion

“Whatever goes wrong in the industry is attributed to the failures of others in a cycle of blame-giving, from the musician to the producer, from the producer to the manager, from management to the recording company, and so on” (Deflem, 2017, pp. 51-52).

Allowing my own experience to set out the research enquiry, I have made a clear statement earlier that this research is neither a grievance from myself as I have failed to ace the *AF* hybrid production. Nor is it an exploration of mapping a cycle of blame-giving, as noted by Deflem (2017), which commonly occurs in the music industry. Rather, it is an attempt to study the patterns and dynamics of pop music careers in an age of media convergence when a hybrid media text, namely music reality television, is likely to be an important site for producing pop music identities. Whether success or failure, both of those industrial outcomes are “always a managed outcome of an industrial process which involves human beings making decisions about the form and content of symbolic goods in production” (Jones, 2012, p. 35). This means that there is a

logical explanation for why and how the outcomes impact on the *AF* musicians' career experience.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the long-term impact this new star machinery has on young aspirant music hopefuls in realising their musical dreams and ambitions. This means that it is noteworthy to acknowledge the reality behind the 'instant noodles' labelling, especially from the perspective of the *AF* graduates. The perspective of the affected party, namely the *AF* graduates, remains 'unheard' whilst the identity of the *AF* graduates is indeed formed by the views of the observers, namely the entertainment media and the key industrial figures. This may sound biased and requires the need for further investigation to fully understand the two sides of the story, not just from one perspective only.

Chapter 2: Literature review

1. Introduction

As established in the previous chapter, this thesis attempts to study the patterns and dynamics of pop music careers in an age of media convergence when a hybrid media text, namely *AF*, is likely to be the important site of producing pop music identities. This further scrutinises the capability of *AF* in the sense of a cultural production and phenomenon that is profoundly fascinating in its own right but somewhat problematic in music industry terms. Apparently, the problem can be found in *AF*'s core proposition – that the show offers access to existing music industry star-making practices whilst acting as a substantial ‘talent-spotting’ mechanism that incorporates a career advancement disposition which is obviously ‘tempting’ to the eyes of young aspiring musicians. However, the amateur hopefuls are actually being offered to participate in a televised career advancement platform that transforms such aspiring musicians into individuals with low ‘staying power’ in the music industry – as ‘instant noodles’ artists, in the industry’s colloquial term. Therefore, this thesis chiefly concerns such individuals and thus analyses the impact of music reality television on musicians’ career experience that will be primarily assessed within the music industry rubric.

With that established, this chapter argues that a music reality television show such as *AF* is a killer application for a converged culture in media industries (Jenkins, 2006). In that respect, media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. The convergence seems to modify the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences, which “alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 16). As such, a show such as *AF* is an effective ‘hybrid media text’ – of an increasingly standardised global media industry that strongly commercialises

every text produced, where such a hybrid is finely tuned to the ideology of profit maximisation (Kraidy, 2005). On that note, the careers offered to the musicians are also part of that ideology, which is somehow less concerned about the initial premise of the *AF* hybrid pop star production that seems to offer a transformation – a career advancement platform, as heavily romanticised by the music reality show. Moreover, the hybrid simplified its pop music star mechanism. It undermines the music market entry for aspirant musicians (which may be useful for them) whilst authorising the audience to be the market gatekeeper and thus allowing the musicians chosen by the audience to access the pop music economy and industry. Apparently, this has created industry debate on the credibility of the musicians that, in some ways, implies a negative connotation to such individuals' industrial status and reputation (as explained in the first chapter). Due to this, essentially, it can be argued that *AF* as a hybrid media text has its negative impacts, significantly, on aspirant musicians who want to advance their career in the pop music industry, disrupting such passionate, creative individuals in chasing their dreams and materialising their musical ambitions.

In establishing the argument, this chapter reflects on the existing literature in the context of pop music careers in the music industry and pop music careers that are integrated with music reality television. Firstly, this chapter will establish the ideology of a pop music career in the music industry by reviewing the scholarly accounts that are predominantly written regarding the recording industry. This refers to the kind of pop music career when there is no intervention by reality television. Secondly, this chapter will look at how pop music careers have changed, especially with the integration of music reality television, thus identifying the problems that usually occur with such a mechanism incorporated into the music industry and the

predominant outcomes the mechanism produces. Therefore, this chapter aims to advance the enquiry on the aspect of pop music careers that are integrated with music reality television whilst acknowledging the existing literature on the given aspect. By doing that, this chapter points out the theoretical gap due to the lack of discourse on the given aspect, which further proposes one of the contributions of this thesis: adding to the existing knowledge in the popular music industry field, especially in the Malaysian context.

2. Pop music career in the music industry

In the sphere of academic scholarship, the topic of a popular music career can be considered an undeveloped scholarly discourse in the Malaysian context. This further highlights that the existing works are neglecting the given topic whereby they are likely to be interweaving pop music in general with areas such as music education and pedagogy (Shah, 2006, 2021), pure musicology (Chopyak, 1986; Matusky and Beng, 2017), sociopolitics and local music culture (Lockard, 1991; Johan and Santaella, 2021), modernity and globalisation (Chopyak, 1986; Barendregt, 2014; Weintraub and Barendregt, 2017), and Malaysian pop music genres (Chopyak, 1986; Sarkissian, 2005; Barendregt, 2011; Seneviratne, 2012; Ferrarese, 2016). Most importantly, the body of existing work apparently signals that the topic of pop music careers has been severely neglected in the Malaysian context, highlighting a gap – the potential research prospect – that is worth exploring.

In the Anglophone context, the field of popular music seems to be treated well by academic scholars compared to the Malaysian context. Nonetheless, much of the scholarly literature is premised on its production aspect, further spanning its production mannerisms and organisation, especially in the recording industry realms (see for examples: Frith, 1996, 2001;

Negus, 1992, 1999; Toynebee, 2000). Also, a significant body of literature on the aspects of musicians discusses cultural work and the economy (among them, Negus, 1992, 1999; Davis and Scase, 2000; du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Ross, 2004; Bilton, 2006; Currid; 2007; and Banks, 2007, 2017). Having stated these works here, they are not written from a position to wholly theorise the musicians' experiences – the individuals' musical journey from an amateur to a professional continuum that shapes their musical outcome and career, as seen explicitly in the works of Finnegan (1989), Cohen (1991), Zwaan and Bogt (2009), Jones (1997, 1999, 2002, 2012), Deflem (2017), Lieb (2018), Wikström (2020), and Everts and Haynes (2021).

Those accounts that cover the musicians' progress in advancing their music-making to the professional level or seeking entry into the music industry truly inspired this research to be in the same context of exploration but a different geographical area and case study of concern. Additionally, the scholarly accounts are arguably sufficient to illustrate the importance of studying pop musicians – a type of creative labourer who has to deal with a tremendous upheaval of the industrial systems that are quite consistently changing over time. The change obviously has detrimental effects on such labour, which in some ways disrupts the conventional way they ritualise the symbolic activity that solely establishes the musicianship. Further, such academic accounts draw on the ethnomusicology tradition that studies cultural practices or specifically the musicians' habitus that comprises their socially-ingrained skills, habits and dispositions that can be learnt through “ethnographic data and microsociological detail” (Cohen, 1991, p. 6), which enables pop music's complexity to be viewed in the sense of its symbolic production and its related institutions.

The works of Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1991) are among the classic accounts that demonstrate the music-making

process that concerns individuals who seek music careers or attempt to make a living out of musical activities despite enduring some hardship in sustaining the music-making. Cohen focuses on young musicians in Liverpool by studying two rock bands that deal with socio-cultural and socio-economic challenges to which they are exposed concerning the interrelationships between art and society by “attempting to explore the tension between creativity and commerce through description and analysis of the processes of musical production and performance by the bands” (p. 4). Similar to Cohen’s account, Finnegan adds considerably to the understanding of the daily practice of music-making but in broad musical genres by studying the social processes by which amateur musical groups in cross-genres including rock, jazz, folk, musical theatre, classical orchestras and choirs, brass bands, country-and-western acts, church music and so on, make music in a ‘cultural desert’ (xvii): an English town, namely Milton Keynes.

Both of those accounts have provided rich ethnographic data and ‘microsociological detail’, as Cohen puts it, that I think is needed especially in the current development of scholarly accounts that tend to be concerned with industrial systems and shifts rather than paying attention to the personnel or designation of individuals in the industrial system (i.e. musicians, music producers and so forth). Focusing on the creative individuals that work in the music industry enables my own thesis enquiry to understand how seriously the marginalised creative labourers treat their music-making, whilst the industry reacts oppositely as it ‘mutates’ to a different mannerism that somehow clashed with what the musicians were prepared for. This demonstrates that the musicians as creative labourers are inevitably being exposed to a ‘precarious’ working environment that is offered by the music and television industries’ mutation.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) in their empirical study argue that the various forces that shape people's experience of working in the cultural industries need to be considered. The scholars pointed out that various tensions occurred between subjective desires and collective aims in the creative production process, which is a complex relationship around the creative labour process, including those between external and internal forces and demands. The scholars then developed a good and bad work model, exploring the quality of the subjective experience of creative labourers in cultural industries, namely in television, magazine journalism and music. The scholars found that good work results in a produced product of excellent quality that contributes to the common good. Conversely, bad work results in a low-quality product that fails to contribute to the well-being of others.

In that sense, the marginalised creative labourers, as I mentioned earlier, will be viewed in the process, especially how the musicians encounter the system of bad work as proposed by the *AF* 'hybrid'. Further, the system normally fails to enable the musicians to contribute to the well-being of others, namely the music market. With that said, I will specifically look at how and why the bad work occurs and impacts the musicians – the individuals that seem to be the contributors to the 'failed' creative products. Most importantly, this scenario has placed the musicians as marginalised creative labourers – a scenario that is probably similar to the notion of the 'hidden musicians', as Finnegan coined it, referring to the type of musician, namely the amateur, that is associated with their often-unrecognised practices of local music-making, which may signify that such marginalised musicians receive far less attention as they are peripheral creative practitioners.

This context of research exploration is worth scrutiny for ethnographers in understanding the musicians' realities –

ritualisation, musical culture, ambition and, most essentially, the challenges they encounter in relation to their music-making. To get the depth and breadth of the sense of music-making from the amateur-professional continuum, it is noteworthy to understand and identify the main factor of the musicians' involvement in the music-making that ultimately leads them to seek the career they aim for. Plus, their experience in their chosen career path would reflect the industrial system and its treatment of them. Such a course is best understood from the bottom line to the top of the cultural production – from the creative labour to the system that is designed by the rationale of the top personnel.

In that respect, the work of Zwaan and Bogt (2009) has demonstrated how musicians can get career entry into the popular record industry that is derived from the first-hand experience of the individuals involved with the music industry. The study focuses on the career entry and development of professional musicians in the Netherlands. This account suggests that the musicians “must find ways of gaining the interest of record industry executives” (p. 90), implying the importance of establishing networking or getting to know the ‘right’ people – the intermediaries or institutions involved in advancing their music careers. From the other perspective, this implies that the musicians are part of the key components of the music industry's ecosystem whilst their “social environment should be supportive but critical, while likeability, perfectionism, motivation, insecurity and self-criticism were said to be key personality traits to become successful” (p. 89). This means that getting signed by a music label is one of the ways that could connect the musicians with the industry, but the musicians must exhibit the required dispositions that match the industrial system and environment.

This recalls the work of Jones (1997) that is based on the scholar's own reflections on the industrial experiences of being

a band member of a group called Latin Quarter, in which his findings further discuss the musicians' preparation for mediation, rather than on the effects of mediation itself. Jones began his thesis enquiry with "the fact that so very few pop acts achieve recognisable pop success problematises the pop process" (p. 6). He writes that, "in whatever ways we define the terms, the processes that result in the 'success' of a tiny handful of pop acts and in the 'failure' of the vast majority, do not explain themselves" (p. 6). In his later work, which is still in the realm of the music industry, Jones (1999) writes that music careers are likely to be tied to a recording contract that is usually offered by a major label in which the label is responsible for delivering the artist and their music to the market. Most of the contracts offered to musicians seem to require the individuals to believe "that the relationships they enter into with intermediary figures will result in their own successful commodification" (Jones, 2002, p. 153), despite the uncertain nature of the processes of music commodification that is always embedded in the music industry's ideology. Unsigned musicians, in particular, are not really aware about that notion of commodification, as record companies operate a system of "prioritization" (Jones, 2002, p. 154) that is largely hidden from the view of the musicians and their associated personnel (i.e. their managers). Plus, the musicians are mostly being driven by their musical ambitions and goals and they tend to neglect the business or commercial aspects, relying on the companies to take charge of and handle such aspects. Due to this system, designed by the creative conglomerates, and the typical musicians' habitus, Jones (2002) argues that musicians have little genuine knowledge of their record label's estimation of, and intentions for, them. Ultimately, "pop acts are 'operationally' disempowered because they are ill-informed and often misinformed" (2002, p. 154), which is then making them vulnerable in terms of what they are passionate about, especially having a music career. One of the reasons that might be

attributed to such a scenario is the fact that “it is still a colloquial practice to make the fortunes of the recording industry stand in for those of an undefined Music Industry” (2012, p. 181).

If the recording industry is just based on the colloquial practice in order to make fortunes, as observed by Jones (2012), the same practice might be applied to how the industry organises and manages the musicians. If that is indeed the case, it makes total sense that the notion of the ‘operationally disempowered’ is closely associated with musicians, as argued by Jones in terms of music industry studies. Essentially, this further demonstrates that the musician’s social environment should be indeed supportive but critical, as argued by Zwaan and Bogt (2009). As such, the scholars underline that the key personality traits to become a successful musician include likeability, perfectionism, motivation, insecurity and self-criticism, which further emphasises the notion of the self, are literally required, particularly as a counterproductive measure for the musicians in encountering the unfavourable industrial system designed for them.

Despite the perils that musicians encounter, music can be still seen as an attractive career prospect by many young aspiring musicians (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This might be due to the fame that is always associated with a popular music career (as seen in the case of *AF*). Fame can be seen as a form of recognition that awaits musicians and as an indicator that they have managed to be in the music economy as professional musicians if they ultimately obtain fame. As argued by Deflem (2017), “for whatever else it is and can be, popular music is by definition popular” (p. 6) – meaning that it is necessary for musicians to be identified as such, generally in public discourse, or seek fame. In this particular work that studies sociological conditions of fame in the world of

contemporary popular music by investigating the rise to fame of global pop sensation Lady Gaga, Deflem outlines some key characteristics of a pop music career and fame:

- i. Fame is associated with interpersonal privilege for the famous person (or celebrity) to interact with other famous personalities as well as with members of the wider public.
- ii. Famous people enjoy a normative privilege whereby they function as role models and can take on worthy causes far beyond the expertise for which they are primarily known.
- iii. Perhaps the most obvious quality of many forms of contemporary fame is that it is associated with the economic privilege of lucrative financial rewards.
- iv. Famous people can rely on special legal privileges to safeguard the benefits of their honoured status. (p. 24)

Those specificities that can be learnt from Lady Gaga's phenomenon resonate with another case study of a top-selling female artist, Beyoncé. In a work that focuses on issues of gender, sexuality, race, branding and the music industry from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, Lieb (2018) notes the Beyoncé narrative in relation to fame and stardom that works as a more extensive 'cultural imaginary' (see Shumway, 1997, 2015) to her fans and followers as her musical texts extend beyond the medium in which they work:

"Beyoncé's appeal reaches well beyond her music. Her success stems in large part from her ability to represent and empower large groups of people who have historically felt left out of pop cultural narratives and windfalls. Additionally, her pride in her body, her inconsistencies, and her brand empire provide an aspirational model for those struggling with dimensions of

their appearance or identity or economic circumstances” (Lieb, 2018, p. 3).

Both accounts, from Deflem and Lieb, supply evidence of the “lived experience” (Ferris and Harris, 2010, p. 392), which refers to the role of the self in the creation of fame and stardom in popular culture; and how such stars are prolonging their industrial presence (or creating career longevity) by utilising their cultural power in order to be in the broader entertainment industry. Most notably, with the case studies represented, both scholarly accounts have demonstrated that pop musicians are actually required to be popular public figures to access the music economy, which eventually gives the musicians’ privileges that are absolutely rewarding and gratifying. However, the musicians that “could attract only a narrow audience appeal were often less fortunate when competing for the firms’ attention and resources” (Wikström, 2020, p. 108). These types of musicians can be considered marginalised creative labourers who fail to achieve the wanted outcomes in their music careers. This further illustrates that, as “fewer artists in the roster gain access to marketing support, it makes no sense for the music firms to hold on to the less successful artists” (p. 108). From this vantage point, it can be argued that the music industry does indeed prepare its systems for failure, which further validates the fact that only one out of every 20 records made significant profits and thus informs that the industry disproportionately produces more failures than successes (see for examples Negus, 1992; Frith, 2001; Jones, 2012).

Nevertheless, that particular opinion or dimension of the pop music career is probably less romanticised in the music industry, especially in the Malaysian context, as the industry is apparently dominated by players who have an effective strategy

to keep their identities and brandings afloat in public visibility. This links to Jones' (1997) argument that:

“...consumers and researchers alike are encouraged to ignore pop's production processes, not simply by the excitement of consuming successful pop music and by the various distractions of the promotional process, but also by the difficulty of accessing the day-to-day practices of record companies and the virtual impossibility of accessing the daily lives of aspirant pop musicians” (p.25).

This may lead to a situation whereby aspirant musicians are likely to be ill-informed about the risks they might be exposed to. On the other hand, they are likely to be well-informed about the perks that await them if they are successfully granted market entry and thus access the music economy in the mainstream music market. Many factors could be argued to take the lead in this pre-informed knowledge of the musicians, and it is not possible to view the cultural behaviour of young aspirant musicians who are probably not fully aware of the (un)wanted outcomes that they might be exposed to when entering the industrial systems as professionals. What drives the musicians is usually and purely their musical ambition in advancing their musical activities in an environment that appreciates and treats their musical activities seriously.

In that respect, a study conducted by Everts and Haynes (2021) is one of the kind that addresses musicians in the given circumstances, which is useful to reflect on as this particular academic exploration is about the routines and rationales of early-career musicians in the Dutch and British music industries:

“The decision to pursue a music career today, therefore, could be further framed within the context of the popularity

and influence of reality TV shows like *Pop Idol* and *X Factor*, which, alongside the increasing number of pop academies and talent schools, coalesces around what Frith describes as the new demands of and commitments to music 'as a symbol of our individuality' (2007: 14). Younger generations are making different kinds of calculations with their careers, where even if music is recognized as more risky than other kinds of work, for many it is more closely tied to a sense of self, thereby reflecting the ideas of individualism and self-reflexivity that pervade neoliberal capitalism" (p. 15)

With this drive exhibited by young aspirant musicians in the current music industry in the given geographic focuses, such findings from the scholarly work further link to the notion of a 'new music economy' as proposed by Wikström (2020). In the current and third edition of his book titled *The music industry: Music in the cloud*, he highlighted three characteristics of the new music economy, namely "high connectivity and little control, music provided as a service, and increased amateur activity" (p. 75). Such a 'newness' is genuinely being driven by the development of digital media technologies that will eventually aid musicians to have more autonomy in their own musical texts. This further indicates that the proliferation of technology has indeed led to the birth of the new music economy whilst, in some ways, allowing and cultivating an amateur culture in the music economy. This new cultural behaviour of musicians and this type of music economy legitimates something that is unprecedented in the recording industry era whereby music companies were always the market entry for amateur musicians, somewhat signifying that the companies were in power to offer career advancement to the music hopefuls in accessing the music economy, fame and stardom back then.

Therefore, it can be said that a pop music career in the music industry is closely tied with popular culture ideology. To have a career and persistently access the music economy at this professional level, musicians have to cater to the masses' needs by providing musical texts that are suitable for the market and popular demands. This means that fame is essential in building and sustaining a music career. Additionally, the musicians are likely to equip themselves with not only musical abilities and talents. Instead, the notion of the self or individualism is essential in this case as it can be a counterproductive measure to failure and thus enable the musicians to create durability in themselves as a music career happens to be challenging and lacking in apparent security (as demonstrated by Jones, 2002; see also for examples, Stahl, 2004, 2013; Frith, 1996, 2001; Negus, 1992, 1999; Toynbee, 2000). Not forgetting the fact that musicians are expected to be aware of current developments in the music industry that are usually being 'revised' by technological advancements or industrial synergy. All of those specificities perhaps define what is meant by a pop music career in the music industry.

3. The integration of pop music career and music reality television

To date, there is no research interest spanning the aspects of popular music career and music reality television in Malaysia. In relation to *AF* as a music reality television show, there are some existing works that focused on the *AF* phenomenon that generally discussed the notion of hybridity concerning its social, cultural and technological impacts within Malaysian society (Moy and Garma, 2006; Mohamed and Mukhiar, 2007; Maliki, 2008; Wahab, 2010, 2015; Ishak, 2011; Shamsudeen, 2011; Shamsudeen and Morris, 2014).

These works primarily covered the perspective of audience reception (Moy and Garma, 2006; Mohamed and Mukhiar, 2007; Shamsudeen, 2011), although some discussed cultural hybridity (Maliki, 2008; Wahab, 2010; Ishak, 2011; Shamsudeen, 2011; Shamsudeen and Morris, 2014) through the case of reality television whilst documenting the proliferation of the reality television genre in a quite descriptive manner.

This means that those scholarly accounts favour the aspect of cultural consumption; that is, the impacts of consuming a reality television show in a wider Malaysian context. Thereby, such accounts are not specifically written to address the issues pertinent to the impact of the individuals who have been in the reality show. Most importantly, this body of work inadvertently signals that the topic of pop music labourers has been neglected and is a huge gap that is worth exploring. With the empirical evidence available, namely the journalistic discourse from entertainment media on the given topic (see Utusan Online, 2009, 2010, 2014; Kosmo, 2015), this has greatly influenced me to further examine the 'fate' of the 'instant noodles artists' – the type of musician that *AF* produced in which such marginalised musicians happen to be one of the key people who have obviously contributed to creating *AF* as a 'national cultural phenomenon' (Shamsudeen and Morris, 2014) – a remarkable entertainment event in Malaysia.

In a broader or global context, the discourse of pop musicians in a music reality television show seems to be an underdeveloped subject whilst the subject of reality television, in general, seems to be the dominant or preferred subject of intellectual discourse (see examples Kilborn, 2003; Andrejevic, 2004; Holmes and Jeremyn 2004; Murray and Ouellette 2004; Hill, 2015, among others). Nonetheless, there is a range of scholarly discussion on music reality television that is particularly useful for this thesis's theoretical framework establishment,

although such literature does not entirely consider or scrutinise the experience of the musicians/the labourers in the explicit context and manner that I propose (Stahl, 2004; Holmes, 2004, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Fairchild, 2007, 2008; Kjus, 2009a, 2009b, 2017; Jian and Liu, 2009; Turner, 2010; Meizel, 2011; Tay, 2011; Zwaan and Bogt, 2012; Cvetkovski, 2015; Graham 2017; Ardit, 2020). This means that these existing accounts are mainly focusing on the music reality television aesthetics and demonstrating the phenomena by reflecting a range of music reality television programmes such as *Idols*, *The X Factor* and *The Voice* – the televised pop music star machines that recruit young music hopefuls as their frontline workers, which happens to be similar to *AF*.

What emerged from these international accounts especially, although they are mostly viewed from the audience participation culture perspectives and not entirely similar to the situated context of my research, were some useful concepts that helped in developing my theoretical framework. In other words, the use of such scholarly accounts as a source of this thesis's reflection is necessary, whilst none of the scholarly works has addressed the exact context I propose here. Most essentially, the reflection works as the premise of most reality television shows suggests an homogenous nature in the sense of the pop music star mechanism. As such, the music reality television hopefuls, who are amateur pop musicians in most cases, are being offered a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity that is a music career as their post-participation perk. Before being entitled to such a reward, the hopefuls are required to 'trade' their personal stories or narratives, which usually requires them to demonstrate how hard it is to obtain entry to the music reality show. Once the hopefuls have been authorised to be in the show, their narratives continue in the pursuit of victory, whilst witnessing one lucky contestant being crowned winner, and thus linking that individual

to another level of entry, namely the music industry, which ultimately allows the individual to access the professional music economy in the mainstream music market. On that note, the related literature that I mentioned may not demonstrate every detail of this process. But, it mostly provides theorisation and narratives about the systems or the process, which helps this thesis navigate and identify both the idiosyncrasies of the music reality television show and the music reality television graduates.

For instance, Stahl (2004) and Arditi (2020), in their respective accounts, generally illustrated a sense of meritocratic utopianism that most of the music reality shows embody. These accounts further demonstrate music reality television as televisual narratives of the hopefuls' 'ups and downs' in materialising their dreams, decoding both commercial and utopian mappings of character and opportunity structures within the televised pop music star mechanism. Not forgetting that Stahl and Arditi pointed out the exploitative nature of this hybrid cultural production mechanism towards the music hopefuls' ultimate dreams, namely to have a music career. This further underlines the hopefuls' experiences within the music reality television settings, proposing a definition of pop music idol or star that can be read through the notion of the quest, struggle, success and failure (see also for examples, Holmes, 2004, 2009; Kjus, 2009a, 2009b, 2017; Zwaan and Bogt, 2012) that requires the contestants to go through a constant audition with no apparent security within the competition (Stahl, 2004).

Although the shows (i.e. *Idols*, *X Factor*, *The Voice*) mostly require the participants to sing cover versions, the contestants' popularity is likely to be the same level as most well-known or established non-music reality television musician artists who already had full albums released in the music market. This means that music reality television shows seem to be a shortcut for the hopefuls to obtain authorisation and validation to

access the pop music market, fame, stardom and economy within a short period of time, which would probably take years for non-music reality television musicians to gain such an entrance and experience. In that so-called pseudo-agency (Holmes, 2004, 2009) created by music and television synergy that is obviously a replication of a record company's pop star mechanism, music reality television shows have also placed a pseudo-democratic system (Meizel, 2011; Jian and Liu, 2009) by granting the audience the power to validate their own preference and taste. In other words, the reality show's viewers seem to be the key decision makers whilst having the authority to be actively involved in this televised pop star mechanism especially at this early stage of pop music star creation. With a reality format that strongly embodies music-based dramas or the docusoap element, such a formulation is likely to be the ideal approach for such a market-based entertainment culture (Graham, 2017), which enables that type of reality show to be a spectacular event (Kjus, 2009a).

What lies within this particular event and popular culture mechanism is that it fundamentally makes full use of the technological change in the media landscape (Jenkins, 2006; Fairchild, 2008; Jian and Liu, 2009). Further, it emphasises the notion of stardom (Holmes, 2004, 2009), which somehow fuels the affective and attention economics agendas (Jenkins, 2006; Fairchild, 2007; Jian and Liu, 2009) that are definitely privileging the businesses of music and television corporations. Such outcomes somewhat demonstrate the music reality television show as a 'hybrid media text' (Kraidy, 2005) and a killer application in a media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) that has a multidimensional purpose and capability (Turner, 2010) as its hybridity, especially in implementing a hybrid economics ideology (Cvetkovski, 2015; Kraidy, 2005) that works in a wider entertainment landscape.

As mentioned earlier, the chief purpose of the hybrid media text creation signals a sense of a monopolistic market move on the part of the hybrid creators. Such a strategy seems to 'kill two birds with one stone'. With many local adaptations of international formats, it demonstrates that music reality television is "a global phenomenon" as it has been productively franchised around the world (Graham, 2017, p.6) until the present. For instance, big-budget reality shows and renowned international formats such as *Idols* have been seen dominating televisions and audiences worldwide as the format's spin-offs have been produced "in over 50 countries" (Kjus, 2017, p. 1012; Schmitt, Fey and Bisson, 2005; Kjus, 2009b; Hill, 2015). Furthermore, the *Idols* global phenomenon led to the emergence of new music reality TV format twists such as *The Voice* and *The X Factor*, among others – the televised musical talent quests that conceptually are similar to the precedent.

As "one of the most successful entertainment phenomena of the 2000s" in both global and local entertainment spheres (Kjus, 2017, p. 1012), it can be said that music reality television formulation, in general, is deemed to be a global entertainment currency as it proposed an homogenised economic value that seemed workable and notably acceptable in different geographical areas. This means that the reality television genre has brought a similar global impact and is becoming the means of cultural appropriation, as in pop music, as the music genre that is globally accepted and adapted. This phenomenon that music reality television has created in some ways demonstrates that such a reality television format is a *glocal* phenomenon.

In Malaysia, *AF* is the principal show. *AF* is a Malaysian adaptation of *La Academia* – a popular Mexican music reality television programme produced by Mexico's second-rated television network, TV Azteca (Kraidy, 2005). Ironically, *La Academia* is likely to be the least popular global music reality

television brand compared with *Idols*. Nonetheless, the adaptation of *La Academia* has received a relatively positive reception on the other side of the world, namely in Southeast Asian regions. After the first inception of the Malaysian version of *La Academia*, namely *Akademi Fantasia*, in June 2003, the Indonesian version named *Akademi Fantasi Indosiar* launched its first series, in December 2003. The show completed five seasons and returned for its sixth season in 2013 after seven years of hiatus. After Indonesia, Thailand introduced the Thai version, named *True Academy Fantasia*, which lasted for 15 seasons. There is also a Singaporean version called *Sunsilk Academy Fantasia*, which only lasted a season. Apart from the mentioned Southeast Asian countries, there have been several versions of the show elsewhere across the globe, such as in Paraguay, which used the same original title, *La Academia*, and which premiered in May 2013 (and only lasted for a season). The United States of America also had its American version, named *La Academia USA*, but it was actually a Spanish-speaking reality music show (which lasted for two seasons). All of the *La Academia* format adaptations have indicated that this music reality television brand has, at least, proved its capability to be a *glocal* mechanism especially in the entertainment landscape, although its achievement and impact are not as profound as those of the *Idols* brand.

On the other hand, there is the capability of music reality television formats as hybrid media texts that could be seen as a 'game changer' that is (perhaps) the best possible solution to override the contemporary challenges to the music industry business model and to overcome the challenges to the music industry from technological advancements such as music file-sharing and piracy (Smith, 2008; Fairchild, 2008), which have led to the struggle and the collapse of music retail stores, thus altering the traditional means of consuming music (Jones, 2002;

Breen, 2004; Azenha, 2006). Hence, the music and TV synergy in formulating the hybrids (i.e. *Idols*, *The X Factor*, *The Voice* or *AF*) that are the televised musical talent quests are seen as embodying the conventional character of the recording industry pop star mechanism in a new, innovative approach. This change may sound exciting and propose a positive outlook to the industry. For instance, Forman (2002) notes that the early music and television alliance, which can be learnt from services such as *MTV*, has a positive influence at its inception as it provided an 'opportunity' for musicians and others in various sectors of the music industry. A similar pattern of acceptance occurs with music reality television programmes. They have been predominantly perceived by many to be an effective pop music star machinery that is capable of producing pop music sensations that is in a way a 'dream machine' to the music hopefuls. As the individuals are granted industry access via the music reality television shows, they have the opportunity to seek commercial success post-participation. Most importantly, this industrial access is given to them regardless of their achievements and position within the competition.

This further validates some "other common tropes across all these [music reality television] shows include non-winning contestants having more commercial success than winners..." (Graham, 2017, p. 13). In the case of *Idols*, for example, "all *Idols*' contestants are contract-bound to Sony BMG" (Kjus, 2009a, p. 293) whilst some of them are awarded a record deal from one of the 'big three major music labels' (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2014), especially the winners and runners-up. The *American Idol*'s first-season winner, Kelly Clarkson, "signed to RCA Records and had an immediate number 1 hit single on the Billboard Hot 100, 'A Moment Like This'. The song went on to become the top-selling U.S. single for 2002. Kelly's initial singles got played more than 80,000 times on radio stations in

2002...[Apart from that], the *American Idol* contestants played to sold-out houses on their nationwide concert tour” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 61).

In addition, the show is seen to be capable of producing “true [industry] A-listers” such as Jennifer Hudson, a non-winning *Idol* contestant on its third series, who are still capable of pursuing commercial success in their music industry career (Lezmi, 2019). Another notable music reality television graduate in a similar kind of music reality television format, Leona Lewis, The UK *X Factor*’s third series winner, is the best example to illustrate the show’s *glocal* power in creating regional and international pop music stars; witness the success of her “chart-topping album in the UK and the US and a single, ‘Bleeding Love’, that went to number one in over 30 countries” in global music markets (Graham, 2017, p. 15). In some ways, all of these individuals’ narratives have illustrated that the *Idols* and *The X Factor* (including *The Voice*) core concepts are identical. By placing the notion of stardom centre stage, such reality television shows promote themselves as teaching the contestants to be music superstars (Arditi, 2020) and privileging them to access the pop music economy in both regional and global markets as their post-participation perk.

Although *AF* does not offer the international exposure and opportunity to its graduates as occurred in the aforementioned international music reality formats, it offered the essential perk which is absolutely alluring to young aspirant musicians: *all* contestants are offered a record deal by a subsidiary company of Measat Broadcast Network System (MBNS) namely Maestro Records. In that respect, the perk offered to the musicians has allowed them to access the music economy and notably transformed them into professionals in the music industry. Therefore, music reality television literally has multidimensional impacts. First, it is generally understood as an effective

entertainment vehicle in the global-local continuum in popular culture. The syncretic formulation orchestrated by the music and television union is finely tuned in the pursuit of profit-making (Kraidy, 2005; Cvetkovski, 2015). Secondly, it offers an economic opportunity to its prospective participants/musicians whilst allowing them to enter the music economy and market via the television route that is not purely a music mechanism. Most notably, music reality television impacts at both macro and micro levels, especially in the exhibited star machinery, which has made the reality format one of the most remarkable cultural and entertainment hybrids in both production and consumption – one that is literally and yet effective the killer application in the media convergence.

However, the hybridity that the music reality television shows manifest has its own 'hidden' glitches in the sense of its innovative cultural production manner. As such, a glitch such as the pop music labourers' exploitation (Kjus, 2009b; Arditi, 2020) has probably been concealed by the hybridity and overshadowed by the reality show phenomenon, thereby treating such workers' contributions within the hybrid system as a peripheral role or as 'throwaway' pop musicians. Hence, my proposal in analysing music reality television and music career in this thesis is to move beyond the aforementioned, the predominantly too narrow point of engagement exhibited by and in the contexts of most local and international scholarly accounts. This means that this thesis is not an attempt to address what *AF* is as a music reality show from the perspectives of the media or entertainment industries. Nor does it attempt to extend or add new knowledge to the existing enquiries on the audience and cultural consumption impact. Rather, my proposal here is to analyse *AF* within the music industry rubric that is ultimately capable of identifying the

contributing factors to the problem that the *AF* graduates have had as their careers are prone to be short-lived.

Also, please note that the term music reality television formats will occasionally be hereafter referred to as hybrid media texts or, in short, as 'the hybrid'. I propose that the former signals how fluid the terminology is, which can be amended according to the situated discussion (i.e. reality television genre, glocalisation aspects), whereas the latter proposes a defined dimension focused on the hybridity within the hybrid's ecosystem, namely the rapid star-making process. Furthermore, its hybridised outcome does not entirely nurture talent as purely musicians (as reflected in its academy dispositions), as *AF* musicians appear to be required to 'master' other creative aspects such as acting and dancing. In that respect, the hybrid produces 'hybridised' pop musicians that may sound innovative but problematic. This means that these coinages are not simply clever wordplay and are not an attempt to redefine the existing terminology, replacing the stale ones or those that are coined for the sake of proposing a novelty in the discourse. Rather, hybrid media texts, the hybrid and hybridised pop musicians demonstrate the uniqueness of the Malaysian music industry, especially in the view of the pop musicians that are integrated with music reality television.

4. Problematising music reality television 'graduates': the idiosyncrasy of the 'hybridised' pop musicians

Based on the existing literature discussed earlier, I have established that music reality television is a form of hybrid media text that seems wholly fashioned for the wider entertainment industry and markets. This means that it is not a dedicated platform that aids the music hopefuls in connecting them with the music industry and thus enables them to have music careers.

Having said that, the hybridity that the music reality television embodies as the arena of transformation for such individuals proposes problems to its participants. Based on that particular problem, I argue that the music reality television graduates are marginal creative labourers as a result of the ‘uneasy’ relationship between music and television; the musicians are the key instrument of the music reality television’s affective economics; and that they are pseudo-stars.

4.1. The marginalised creative labourers – the result of the ‘uneasy’ relationship between music and television

The music hopefuls who participate in any music reality television show are likely to be seen as individuals possessing creative and economic values that align with the show’s objectives. Such individuals then deserve the opportunity provided by the hybrid and are worth being at the centre of attention in the music-television event. When the hopefuls are selected to be on any music reality television show, any one of them has a chance to be the ‘hero’ of the reality television series. This means that music reality televisions seem to be the epicentre for eager musicians – a platform that welcomes and celebrates ‘serious’ musicians who can be frontline workers who appear on television. This is not an easy task as the musicians are required to carry the music reality television brands according to the show’s terms and designs as determined by the show’s producers. In addition to that, the musicians are not simply ordinary people who are lucky to appear on a prime television time slot. Rather, they are likely to be expected to contribute to the show’s success or phenomenon.

Based on that analogy, it seems that musicians are the key worker in the structural organisation of the music reality television show. Most notably, the fame and stardom the musicians get to experience illustrate that they *really* matter to

the show's branding and ecosystem. However, such an understanding is ill-informed – something that probably does not really matter to the music reality creators or producers as they are more concerned about the monetisation of the musicians within the hybrid system. Moreover, the sustainability of the music reality television branding is what they are particularly concerned about (as demonstrated in *Idols* and *AF*). In that respect, this could be the contributing factor that establishes the 'instant noodles' ideology whereby such musicians are likely to be the marginalised creative labourers that only work on the show's terms and not entirely for their own purposes, terms and interests. This recalls the work of Stahl (2013) titled *Unfree Masters* that studies the symbolic and social figure of the recording artist, arguing the paradox of being a signed musician: "as an agent of self-expression under contract to a major entertainment conglomerate or a subsidiary company, the recording artist is both autonomous and the target of control" (p. 3).

Such a problem in the recording industry as observed by Stahl seems pervasive in regard to music reality television musicians. However, the musicians' autonomy is highly likely to be limited, in which, to an extent, they can be seen as the 'puppet' to the reality show's design. As such, the treatment received by individuals signed to any particular show is unlikely to be matched with what most of them expect. In other words, they might experience something that they did not bargain for. Arditi (2020) has argued that contestants of *The Voice* have opened themselves to precarity:

"Contestants accept the logic that they will gain from television exposure while neglecting to acknowledge the inevitable—their position on the show will not develop their careers or help them achieve their goals. Whereas contestants work hard to become celebrities, their

participation on *The Voice* blocks them from being able to achieve tangible results in their careers. Most musicians live in the condition of precarity but shows such as *The Voice* utilize precariousness” (Arditi, 2020, p. 148)

In relation to *AF*, I have seen that the show has exposed its participants to precariousness. But, it is manifested in exploiting the participants’ vulnerability to make the show interesting to watch. For instance, *AF* recruits rock musicians such as Rich *AF4* and Yazer *AF3* to be participants and teaches them dancing skills, which is obviously not their ‘normality’ as rock singers. As the participants are being tested to perform different kinds of repertoires which are obviously not their preferred one, they have no choice than to fulfil the show’s aims, rather than realise themselves through their own, self-chosen performance.

This is the starting point of the notion that marginalised creative labourers occur because such musicians are doing things they are not truly capable of delivering. The musicians are working in a system that in turn produces a ‘bad text’ of their own text (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), which in this situation has put them at risk of rejection and failure. As such, *AF* as a pop academy with its well-rounded training programme in some ways has put unnecessary pressure on the participants, which may impact the quality of the performances they produce. Thus, the show and its academy disposition are unlikely to unleash the participants’ truest potential, especially their musicality. Although the participants are likely to be musically talented individuals, such talent is strangely not entirely essential to the show. What does matter in this televised pop music academy is the ability of the participants to satisfy the show’s emotional narrative imperatives. This further indicates that the individuals who participate in the show seem to be autonomous, especially in singing, but, at the same time, they tend to be less autonomous in other aspects that are pre-determined by the reality format and

the producers' requests that the participants need to obey. I argue that this is the result of 'the uneasy relationship between music and television', echoing the long-established account of Frith (2002) of the friction between music and television. Frith argues that music has not been a central part of television programming and "the relationship of music and television is not organic but a matter of branding" (p. 282), and further proposes that "music on television is primarily a sales device" (p. 282).

In the music-television synergy, namely in the music reality television production in particular, music is not the chief purpose of the production. On the surface, it may seem that the synergy of music and television regarding the music reality television show production is harmonious, but it is actually out of tune, as Kjus (2017) argued. This further signals that the "structural differences between these industries (TV and Music) trigger struggles over the content and presentation of musical performances which, over time, undermine the credibility of the joint venture" (p.1011). Moreover, Frith (2002) argues that "television programming is not sound-centred but picture-driven, organised around an aesthetic of immediacy (rather than reflection)... Music on television is less often heard for its own sake than as a device to get our visual attention" (p. 280). This friction between music and television has influenced the aesthetics of musical performance on television (Frith, 2002; Forman, 2012), which may result in "overt cynicism about the capacity of music reality TV shows to possess pop culture industry authenticity" (Cvetkovski, 2015, p. 105). This further suggests that the music and television star machinery that is an invention of music and television amalgamation is typically associated with the issue of authenticity which further proposes a problem for the stardom and stars it produces (Shumway,

2014)⁹. To a lesser degree, this illustrates that such a reality television format is a cultural pariah, echoing the observation of Graham (2017) on the music reality television show that embodies the worst of neoliberal capitalist culture:

“Its musically framed admixture of richly unpredictable drama and rancid demagoguery amounts to a potentially very valuable staging of what is nevertheless a clearly compromised, market-corrupted commons.” (p. 6)

Such a problematic formulation that the music reality television proposed, implies that the music industry is becoming decentralised, whereas the television industry is reformulating the long-standing pop music star mechanism that is typically ‘owned’ by the music industry. This further suggests that the music industry is seen as the ‘co-actor’ that is less centralised (or powerless), especially in the music reality television star regime, while authorising the television industry, in which experts and entities that are not totally musically driven intervene and take the lead in such a pop music star mechanism. The significant intrusion of television into the music industry can be argued to have, as Forman puts it, “destabilized established relationships among discrete music industry sectors and between audience consumers and producers” (Forman, 2012, p. 333), whilst dislodging the long-standing old conceptions, specifically in terms of music industry autonomy and power.

This scenario, in turn, has detrimental effects on the reality cast members, namely the young aspirant musicians who are

⁹ Authenticity is just a term that explains how inauthentic the outcome music reality television star machinery produces in which several scholars have noted that particular problem in regard to music reality television phenomenon (see for examples: Turner, 2014; Zwaan and Bogt, 2012; Cvetkovski, 2015). Plus, authenticity in music is a multidimensional and laden term (see for examples: Shumway (2014) in relation to music and media, Percival (2011) in music radio and; Frith (1978) in rock genre). Therefore, it will not be further discussed as it is not in the interest of this research concern.

predominantly seeking mainstream music market entry and hoping to access the music economy as professional pop musicians via the music reality television show. With the prejudice that the *AF* graduates face – the ‘instant noodles’ status they had and their limited ‘shelf-life’ – it undermines the superficial offer made to participants, and denies the core promise of the concept (that lasting stardom must surely follow winning a series). As such, the participants are likely to be treated as key workers in the music reality television ecosystem. On the other hand, they seem to be the marginalised creative labourers, namely “a master in some areas but servant in the others” (Stahl, 2013, p. 3), in which such a contradiction is the outcome of the unstable nature of the music and television amalgamation.

4.2. The musicians as the key instrument of the music reality television’s affective economics

Music reality television is indeed a killer application for a converged culture because it ‘works,’ in the sense that the stars produced are a practical approach deployed by the reality show’s creator to fulfil and serve their business and economic imperatives. This provokes a ‘buy-in’ from viewers, translating into sales in a quite multidimensional area. Under these circumstances, whether or not it produces ‘real’ musicians, recruits less-talented musicians or “the producers lack an ethical or perhaps even moral compass” in obeying the tele-spectacle nature of the format (Cvetkoski, 2015, p.101) are not the issues here. Rather, the fact that it can have real market outcomes is what counts. The way the music reality television obtains these real market outcomes is worth examining as it seems to involve manipulating the hopefuls for the sake of the ‘affective economics’ ideology (Jenkins, 2006) that it usually embodies.

According to Jenkins (2006) in relation to the logic of affective economics, “the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked” (p. 20). It is arguable that “fans of certain cult television shows may gain greater influence over programming decisions” (p. 62) when the music reality television producers build affective investment in contestants, in the hope that such investment benefits the show as a whole (Fairchild, 2007). This means that a strong emphasis on the participants’ narratives, drama and lived experience is vital in deploying affective economics (Hill, 2015).

“It [music reality television show] can act as a public midwife to the births of new pop stars, foregrounding its assumed role as transparent, earnest, and benevolent facilitator of the best undiscovered talent it can find, and through this giving us all the drama, tears, pleasure, and pain we can stand” (Fairchild, 2007, p. 356).

Fairchild’s remark literally informs us about the reality television show’s aesthetics and its role in popular culture in general, which makes perfect sense for that kind of show or format. Most essentially, it signals a strong sense of affective investment in the music reality television participants (Fairchild, 2007; Hill, 2015) as a way for the show to generate mass attention and engagement. Nonetheless, what is intriguing about this affective engagement sought by the music reality television is that it forces itself to become an important site of producing (especially) pop music identities, in this way challenging and even replacing the long-standing pop star mechanism that is traditionally associated with record companies. Technically, this signals a rather radical change in the music industry, whereby the pop star mechanism has been made accessible to the masses when it is being televised and broadcast. However, I find that Fairchild’s remark is actually proposing an implicit contradiction. This reflects one of the main goals of the shows’

producers: to build affective investment in contestants whilst cultivating engagement with the show that is not only promoted through the contestant's musical talents. Alongside musical performance and ability, the attractiveness of their personal stories and traits also contributes to building the affective investment. And, certainly, the music aesthetics presented on television tend to be diminished whilst favouring the televisual aesthetics as part of the music performances. Hence, the participants are the key instrument of the music reality television's affective economics. In other words, they seem to be manipulated to fulfil the economic ideology and interest of the television show's producers.

For instance, the *AF* participants are challenged with 'constant auditions' (Stahl, 2004) within the show in favour of mental and physical durability. The contestants have to prepare themselves for a situation where they seem to always have to be ready to be commented on or criticised publicly, and this can be intimidating and draining. Plus, they are all young amateur hopefuls embarking on an attempt at commercial success in a reality television singing contest. In addition to that, requiring the hopefuls to sing music repertoires that are not their main preference is both mentally and physically exhausting, as they are given less than five days to prepare for such a challenge. Further, consider the planning demanded by performing such tasks during a live telecast and in a concert setting and environment with the presence of professional judges evaluating every detail of the performances, which is so unlike reality. Most notably, that occurs in a concert (or professional) staging and setting that articulates the sense of stardom (Holmes, 2004). These so-called intense 'constant auditions', as coined by Fairchild (2007), may illustrate the music reality television's role "as transparent, earnest, and benevolent facilitator of the best undiscovered talent it can find" (Fairchild, 2007, p. 356).

However, it seems to be contestable as it is somewhat disingenuous (Cvetkovski, 2015) and a fallacy. Taken as a whole, constant audition is a stressful process and completely unlike the experience of trying to make progress outside of a television reality show, namely in the music industry.

Nonetheless, the music reality television participants are the crucial actors in the multistage drama of a format which is capable of creating the format as a cultural phenomenon (Hill, 2015). The reality cast members and the televisual narrative that are usually portrayed through a scenario that largely works through their 'quest' or 'struggle' in competing for the winning title is probably the definition of what a pop idol or star is, as argued by Hill (2015). In another dimension, those are the key factors in attracting viewers to watch and follow the show and be actively engaged with the music reality television format. Most 'pop programmes', as articulated by Holmes (2004) in regard to music reality television shows, are "self-consciously articulate ideologies surrounding the construction of stardom and increasingly—with an emphasis on interactivity—its relationship with the politics of audience response" (p. 149). This definitely entices viewers to watch and follow them whilst the star-making process is on public display, foregrounding the democratic concept as the evaluation tool and allowing the viewers to be actively engaged with the process.

In general, this whole concept of music reality television and its affective economics probably mirrors the 'reality' of the entertainment industry, as argued by Simon Cowell, one of the 'founders' of the music reality television format. The entertainment mogul explained in one edition of *Pop Idol*: "Part of 'the reality' of this show means that we must show 'the reality' of the business" (Holmes, 2009, p. 394). In that respect, the reality may imply how difficult it is to be in showbiz, underlying the ideology of success and failure that is the common nature or

outcomes of the entertainment industry in particular. However, it is imperative to illuminate that the reality that Mr Cowell refers to is actually the mediation that the music reality television was invented for. This further illustrates that some mediations the music reality television attempts might work and some might not. The type of mediation that occurs here obviously favours the music reality television show whilst the music reality television acts as the mediator in negotiating the success or failure that the show might obtain. This means that the participants are likely to be exploited with the ideology of meritocratic utopianism, as introduced by Stahl (2004), which is being over-romanticised and which acts as the show's primary agenda, which can be linked with the argument of Fairchild (2007) on *Idols*, emphasising that "we are reminded constantly, this is 'our Idol'. We created them so we should take them seriously" (p.121). In fact, such a rhetoric of the reality television show implicitly reminds viewers to be actively involved in the game that the show curated that is actually concerning its business aspect whilst expecting them to take the reality cast members seriously. In that respect, the show depends on such television acts, and it obviously could not run without them.

Moreover, most reality shows propose a similarity, namely embodying 'the Cinderella stories' (Jian and Liu, 2009). This ideology links with the *AF* slogan that reflects its transformation ethos:

"One hope, one purpose, one destination and we at the *Akademi Fantasia* strive to transform their dreams into reality." (Aznil Nawawi, 2005¹⁰)

With the help of a pseudo-democratic mechanism (Holmes, 2004, 2009; Meizel, 2011; Jian and Liu, 2009) in finding

¹⁰ "Satu harapan, satu tujuan, satu destinasi dan kami di *Akademi Fantasia* berusaha merubah impian mereka menjadi reality." See leiadila (2008) and Ismail (2011).

the most 'deserving Cinderella' (the individual who deserves the winning title), the outcome on the given course is all due to music reality television's terms and obviously not the music industry's terms. This means that the transformation that the show deemed itself to be an expert at is probably occurring but apparently in televisual terms and not entirely musical terms. Within this particular cultural production, "the television industry is actually strengthening its grip on people in order to reduce costs and risks while increasing revenues in a time of uncertain financial prospects" (Kjus, 2009b, p. 277). What lies within this agenda is that:

"Reality TV's false premises, of course, also have ramifications for the viewers who participate via telephone and Internet connections, as *Idol* is not the open and fair campaign it is projected to be. Yet the question of whether audience participation involves empowerment or exploitation is ultimately moot: it is both" (Kjus, 2009b, p. 296).

In other words, it somewhat does not really matter if a music reality show has not been transparent to both the audience and the participants, as argued by Kjus (2009b); or if the show's premise seems to contradict what the programme proclaimed it was meant to be. Consequently, it is indeed 'real' for viewers to watch the show and enjoy the entertainment that draws on the notion of the ordinariness – the transformation journey of the individuals from being no one in the public sphere to someone worth public attention. Most importantly, it is truly 'real' too for the participants because careers are on offer even if the contestants are not being judged on their musical talent alone. Furthermore, these points may explain why the notion of 'instant noodles' artists emerged, especially in the case of *AF*, as the musicians are likely to be treated as the format's 'victim' in ensuring that the affective economics ideology is being

effectively optimised – one that offers more privilege to the music reality television creators.

4.3. The musicians as pseudo-stars

“If it [the music reality television show] couldn’t make stars, what was the point?” (Graham, 2017, p. 15)

Graham has made an explicit enquiry about the fate of music reality television graduates in relation to a show called *The X Factor*. The reason for raising this kind of question is to understand why such a show produces short-lived careers for its stars such as Steve Brookstein, G4 and Shayne Ward. Such an enquiry has been partially addressed in this chapter especially in the case of *AF* graduates, as the music reality television show is indeed a market-defined entertainment that apparently produces an outcome that is not entirely privileging the participants. This further demonstrated that the produced outcomes are marginalised creative labourers – the type of individual that works as the key instrument of the music reality television’s affective economics. Thus, it can be said that most music reality shows do not genuinely produce stars as they constantly claim. Hence, I argue that a show such as *AF* apparently produces pseudo-stars as the fame and stardom offers to the participants is largely fictitious and ephemeral.

The reality participants seem to be seeking fame and stardom as most music reality television shows are a combination of the mediation of popular music and the cultural construction of stardom (Holmes, 2004). To a lesser degree, this might propose that music reality television is not simply an entertainment show as it produces the star-to-be individuals that will become pop music stars, idols or cultural icons of society (especially to youngsters) particularly in the field of music. In a classical notion of stardom in the entertainment industry, stars

usually carry cultural meanings and/or ideological values. This means that such public figures are likely to possess a highly developed skillset comprising labour, talent and/or reputation and thereby are highly paid creative workers in the hierarchy of popular culture (see Dyer, 1986; Gledhill, 1991; Marshall, 2007; Shumway, 2001, 2015). Taken as a whole, this means that stars are generally understood as individuals who have made a profound achievement and contribution in their field of expertise in society and, therefore, are an effect or a product of mass cultural embrace (Gledhill, 1991). Additionally, such public figures predominantly exhibit their 'strengths' rather than 'weaknesses' for public viewing – their characters that literally make them stars. This further exemplifies that the star text made of them that is on offer for public viewing is a solid, polished one which is, in many cases, totally opposite to what the *AF* 'stars' are.

In *AF*, the participants are addressed as 'bintang *AF*' (*AF* stars) by the show's host even though they are still in the competition and have not graduated from the Akademi yet. This probably can be argued as a deliberate rhetorical misnomer. But it is also arguable that the show tries to be consistent with its rhetoric promotional theme, namely the transformation ethos it promises to the lucky individuals who participate in the show, although not all transformational work pays off for all the participants in the end. As such, not all participants seem to be entitled to star status – if they were to obtain that, the type of star they would turn into is likely to be a pseudo-star. This is due to the fact that the star system in music reality television is a contrived and fictitious one and the effect is ephemeral.

The way *AF* orchestrates its star mechanism is another controversial aspect that is frowned upon, especially by key industrial people (as explained in the previous chapter). The way *AF* publicly exposes and televises the star production process

has certain negative impacts on the produced stars. First, *AF* has kind of re-invented and diluted the long-standing star mechanism in wider popular culture and made an innovation to the former that has seen it become more sensational and easily accessible by viewers. This conceit allows viewers to encounter the stars' weaknesses instead of their strengths, ultimately suggesting that music reality shows create vulnerable types of stars. Moreover, the star's production time frame runs in a compressed manner. This means that the participants' experience, namely the transformation offered by the show, is instant and in line with the television ideology that is organised around an aesthetic of immediacy (Frith, 2002).

In the end, this process of the reinvention of the star-making machinery as demonstrated by the music reality television mechanism tends to produce 'hybrid media stars', as argued by Holmes (2004), as "the contestants become as much TV personalities as pop stars" (p. 151). But, more precisely, those hybrid stars are pseudo-stars. This fictionalised star system subverts the music industry's own process in the name of reproducing it for public gaze and consumption. In this particular respect, it is not entirely true to say that "TV-made pop stars almost always lack musical credibility", as argued by Frith (p. 277, 2002). The credibility issue is that what the reality show produces is a winner on its own terms; to this extent, at least, the stars accomplish something they did not set out to accomplish, but they are not 'uncredible', they are just not self-established pop stars. (I will further unpack and scrutinise the *AF* stars' experiences and industrial processes in later chapters.)

To an extent, it can be said that the individuals are victims of the *AF* hybrid production in which such hybridity has been formulated for the reality show's benefits. This further indicates that the *AF* graduates, in particular, have been produced by a star-making mechanism that does not offer a long-lasting

positive impact to them as creative individuals. Therefore, this can be argued as the contributing factor for the ‘instant noodles artists’ phenomenon – musicians tend to suffer from low staying power because they are not designed to last, only to win *AF*. In the end, the show produces pseudo-stars rather than real stars.

5. Conclusion

“In the creative economy context, it should still be possible (and is indeed beneficial and necessary) to talk about aesthetic value and the objective qualities of art and culture – not least to better account for why they might actually matter to those who produce and consume them.” (Banks, 2017, p.14)

In relation to the above remarks, this thesis specifically raises an important question about why music reality television graduates, namely the *AF* musicians, are as crucial to the formula as the show’s incorporated platform and delivery mechanism. There has been sufficient interest paid by scholars in the sense of the cultural consumption of music reality television, but none have addressed my research interest, namely musicians *within* the television process itself and notably in the Malaysian context. The importance of acknowledging such music labourers is to acknowledge their presence and substantial contribution that completes the music reality television ecosystem, proposing a new dimension in discussing the creative economy as proposed by Banks that only focuses on two aspects: cultural production and consumption.

I further propose that it is noteworthy to discuss the creative economy of individuals who work for both cultural aspects. Furthermore, the musicians are the key instrument of the music reality television’s affective economy – the key component of the cultural production that ultimately delivers the

success of the formula of music reality television. But, in contrast, such an achievement of the reality television genre and its reality formulation might not be entirely rewarding and helpful for the musicians' career trajectories – those individuals who have dedicatedly worked and contributed to the reality show's phenomenon.

Since graduating from *AF*, becoming a professional musician, and experiencing the vulnerability of my own pop music career, I am concerned too to understand why such an outcome was a common experience for most *AF* graduates, and not just my personal fate. I appreciate that *AF* is indeed a helpful platform that grants instant access to the pop music economy and market. However, such an instant mechanism comes with a substantial downside that seems to be exploitative of young hopefuls like me and my fellow *AF* stable mates.

While it cannot be denied that *AF* succeeded in its own terms, what it produced as a star was a distorted, hybrid text. The main effect, therefore, is that the show's premise with its life-transformation ethos is likely to be more accidental and not totally by design. By analysing the experiences of the hybridised musician and the process that the individuals had endured, it seemed that the point of the show was its own success, not the delivery of new Malaysian pop stars. This chimes with Graham's point: "if it [the show] couldn't make stars, what was the point?" (2017, p. 15).

In no way did *AF* take its responsibility to participants and graduates seriously; it transferred responsibility to the viewers. This echoes the argument of Fairchild about *Idols*, emphasising that "we are reminded constantly, this is 'our Idol'. We created them so we should take them seriously" (2007, p.121). In the case of *AF*, the show's host always kept reminding the viewers that they were 'responsible' in the sense of the *AF* students or

stars' fate within the show. This 'transference' of responsibility allowed *AF* to persist with its production of music-television hybrids. The irony then is that graduates were launched into pop music careers not as truly 'finished' or groomed' pop musicians but as hybridised pop musicians who could not determine their own fate.

Music or creative industries' precarity has been long discussed by scholars (see for example Negus, 1992, 1999; Frith, 2002, 2018; Jones; 2012; among others), reflecting that the tendency to experience failure rather than success is the norm in a music career – there is no exception that this would not happen to music reality television graduates. As argued by Jones (2012), “market failure is always a managed outcome of an industrial process which involves human beings making decisions about the form and content of symbolic goods in production” (p. 35). In my case and that of *AF* graduates like me, some aspects of our management as texts was taken out of our hands in ways different from the 'normal' music industry experience – we were accelerated but 'restricted' at the same time. With this limitation (and also responding to the notion of failure as argued by music industry scholars), it can be said that the tendency to fail is something that can be managed if the decision-making in the production of symbolic goods considers aspects such as talent development and career advancement – the ones that focus on the talents not the products. By doing so, it at least illustrates some effort of the music companies in appreciating the musicians as creative labourers who 'work' as the key instrument for the companies' profit generator.

Positing myself as the primary source of reflection, this thesis has set its working hypothesis from my own encounters in the music industry. This means that the existing scholarly theories that have been discussed earlier are the supporting scholarship that is capable of supporting me in addressing the

hypothesis and thus enabling my theorisation into an academic entry – that is based on the ‘microsociological detail’ (Cohen, 1991) that is through my 16 years of music experience. Further, this will be supported by interviewing selected *AF* graduates. This links the body of existing knowledge to my specific research concerns and specificities, which helps construct my thesis argument. In other words, the purpose of collating such scholarly accounts is to illustrate that this particular dimension of hybridised pop musicians and hybrid media texts has been a periphery context of discussion in academic discourse. Still, it is a growing topic of interest in the global contexts but is truly neglected in the local contexts. The next stage that will be considered in advancing this thesis exploration is to define the way this study will be approached in terms of its methodology, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

1. Introduction

This chapter mainly discusses the methodological perspective that underpins the research framework used to explore the career experience of pop musicians produced by the pop music-television hybrid *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*, Malaysia's music reality phenomenon. It opens by outlining the primary research method used, namely the qualitative approach, while exploring the inductive reasoning used; in other words, examining an untested inference or unaddressed phenomenon by positioning myself within the studied subject and then examining the negative portrayal of hybridised pop musicians. Indeed, inductive reasoning is designed and equipped with three specific dimensions or methods: a practice-led approach; autoethnography; and interviews. The practice-led approach is articulated in my participative, grounded and applied dimensions, namely my scholar-practitioner duality. Meanwhile, autoethnography helps to situate and derive the working hypothesis through the preliminary discourse and text while essentially, as a former *AF* contestant myself, I have to acknowledge the presence of my own experience in forming this analysis and argument. Interviews were then conducted with five different individuals that have gone through the hybrid pop star mechanism. These individuals encountered their own challenges in establishing themselves as pop musicians and their unique experiences offer valuable research data and will be parsed, first by Nvivo Pro 12, which, in turn, suggests that SWOT analysis helps move the argument forward. In short, the data parsed by Nvivo Pro 12 drives the SWOT analysis. This chapter will then discuss the chosen methodology and research instruments, which are based on triangulation as the post-rationalisation of the research design.

2. Research methodology: a qualitative approach

The qualitative research method will be the key methodology used to scrutinise the career idiosyncrasies of the pop musicians examined in this thesis. As Van Maanen (1979) has articulated, the qualitative research method is “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (p. 520). Echoing this, Kirk and Miller (1986) elaborate that:

Qualitative research is a particular tradition in social science that fundamentally depends on watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms. As identified with sociology, cultural anthropology, and political science, among other disciplines, qualitative research has been seen to be ‘naturalistic,’ ‘ethnographic,’ and ‘participatory.’ (pp. 8-9)

Regarding the contemporary notion of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2013) have noted that it is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (and) consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 6). Most importantly, and as argued by Flick (2015), it is an attempt to understand subjective experiences and social processes in the making, rather than “collecting ‘facts’” (p. 117). The accounts of these scholars recall Meriam and Tisdell (2015), who have outlined that “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (pp.14-15). Therefore, the active inclusion of researchers in this type of research enquiry deploying inductive reasoning is capable of deriving organic knowledge beyond mere facts. Those accounts from both classical and contemporary scholars ultimately

propose that qualitative research is seen as: embedded with value-adding abilities to generate the meaning of observed phenomena; emphasising the active role of social scientists conducting research in their own territories; and addressing a practical problem of immediate concern which contributes primarily to industry needs rather than academic theorisation.

In applying the qualitative measure in the context of this thesis, combining an industry-derived perspective with an academic one offers a dual view to social scientists, namely allowing one to be both observer and participant-observer while exploring the ‘rich’ narratives that are typically embodied in social phenomena. Bearing this in mind, this thesis is based on induction-oriented reasoning as a way to extend and locate the qualitative enquiry by including my personal narratives based on more than a decade’s experience of the music industry as a hybridised pop musician.

3. Research design: inductive reasoning

Table 2: Inductive reasoning (Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2019, p. 153)

Induction: from reason to research	
Logic	In an inductive inference, known premises are used to generate untested conclusions.
Generalisability	Generalising from the specific to general.
Use of data	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, and create a conceptual framework.
Theory	Theory generation and building.

In applying the inductive reasoning model as illustrated above, the situated premise or subject for this thesis is the *AF* hybrid production. This model is specifically used to examine the *AF*

pop musicians' music industry credibility and sustainability, which in turn has impacted their career trajectories. In order to explore the situated contexts, this research first scrutinised the Malaysian music industry's ongoing discourses, particularly the issue of musicians' low staying power. The negative portrayal of such an issue in the pop musicians' narratives in the music industry is the tentative hypothesis that will be further tested by examining individuals (including myself) who have experienced both the pop star regimentation system and its apparatus and those who are persistently pursuing a popular music career. The data gathered from the sources is useful in terms of identifying recurring themes in these pop musicians' career patterns while also addressing the tentative hypothesis. Nevertheless, the ultimate outcome of inductive research is not only to collate new emerging concepts, but also to generate persuasive new theories (Gioia and Pitre, 1990).

The induction framework will also be further elaborated through the practice-led approach in relation to research instruments such as autoethnography and interviews. This is to establish the notion of good practice in the sense of acknowledging and imposing the instruments necessary to enhance research credibility and the rigour required for a situated methodological framework.

3.1. Practice-led approach

The term practice-led research and its associated phrases (applied research, practice-based research, practice as research, research by practice, practice-oriented research) proposes a practice-centric instead of a scholarly-centric mode of research enquiry. It primarily emphasises practice in itself, while also highlighting insights, conceptualisation and theorisation based on reflection on the self in practice (Smith and

Dean, 2009). In this respect, the research approach used here is based on the notion of the reflective practitioner that obviously originated in the world of professional practice rather than in academic settings, with the aim of reducing the influence of existing theories on the researcher's interpretation of his or her own data (Flick, 2015; Rutten, 2016; White, 2009). This further emphasises that the solution of problems is based on practice by improving a particular discipline's quality of practice (Flick, 2015; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

In relation to this thesis, the problem is that the pre-existing debates concerning the music industry raise red flags in terms of over-representing (or favouring) influential critics, such as media and music industry professionals, while neglecting or marginalising the voices of the pop musicians. However, the inverse of this scenario remains unaddressed, concerning the under-representation of the musicians. This can be counterproductive, as it highlights the musicians' vulnerability, especially in this case of the most debated and discussed kind of pop identity. The discussions of the music industry tend to be dominated by the 'common sense' generated by music industry professionals. Musicians have little alternative but to discuss their experiences in and through these terms. One aim of this research is to encourage musicians to formulate their experiences more productively, based on evaluations of their own expectations when participating in *AF*.

That particular aim will be achieved by optimising my dual position, namely my roles as a practising music industry professional for over a decade and as an academic at a Malaysian public university. In addition, the interplay between academic and industrial contributions or forces is unprecedented in the Malaysian context, especially in relation to reviewing the music industry's contemporary apparatus and regimentation. On the one hand, the contribution of this thesis is based on

addressing this very substantial gap, both theoretically and practicality. On the other, the research underlines the strong urge for theory and practice to engage with each other; academic research and industrial practicality can help to cultivate and create a better industrial system that ultimately ascribes equal importance to both the system itself and the industry's creative workers. This specifically concerns the fate of the pop musicians, namely those creative individuals who have the most substantial role in the music market ecosystem.

3.2. Autoethnography: the preliminary mode of enquiry

Autoethnography is a qualitative research instrument employed by social scientists in the form of self-reflection and writing in order to explore anecdotal and personal experiences while articulating an autobiographical narrative and uncovering its broader cultural, political and social meanings and understandings (Ellis, 2004). To put it simply, autoethnography appreciates and utilises personal narratives (auto) in an attempt to understand cultural experience (ethno) while systematically analysing the research processes involved (graphy) (see Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015). The ultimate outcome of the autoethnographic approach does not only involve focusing on one's self as a subject of study in a situated research setting; rather, it "transcends a mere narration of personal history" (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013, p. 13). Hence, the sole purpose of writing autoethnography is to go beyond a documentary format that is typically descriptive in nature. Instead, it 'unfolds' the documentary, scrutinises its social complexity, and translates the underlying meanings. This analytical process involves texts featuring a "thick description" of a given culture, a concept that has often been featured in autoethnographic-themed accounts in order to identify patterns

of cultural experience such as repeated feelings, stories and happenings as evidenced by field notes, interviews and/or artefacts (Ryle, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Jorgenson, 2002; and Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2013).

According to Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015), one of the ways for autoethnographers to employ the autoethnography method is to fully, deeply and meaningfully understand the complexity of the thick description. Such a process for autoethnographers of understanding experiences observed or felt provides epiphanies – “those remarkable and out of the ordinary life-changing experiences that transform us or call us to question our lives” (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015, p. 26). The autoethnography scholars further note that:

“Epiphanies create impressions that stay with us, recollections, memories, images, feelings that persist long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished. These epiphanies prompt us to pause and reflect; they encourage us to explore aspects of ourselves and others that, before the incident, we might not have had the occasion or courage to explore” (p. 47)

Given autoethnography’s attributes, the research instrument matches well with the research role and background of this thesis. I have experienced *AF* and observed its phenomenon (as the show’s viewer, participant and graduate) and I would like to transcend the experiences, connecting the epiphanies to a context of academic exploration. My scholar-practitioner duality allows me the privilege of gaining access to “closely guarded communities,” thereby helping me to understand “the impact of professional identities on types of disclosure in the field” (Caldwell, 2009, p. 214). The interesting aspect of having such a dual role in the context of this thesis is that merging two roles has given autoethnographers a vantage point from which to consider sociocultural phenomena from

perspectives familiar to the self as a researcher and participant (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013). This enables me to transcend thick description by parsing the intractability of cultural marginalisation, which is less discussed in the Malaysian music landscape. In this respect, the fate of the pop musicians, namely, the epiphanies of the individuals impacted by the hybridised pop institution, is the primary concern. When unpacking the complexity of the issues at hand, it is necessary to both evaluate the industry's pre-conception/identification of the hybridised musicians and to ascertain to what extent their prescribed status has impacted them in terms of music industry career sustainability. Therefore, autoethnography seems to be the ideal approach to the unaddressed issues that have been a long-standing feature of the pop music landscape.

3.2.1. Establishing a tentative hypothesis

“Autoethnographies place personal experience within social and cultural contexts and raise provocative questions about social agency and socio-cultural constraints” (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p. 28).

Autoethnography is located at the heart of the reflective practice involved in being both a graduate of a hybridised pop institution and a practising music industry professional. The tentative hypothesis is mainly derived based on the notion of “instant noodles”, a conspicuous branding that reflects a negative judgement of certain pop musicians' music industry longevity and credibility (see Utusan Online 2009, 2010, 2014).

In relation to the Reed-Danahay quote cited above, the autoethnographic approach as adopted in this thesis is indeed a provocative mode of enquiry. This is because the enquiry is conducted by someone who is both very familiar with the issues

and will be able to supply first-hand information. To an extent, the autoethnographic approach is able to contest the preconceptions established by critics of the pop music television hybrid. However, this thesis acts as a mediator; namely, it tries to position itself impartially while attempting to address the tentative hypothesis by documenting the narratives of the affected individuals and examining the *AF* hybrid system. Paradoxically, this in turn will help to discern patterns by, respectively, examining the musicians included in the show, the star-making process, and the aftermath in terms of their ongoing pursuit of sustainable music careers.

3.2.2. Preliminary discourse and text

According to Bochner (2013), “autoethnography is inquiry; something we call experience is being inquired into, interpreted, made sense of and judged” (p.54). It is also a pragmatic social science approach that is driven by questions relating to observed phenomena that have yet to be explored and testified to. Such a process derives a tentative hypothesis, which is a preliminary enquiry in a practice-led research setting. Before drawing up the hypothesis, it is vital to locate the origins of its formulation. This is to establish how inductive the designated research process is, thereby helping to propose a coherent framework that will help articulate and situate the primary enquiry and sources of tension or problems in formulating the hypothesis.

As mentioned earlier, the primary enquiry of this thesis concerns the career experiences of hybridised pop musicians, which happens to be an unprecedented research area in scholarly terms, especially in Malaysia. From the body of accounts that have discussed *AF* in a music reality show context (Maliki, 2008; Mohamed and Mukhiar, 2007; Turner, 2010; Wahab, 2010; Ishak, 2011; Shamsudeen, 2011; Shamsudeen and Morris, 2014; Muhid, 2015), the micro-level discussion of the

pop phenomenon, relating precisely to the pop musicians' experience of their music career, is an apparent gap.

Additionally, the critics (predominantly the entertainment media) who are in the vanguard of establishing judgmental conceptions of such musicians seem to be strongly biased in this case. Adding tension to this unfortunate situation is the dynamic whereby some of the key figures in the music industry have explicitly expressed worries about the hybrid's negative impact on the career launches of aspirant musicians via the pop music-television hybrid. Therefore, in order to draw a tentative hypothesis based on this gap and problem, it is imperative to explain the rationale of the hypothesis formulation to ensure that the enquiry is systematically mapped and articulated.

The primary source is apparently the recurring music industry discourse on hybridised pop musicians, which is the main driver of this entire thesis. In this respect, there is a wide range of grey literature discussing the credibility and longevity of pop musicians, including the industry-based enquiries and critiques that seem to raise red flags regarding the pop musicians' industry status. As such, the notion of 'instant noodles' has been mass-circulated by entertainment media in Malaysia (Utusan Online, 2009, 2010, 2014), whereas key industry figures (Dato' Ahmad Nawab, Datuk Syafinaz Selamat and Ziana Zain) have expressed concerns regarding issues of artistic quality and that the star-making process taints the hybrid pop musicians' star status.

It will be argued that the misconception associated with hybridised pop musicians is a result of a lack of understanding of these pop musicians' unmet expectations. This further underlines that they are being mistreated and misjudged quite severely. In this case, in judging these musicians, critics may have been influenced by their conceptualisation of the hybrid

format itself, which seems to be based on resenting the 'exploitation' of music on a reality television show. This suggests that they tend to evaluate the presence of such musicians in the music industry based on understanding the *AF* hybrid production as a form of soap opera TV show and not especially as a credible pop music institution. That being said, the criticisms might be overshadowed or implicitly influenced by the nature of the hybrid itself as a music reality TV show – a mechanism that is not dedicatedly a talent-focused one, as opposed to the record companies, who are typically seen as running a credible pop star mechanism in the music industry. To put this simply, the role that the hybrid has had is as an unparalleled pop star mechanism regimented by record companies in the recording industry, whilst the critics were expecting the hybrid to produce the same outcomes as the record companies. In that respect, the critics, especially the key industry figures, are sensitive to the apparent 'harm' that is inflicted by the hybrid on the music industry. This harm is seemingly rooted in the hybrid itself, which further exposes aspirant pop musicians and makes the potential outcomes of their career prospects precarious. Although the key figures are playing their role by criticising the hybrid's pop star machinery, their 'warnings' have escalated tensions, implicitly establishing misconceptions regarding the pop musicians' branding. One thing to note here is that such figures might not be really aware of how exploitative the hybrid has been of its participants; this only can be understood entirely from the experience of being in the pop music hybrid mechanism and not from outside observation of the format's setting.

Therefore, the tentative hypothesis that derived from such preliminary existing data somehow provides a preliminary 'thick description' that is useful essentially to understand its micro-sociological detail (Cohen, 1991) that contributed to the problems of the cultural phenomenon. Having said that, please

bear in mind that, in allowing my own experience to dominate this study whilst unpacking the phenomenon of the *AF* hybridity that marked the journeys of different pop musicians or artists, the narrative is just an evidential moment that recalls the notion of thick description as it has appeared in autoethnographic academic accounts. This further refers to the autoethnography nature that predominantly embodies “multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Whilst facts such as the preliminary data are essential to an autoethnographic storyteller, they can and should be able to be verified as they do not tell what they mean or how they may make you feel (Bochner, 2013). Thus, it can be said that autoethnography “has become a rallying point for those who believe that the human sciences need to become more human” (Bochner, 2013, p. 53), somewhat proposing “a response to an existential crisis—a desire to do meaningful work and lead a meaningful life” (p. 53).

3.3. Interviews: data collection

A phenomenological exploration would not be complete by only referring to one ‘voice’. It has to be accompanied by some relevant source of information that has the potential to elevate the credentials of this thesis as an academic contribution. Therefore, to add greater depth and breadth to the exploration, the thesis employs a qualitative research instrument such as interviews as a supporting method in order to unpack the career experience of selected individuals, specifically *AF* graduates. Apart from my own observation that is taken on board, five individuals will be approached by interviews to understand the *AF* hybrid and the ‘instant noodles’ phenomenon that it produces. According to Creswell (2018), a scholar in qualitative research, in the fourth edition of his qualitative research book, a sample size of five interviewees is within the proposed sampling

size – the minimum and an ideal sampling framework in qualitative research – and thus would suffice in studying a phenomenon (see also for examples Dukes, 1984; Ray, 1994; Morse, 1994; Creswell, 1998; Smith and Dean, 2009). The interviewees are carefully chosen based on their unique encounters and professional backgrounds. In this way, it helps to establish a deeper understanding of how such individuals experience both the show and their post-involvement phase, particularly in relation to the music economy and industry.

The misconceptions of *AF* pop musicians literally signify the misinterpretation and misjudgement by stakeholders who have established the ‘instant noodles’ ideology. Employing interviews as a research tool also gave me an opportunity to make sense of this misconception; in other words, the method forms a counterproductive measure in the situated research context which eventually aids the creation of “a sense of *verisimilitude*, the feeling or illusion of reality” when the “marginalized voices”, namely the selected *AF* interviewees, are finally heard and counted (p. 85):

“If the research topic concerns more implicit meanings and tacit understandings, like the taken-for-granted assumptions of a group or a culture, then participant observation and field studies of actual behaviour supplemented by informal interviews may give more relevant information than formal interviews” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p.128).

Regarding the quote from Brinkman and Kvale, it is useful to employ the interview method in order to support the autoethnographic approach. Having my own established reputation and connections with key people in the industry, especially *AF* graduates, enables the research to minimise or

possibly avoid formality when conducting interviews when individuals interviewed one-on-one are usually hesitant to provide information (Krueger and Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997). With the aim “to minimally disturb the [interview] subjects under investigation” (Cole, 1991, p. 159), this has absolutely resulted in more casual and guileless interviews, which may cultivate transparency at every possible level. The respondents’ interview consent was obtained beforehand. Furthermore, they were happy to know that this research effort will contribute to popular music studies, which is an underdeveloped academic discipline in Malaysia. In fact, they were not at all reluctant to disclose their own identities for the research purpose, although the option of anonymity was explained and offered to them in the first place. They were also informed that this research obviously has no commercial advantage as it is a non-profit project dedicated to making an academic contribution.

In conducting interviews, open-ended questions in a semi-structured form are helpful in qualitative research. Below are the questions:

- a) Could you tell me how your life was before participating in *AF*? (previous job, musical experience, etc.)
- b) What made you participate in *AF*?
- c) What was your perception of *AF* before and after joining the show?
- d) How was your career path after taking part in *AF*?

The interviewees are expected to reply as freely and as extensively as they wish. In this sense, I could probe further “if the answers are not rich enough” or unsatisfactory according to the research’s objectives or themes (Flick, 2015, p. 140), as usually legitimate in conducting interviews in qualitative research. I ‘wore a different hat’ in the interview sessions by staying neutral and not asking provocative questions, meaning

that I embodied the image of a true observer who just wanted to obtain answers to my enquiries without influencing how participants should respond to the questions. All I was asking for was their *AF* stories and post-*AF* music industry journeys. In this manner, I was allowed a space to instantly pre-analyse and react to the stories or any issues that emerged during the interview sessions. In addition, the interview process also offers live interaction, which helps in examining non-verbal cues that might be expressed in the interviewees' responses, either intentionally or unintentionally. Such non-verbal cues can be a tool to help identify interviewee sensitivities regarding the questions and issues discussed. This means that the non-verbal cues are just being observed during the interviews which aid me in interpreting the interviewees' body gestures or reactions, further informing whether the interviewees are comfortable with the questions being asked. It is important to keep the interviewees at ease in responding to the questions which ultimately affects the outcome of the interview data. For instance, if the interviewee looks uneasy with a question asked, I will try to change the subject or rephrase the question in a different perspective. As such, I will add any related stories that enable me to encourage the interviewee to answer my question. In this case, handling questions about 'instant noodles artists' is the one that requires me to be careful as it may offend the interviewees.

3.3.1. The interviewees: *AF* graduates

Graduates from the earliest seasons of *AF* were chosen as interview subjects, a period marking the platform's highest level of popularity as a pop phenomenon, one that has had a profound impact on the Malaysian entertainment scene. This periodisation also reflects my active participation and observation whereby I witnessed the phenomenon and was later involved in the star machinery. In other words, the *AF* graduates in this period were

uniquely vulnerable as they were ‘produced’ during *AF*’s glory years when the ‘instant noodles’ ideology was first created and disseminated. Thus, when determining suitable interview candidates, the *AF* graduates chosen exemplified the journey to becoming pop music stars and they are still facing challenges in establishing their musical branding in the industry. Some of them are *AF* winners and some are Top 5 finalists who made the last rounds. Most importantly, they still have music careers.

- **The winners:**

There are two winners identified because of their distinctive experiences that are literally valuable for the thesis exploration. One gained his victories with a phenomenon he ‘accidentally’ created, whilst the other had a ‘blueprint’ that seemed effective to exploit the hybrid. Both individuals have offered very ‘thick descriptions’ of their respective musical journeys in which they developed their own phenomenon on the show while having a lasting music industry impact.

- **Mawi (*AF3*)**

In *AF3*, Mawi was known as ‘the King of SMS’ due to the undefeatable popular vote that he gained – he was always in the first spot throughout the competition. With his ‘tsumawi phenomenon’, this naïve, pious-seeming individual from a rural background set a benchmark that has never been surpassed in *AF*’s history. In other words, no *AF* participant over any of its seasons has matched his remarkable record.¹¹ Most notably, the man himself is one of Malaysia’s ‘pop phenomena’ (Lee, 2006) as his personal stories always had the subject of media discourse and attention which helped him to be the centre of public attention (Lee, 2006). His success is not just driven by

¹¹ The word ‘tsumawi’ is intentionally spelt in that way. “Fenomena tsumawi” in Malay: the term “tsu-mawi”, coined by *AF*’s host, originates from the term “tsunami”, i.e. underlining Mawi’s unprecedented popularity during the show.

controversy (e.g. he hid his status as an engaged person since his *AF* participation until he broke up with his fiancé several months after winning *AF*); it is also reflected by his album sales: “His three albums sold hundreds of thousands of units, when other artists were struggling to reach even 10,000 sales units” (Tengku Bidin, 2007).

- **Hazama (*AF9*)**

His experience with *AF* started off as a ‘rejected’ contestant from *AF4*’s Prelude; he was shortlisted in the Top 20 preliminary round. At this stage of the competition, the successful candidates moving into the Top 12 were considered exclusively by the professional judges; he was not on the list. However, this ‘lucky’ hopeful made a great comeback on the show as he had a second chance on *AF9*, namely, an instant pathway without going through the audition process. Learning from his failure on *AF4* and exacting a ‘sweet revenge’ on *AF9*, he grabbed the title and finally became one of the music scene’s most prominent figures with numerous hits and was once was nominated for Anugerah Industri Muzik (AIM)¹² best album prize for his 2013 recording, *Penglipur Lara* (Chaw, 2015).

- **The finalists:**

Three individuals who were Top 5 *AF* finalists were chosen for the interview while also taking into account their talent and career paths. They have their own distinctive career experiences; they have had their share of success and failure.

¹² Anugerah Industri Muzik (AIM), organised by the Recording Industry Association of Malaysia (RIM), is the premier music industry award show in Malaysia. It is known for its prestige and credibility, with respected practitioners in the industry sitting on its judging panel (AIM, 2018).

Most importantly, they are the early *AF* graduates who have tried the hardest to achieve music industry career stability.

- **Bob (*AF2*)**

Bob is one of *AF*'s gems; 2020 seems to be a lucky comeback year for this pop singer as he was one of the award winners on Anugerah Juara Lagu (AJL), one of the most prestigious pop music award ceremonies in Malaysia. With his remarkable talent, Bob has also been recognised by an international competition named the World Championships of Performing Arts in Hollywood, California. However, in his early career, he tended to be forgotten in the local popular music scene, as he argued on Sinar Harian that his songs did not receive airplay from radio stations (Ishak, 2015).

- **Amylea (*AF3*)**

A singer and songwriter, Amylea (*AF3*) made a bold statement in an interview on “*AF* Close Up”, asserting that she felt that her talent and presence was ‘neglected’ by the industry at some point in her music career (Astro Gempak, 2017). Despite the struggles she has faced through her early music career, Amylea made a great comeback recently with a song that was one of Anugerah Juara Lagu’s (AJL) finalists. Currently, she is one of the singer-songwriters that always appear in the local music charts.

- **Farhan (*AF4*)**

Farhan is known as a jazz singer. The genre itself is a niche music market in Malaysia as it has been the music preference of an elite audience and is not a mass-market musical genre in Malaysian society. In this niche or high-end market, Farhan has always been preferred for VVIP private events and functions, especially in the presence of Malaysian kings and royals, prime ministers, ministers, and local and international dignitaries.

Nonetheless, she once made some remarks to Utusan Online underlining her sense of struggle regarding establishing a musical identity in the pop music industry; despite this, Farhan has asserted that she has never given up on her career (Mohd. Faizal, 2008).



*Figure 6. Mawi.
(Hassan, 2017)*



*Figure 7. Hazama.
(Chua, 2019)*



Figure 8. Bob.

(Gempak, 2017)



Figure 9. Farhan.

(mstar, 2011)



Figure 10. Amylea.

(Gempak, 2017)

3.3.2. Research ethics clearance and the fieldwork

Research ethics clearance was obtained from the University Ethics Team on 5 July 2018. Starting from the approval date, I allocated a month for the Malaysia-based fieldwork in order to give myself ample time if any hiccups hampered the fieldwork

plan. The interview sites were locations such as private residences, cafés and a restaurant, while the interviews themselves took up at least to an hour each to conclude. Before the sessions started, the research intention and objectives were explained to the interviewees in detail. They communicated that they were honoured to voluntarily take part in the interview sessions and were happy to disclose any information that I needed, including their own identities, although the option of anonymity was of course explained and offered. In addition, they were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the interview session at any time, without explanation and without incurring any disadvantage. If they were unhappy or if there was a problem regarding their participation, they were free to contact the Principal Investigator of the research, Dr Michael Jones, or alternatively contact the Research Ethics and Integrity Office at ethics@liv.ac.uk. Overall, the fieldwork was a pleasant experience as it ran smoothly and as planned without any significant issues.

4. Thematic data analysis: Nvivo Pro 12 and SWOT template

Once the data is gathered from the fieldwork, it will be translated and transcribed in English. Then, the data will be analysed thematically to identify the data set's recurring patterns or emerging themes. This process of interpretation begins with open coding and aims to express the data and phenomena in the form of concepts (Flick, 2015). Towards the ends of the whole analytical process, selective coding comes more to the fore, signalling the potential core concepts or variables (Flick, 2015). In doing so, the data was analysed by employing Nvivo Pro 12, which is computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The software is a helpful tool to add depth and breadth to one's analysis given its triple power, namely, data

management, data coding and data analysis, by querying coded material or developing conceptual models (Mortelmans, 2019).

In seeking out the occurrence of emerging themes in the narratives of the raw data gathered, this thesis borrows a strategic management tool, SWOT analysis: a simple and practical form of the evaluation model that is usually used within an organisation's resources and capabilities that is able to review its internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as assessing external business environments that propose opportunities and threats. In relation to this thesis, the application of SWOT analysis is only in terms of its descriptive format. It is literally a preliminary examination as a way of organising and grouping the raw data gathered. Such an early process simply describes a list that conveys no information in itself, but it is a way of helping the analyst to think about the gathered information that could be useful for further reasonable actions (Kay, McKiernan and Faulkner, 2006). Thus, the deployment of Nvivo Pro 12 and the SWOT template enables the researcher to generate a set of systematically organised findings that will then be synthesised and become the main outcome of the research.

5. Triangulation: the post-rationalisation of research design

In the social sciences, triangulation is about deepening and widening one's understanding of the same phenomenon by the application of different research instruments, sources or materials, such as methods, data and theories. Flick (2015) notes that triangulation is designed "to view a research issue from at least two vantage points. Mostly, analysis from two or more points is realized by using multiple methodological approaches" (p. 218). In doing so, two forms of triangulation are helpful for this thesis: triangulation of data and methodological

triangulation (Denzin, 1970, 1989, cited in Flick, 2015). These are useful in order to establish a pragmatic research framework through cross-verification, which is then articulated as a validation strategy when studying the notion of ‘instant noodles’ or, precisely, the pop musicians’ staying power.

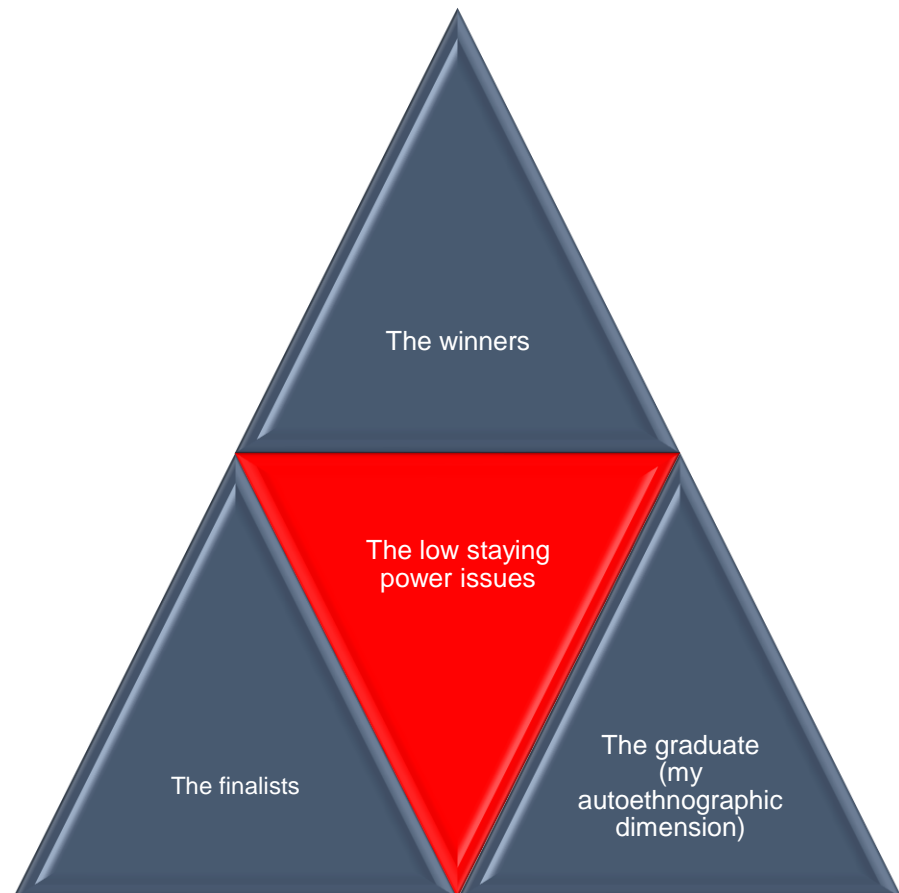


Figure 11. Triangulation of data

As seen in the works of Denzin, data triangulation is the process of analysing combined data drawn from different sources and at different times and places or from different people. As illustrated in Figure 11, “each data point represents different data of the same event; discovering commonalities within dissimilar settings. Furthermore, the data points take place over time to observe ongoing interactions – days, weeks, months, years” (Fusch, Fusch, and Ness, 2018, p. 22). In exploring the problems of pop musicians’ career longevity and

credibility, which impact on these individuals' career staying power, three different narratives of hybridised musicians are generated: the winners, the finalists, and the graduate. The main purpose of this data triangulation is to find similarities and dissimilarities between such individuals, particularly in terms of their experiences of the pop music television hybrid as a star-making mechanism and the music industry as a 'workplace' for graduated pop musicians. Thus, the use of data triangulation ultimately enhances the validity of the research by acknowledging the multidimensional uniqueness of the musicians' experiences.

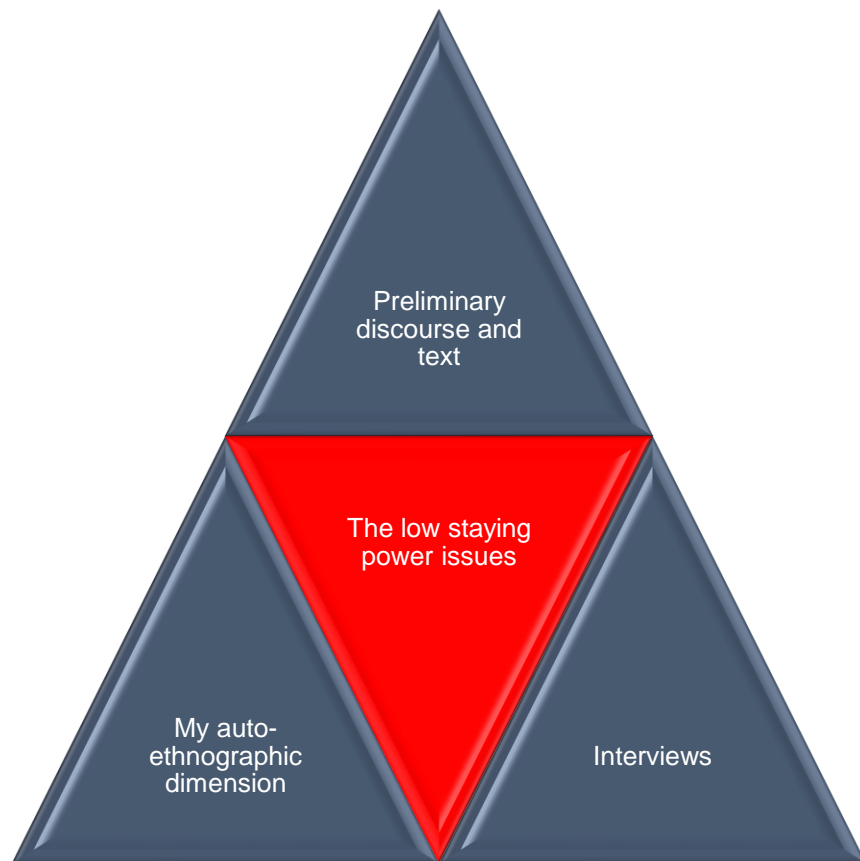


Figure 12. Methodological triangulation

The second form of triangulation is methodological triangulation, which is between or within a given method. In other words, it is a complex process of playing each method off against the other so as to maximise the validity of the field research

(Denzin, 1970 cited in Flick, 2015). For this thesis, it is manifested in the qualitative method used, namely one which is based on a tentative hypothesis. As illustrated in Figure 12, it first draws on my autoethnographic description of the nature of a hybridised pop musician, followed by the industry's discourse and text, and, finally, interviews. As mentioned earlier, one's own perspective is insufficient to address the whole situated research context. Each given method represents different data resources drawing on different people's backgrounds. The way the interviewees viewed the low staying power dynamic also varied; the outcomes might be influenced by either the active or passive mode of observation they practised. This further underlines their industry roles and backgrounds, their level of knowledge, and the experiences they have had regarding the issues observed in the situated phenomenon. Therefore, within the overall qualitative methodology, triangulation is useful in gathering different perspectives from different sources. It is possible to test the consistency of the pop musicians' (mis)conceptions by assessing the factors that establish the low staying power issue while ultimately facilitating an in-depth understanding of the main research enquiry.

6. Conclusion

The research is wholly strategised and designed based on a qualitative framework, which further underlines the practice-led approach as well as the use of autoethnography and interviews as the qualitative research instruments. The practice-led approach is reflected in the sense of participative, grounded and applied research dimensions. The approach is usually and predominantly employed by industrial practitioners in approaching the subject under study, specifically in terms of dealing with practical contexts. This means that the approach is not designed to address pre-existing scholarly theories and

contribute to the academic setting in the first place. Rather, it highlights the active process of researchers attempting to understand problems that need addressing as well as suggesting solutions.

The practice-led approach will be further deepened by the sustained use of autoethnography in this research. Mainly adopted by social scientists, autoethnography is a research instrument that optimises a researcher's personal experiences and history to help describe, analyse or report on political, social or cultural phenomena. It highlights the deployment of the researcher's dual role, namely as the investigator and the subject being investigated, in order to achieve a profound understanding of the subject under study. In addition, the approach helps to document or map conceptual developments and theoretical claims, which are useful when deriving an analytical research outcome. In this thesis, autoethnography is seen as a dynamic mechanism while assisting a systematic enquiry. It examines the preliminary discourse and text of the phenomenon and then focuses more narrowly on my autoethnographic dimension, namely my epiphanies as a hybridised pop musician in the Malaysian popular music scene. Such autoethnographic appraisals facilitate the formulation of a tentative hypothesis which will be further explored in the fieldwork by using the interview research instrument. The interviews are conducted with five identifiable individuals with 'high durability' criteria according to their 'colourful' music industry journeys. That said, the respondents are those who have experienced ups and downs in their music careers but who have also persistently and actively established music market brandings.

The data gathered from the fieldwork was analysed thematically by using Nvivo Pro 12. In order to justify all the processes, instruments and tools deployed in this research, this

chapter discusses triangulation. Two levels are deployed, namely, methodological and data triangulation. Such triangulation modes reflect a post-rationalisation of the research methodological framework that enables one to obtain the best possible breadth and depth of understanding of the studied phenomenon. In conclusion, all the research instruments involved in the research design primarily show how the tentative hypothesis is formulated and where it has been derived from to ensure that the problem statement is attended to and answered in the best possible manner.

Chapter 4: The findings

1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the raw data gathered in the fieldwork, which is designed to address the key question of the thesis, namely how *AF* can be perceived as a help or harm to its graduates' career trajectory. The data will be parsed first by using Nvivo Pro 12, a qualitative software package. Secondly, the data will be further processed by employing SWOT analysis. SWOT's capabilities seem to be useful in sorting out data thematically within its quadrant classifications. Hence, the findings that emerged within the SWOT quadrants represent the musicians' career experiences. These suggest that 'Strengths', 'Weaknesses', 'Opportunities' and 'Threats' are found in the musicians' industry narratives ever since their inclusion in *AF*. There will be a pre-analysis and a brief discussion of each respective SWOT quadrant's findings which will reveal the predominant themes that emerged. This chapter moves on to reviewing the musicians' career experiences by addressing the thesis research question and establishing a theoretical framework that will be further scrutinised in the next chapter.

2. Parsing the pop musicians' career experience

The data gathered will be parsed, first by Nvivo Pro 12. It is a helpful tool to add depth and breadth to one's analysis given its triple power, namely, data management, data coding and data analysis, by querying coded material or developing conceptual models (Mortelmans, 2019). In employing this tool, the data will be reviewed under three key Nvivo terms: 'Nodes', 'Files' and 'References'. Nodes simply refer to codes or themes coded as data. Files indicate the number of respondents who contributed to the discussion of the themes, whilst references are the coding reference count or the themes' frequency which can be detected in interview texts that ultimately established nodes.

Once the data has been processed by Nvivo Pro 12, it will then be further parsed by using SWOT analysis, which in turn suggests that SWOT's capabilities help to move the thesis argument forward. The SWOT analysis is seen as a simple and practical form of evaluation model that is usually used to identify an organisation's resources and capabilities while allowing one to review its internal strengths and weaknesses as well to assess external business environments that pose opportunities and threats. As argued by Haberberg (2000, cited in Helms and Nixon, 2010), "by listing favourable and unfavourable internal and external issues in the four quadrants of a SWOT analysis grid, planners can better understand how strengths can be leveraged to realize new opportunities and understand how weaknesses can slow progress or magnify organizational threats" (p. 216). Despite the usefulness of SWOT analysis, it should be noted that I will not be utilising this classical strategic management tool for the analysis as it is predominantly understood in management studies. As argued in relation to SWOT limitations, Panagiotou (2003, p. 8) has observed that it "no longer provides the support needed to achieve a more advanced level of analysis" while Haberberg (2000, cited in Helms and Nixon, 2010) asserts that SWOT analysis "does not provide a sufficient context for adequate strategy optimization, and states the simplicity leads planners or managers to use it incorrectly, producing short lists of non-prioritized, generalized bullet points" (p. 234). Hence, it makes total sense that the SWOT analysis outcome is simply a list that conveys no information in itself, but it is a way of helping the analyst to think about the information gathered, which could be useful for further reasonable actions, as argued by Kay, McKiernan and Faulkner (2006).

Therefore, the SWOT approach as employed by this thesis is simply a way to interpret musicians' career experiences

from their first appearance on the show until the present, as they are now practising pop music professionals. For instance, 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses' refer to positive and negative experiences respectively during the musicians' *AF* participation while they were still *AF* hopefuls and dreamed of becoming pop musicians. On the other hand, 'Opportunities' and 'Threats' reflect the positive and negative experiences that the musicians faced in their post-*AF* phase whilst having music industry careers. Therefore, SWOT's capabilities seem to be useful in sorting out data thematically within its quadrant classifications, which has helped this research organise the data gathered and develop a solid theoretical framework. That said, the outcome of the SWOT analysis at this stage does not imply the research outcomes or conclusions.

The term 'Texts' as used in all tables across this chapter refers to the interview extracts that embodied the nodes in the data. The situated texts in all nodes have been processed as effectively as possible, with my best efforts to preserve the meanings, particularly in relation to Malaysian music industry definitions and culture. For instance, there are some forms of expression that are commonly used in the Malaysian music industry that probably have different meanings in the UK or global music industries; for example, 'shows' refers to 'live performances' while 'jobs' refers to paid musical activity or income streams.

The themes that emerged in the findings are all based on their discussion frequencies in the interview texts. It should be noted that some of the interview texts suggest multidimensional meanings. Hence, certain texts can be coded in more than one node. Once the texts have been laid out systematically by using the SWOT orientation, every theme that emerged within each quadrant will be pre-analysed in order to understand the

underlying meanings embodied within each respective SWOT element, and will be briefly reviewed accordingly.

2.1. Strengths

Strengths are seen as the internal elements of *AF*, namely the respondents' positive experiences of the show that have been beneficial for their becoming pop musicians in the music industry. There are four elements listed in this SWOT quadrant and they are *AFs* reputation, industry training, pop music market entry, and a well-rounded training approach.

Table 3. Strengths

SWOT Quadrant & Nodes	Description	Files	References
Strengths	<i>AFs</i> internal elements that benefit the participants in terms of becoming pop musicians	5	25
<i>AFs</i> reputation	The 'national cultural phenomenon'	4	10
Industry training	Exposure to performing arts knowledge courtesy of well-known, high-reputation industry figures	5	7
Pop music market entry	Career launcher for aspirant pop musicians	3	5

A well-rounded training approach	Produces entertainers	3	3
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- **AF's reputation**

As illustrated in Table 4 below, most of the respondents' *AF* participation is primarily due to the show's reputation. This underlines *AF*'s branding as a national cultural phenomenon (Shamshudeen and Morris, 2014). This phenomenon is unprecedented in the Malaysian music industry, whilst *AF* has set the benchmark as the first music reality television show to have garnered exceptional mass attention courtesy of its televised pop music academy format with effective fame and stardom effects. In addition, *AF*, as a paid television network production, has successfully created a new form of cultural consumption on the part of the Malaysian audience, who had previously consumed content from free-to-view TV channels dominated by public and private broadcasters. Most notably, *AF* as a pop music-television hybrid is a literally life-changing experience for aspiring musicians whereby it materialises their musical ambitions and dreams. The profound impact on the Malaysian entertainment landscape of *AF* alongside Astro, its television network, is a truly remarkable phenomenon, as argued by the respondents. The reputation that *AF* has created, therefore, has become the hybrid's key attraction in the eyes of young aspiring musicians.

Table 4. 'AFs reputation' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	"Everybody talked about AF1. It was much hyped!"
	2.	"I was not after the competition. AF fascinates me with its elements – you got to do a performance every week, you have trainings in the Akademi."
	3.	"But overall, the AF [experience] was the best moment in my life and I could never have the same moment again. I really appreciated the moment! I still can remember the concert for the fifth week that was held in an open space in Putrajaya, not in the stadium. There were thousands of people waiting since 5pm – the concert start[ed] at 8.30pm. When the floor manager warmed up the crowd while we were standing by at the backstage, I can still remember the goosebumps that I had! It was just amazing! I still can remember that!"
	4.	"Three months ago, you're just a normal person, no one was really bothered about you. Three months after that, you are totally an artist, a star – you're so famous instantly!"
Bob	5.	I thought it was just a singing competition. It is kind of odd to know that I have to stay in designated accommodation with other contestants for up to three months. I

		was amazed that everything [in the facility] was so luxurious. I was extremely happy when I started to understand the format and everything about <i>AF</i> . It was a fascinating experience.”
	6.	“[My life is] totally changed! 360 degrees! But I never think that I am a [famous] artist or experience culture shock given such an experience. I treat this [life-changing experience] as my work, my career. I never drown in fame as I believe this is my work.”
Farhan	7.	“I have never subscribed to Astro. It was too expensive in those days – it was meant for rich people and it was about RM1000 something to subscribe. When I was selected for the programme, my father subscribed to Astro. I have never known [all <i>AF</i> winners] Vince, Zahid, or Mawi before. But I heard that <i>AF</i> is a reality TV show but never watched it before.”
	8.	“The three-month period is valuable for me as I had extensive exposure on TV.”
	9.	“ <i>AF</i> is a very effective way to be a singer in the industry – it is a stepping stone.”
Hazama	10.	“[<i>AF</i>] is an opportunity! It is very valuable! This is the way to get in [into the music industry]! I heard about <i>AF</i> 1 even though I had not subscribed to

		Astro at that time but I know that it was phenomenal.”
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- **Industry training**

The participants’ exposure to industry training seemed to be the primary privilege before embarking on a music industry pop career. Table 5 explains how grateful the respondents were given their experience of *AF* as a pop music academy and the guidance provided by well-known, high-reputation industry figures.

Table 5. ‘Industry training’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“I was not after the competition. <i>AF</i> fascinates me with its elements – you got to do a performance every week, you have trainings in the Akademi. I love stage and I love learning. So, <i>AF</i> is the perfect place for me to do things that I love. So, I accepted the offer because I wanted the opportunity and knowledge. That was my only aim!”
	2.	“I have equally bad and good memories. The good ones are the performances that I gave, the learning experience in the Akademi – you get to know the experts.”
Bob	3.	“I love learning and asking the teachers questions and they are all indeed professionals. Therefore, I optimised every moment, thereby

		focusing and I think that is how I appreciated the opportunity.”
Farhan	4.	“Overall, <i>AF</i> is useful. In three months, I acquired a lot of knowledge and exposure. We had been trained for singing – I like this part – dancing – I like to learn about this – and acting – this is what I was struggling at.”
	5.	“The training period can be arguably brief, but I can feel the effect until today – it makes you visible as a newcomer.”
Mawi	6.	“The teachers are very professional and very credible in terms of training us.”
Hazama	7.	“ <i>AF</i> provides us with credible teachers to teach us. Basically, <i>AF</i> just gives you a formula [to develop artistic talent and skills through its teachers. We had vocal, acting, dance and stage performance training.”

- **Pop music market entry**

When the participants were provided with training courtesy of *AF*, they seemed to feel entitled to a music industry career, as reflected by the nature and pre-determined narratives of the televised pop music academy. This is literally a life-changing experience as they have now obtained music industry access, and earned the status of professional musicians or artists, enjoying fame and stardom within a short period of time. As illustrated in Table 6, the respondents expressed how valuable *AF* was as a pop music industry career launcher, signalling that

AF is indeed a pop music academy that implicitly taught its ‘students’ a game plan regarding entry into the music industry.

Table 6. ‘Pop music market entry’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“Three months ago, you are just a normal person, no one was really bothered about you. Three months after that, you are totally an artist, a star – you are so famous instantly!”
Farhan	2.	“I think it was a good medium for me to be exposed to the industry – it is a stepping stone.”
	3.	“ <i>AF</i> is a very effective way to be a singer in the industry – it is a stepping stone.”
Hazama	4.	“It is an opportunity! It is very valuable! This is the way to get in [into the music industry]!”
	5.	“ <i>AF4</i> also is a means for me to know and understand <i>AF</i> and the industry’s games.”

- **A well-rounded training approach**

Lastly, one final privilege pointed out by the respondents is *AF*’s well-rounded training approach that is intended to prepare them to be entertainers, not merely pop musicians. As illustrated in Table 7, such an approach nurtures versatility and seems beneficial in establishing a strong pop identity and artist branding in a wider entertainment industry.

Table 7. 'A well-rounded training approach' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	"I am kind of a versatile singer and I am up to the challenge."
Farhan	2.	"Overall, <i>AF</i> is useful. In three months, I acquired a lot of knowledge and exposure. We had been trained for singing – I like this part – dancing – I like to learn about this – and acting – this is what I was struggling at."
Hazama	3.	Basically, <i>AF</i> indirectly just gives you a formula [to develop artistic talent and skills] through its teachers. We had vocal, acting, dance and stage performance training. All these are vital elements in producing a well-rounded artist in our entertainment industry."

2.2. Pre-analysis of strengths: *AF*'s life-transformation ethos

Overall, *AF*'s strengths indicate its effective romanticism, which "represents extraordinarily a sense of ordinariness", namely providing a life-changing experience to its hopefuls, changing from being a 'nobody' into a 'somebody', a facet which is reflected in its life-transformation ethos (Cvetkovski, 2015, p.12). As argued by Holmes (2004) regarding *Pop Idol*, a similar pop music reality format that offers a life-transformation ethos,

... the concept of ordinariness is constructed not simply at a discursive level through biographical information but also through the televisual form itself: the contestants all emerge from a delimited space of ordinariness constructed by the melodramatic and realist aesthetic of

the auditions stage before moving on to an aesthetic of a more professional pop performance as the series progresses. (p. 157)

In relation to *AF*, the respondents have learned that the pop music television academy was useful for them, not only because of the profound exposure it offers, specifically in terms of gaining market entry into the pop music landscape; rather, their inclusion in this academy has equipped them with the training necessary to develop their musical talent and skills before embarking on a professional music industry career path. This means that *AF* can be considered as a credible springboard into the industry, which reflects the life-transformation ethos that seems to embody core traditional music business attributes while providing industry training and improving the respondents' career prospects.

2.3. Weaknesses

The weaknesses represent the negative experiences encountered by the respondents during their *AF* participation. Such experiences are likely to disrupt the participants' talent development and, essentially, limit them in fashioning their own craft within the show. There are five elements listed in this quadrant and they are: instant pop star mechanism; issues of agency; mental well-being; a mere entertainment show; and multidisciplinary training syllabus.

Table 8. Weaknesses

SWOT Quadrant & Nodes	Description	Files	References
Weaknesses	Experiences that are likely to limit the participants' growth in terms of becoming pop musicians	5	25
Instant pop star mechanism	Compressed module of learning, a relatively short period of time spent polishing up raw talent	5	7
Issues of agency	Less or no control over creativity, repertoire, image and identity	3	7

Mental well-being	Young hopefuls' profound exposure to fame and stardom	4	6
A mere entertainment show	No intervention from music professionals in deciding the winners	2	3
Multidisciplinary training syllabus	Versatility is unnecessary for the creation of pop music identities	2	2

- **Instant pop star mechanism**

As shown in Table 9, the instant pop star mechanism indicates a compressed mode and duration as regimented by *AF*'s pop music identity production. This is reflected in its introductory training syllabus while the 'students' also have pressing obligations that go well beyond student-level expectations, such as performing in the weekly concerts within a short period of time spent on training and practising, alongside the effects of excessive fame and stardom. All of this ultimately seems to put them under real pressure.

Table 9. 'Instant pop star mechanism' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	"[The training period] was not enough but it was just nice for the weekly tasks. Roughly it was just three to four days that you are really doing the

		training [from Monday to Wednesday]. You have to present your progress on Thursday in front of the faculty members. On Friday, it is a full day of rehearsal in the concert venue and Saturday is the day! I worked very hard in the Akademi. I was always with the teachers, asking questions and trying to utilise the opportunity that I had.”
	2.	“It was just three months to totally change your entire life. Three months ago, you were just a normal person, no one was really bothered about you. Three months after that, you are totally an artist, a star – you’re so famous instantly!”
Bob	3.	“In terms of the training period, it would never be enough.”
Farhan	4.	“The training is compressed into three months. That’s what made me stressed during the <i>AF</i> phase.”
Hazama	5.	“...the three month period [in <i>AF</i>] is not enough for people [the audience] to know you better.”
	6.	“In terms of the training period, it was not enough.”
Mawi	7.	“To be honest, I did not acquire enough knowledge in the three months of training to learn music. In terms of the duration, it was too compressed. If you are lucky and last

		until the final rounds, you get the chance to learn more.”
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- **Issues of agency**

As the *AF* participants are too young and inexperienced to handle the ‘heat’ generated by the instant pop star mechanism, they argue that they had less or no control over their craft or the opportunity to present their true musical talent in the televised pop music academy. As shown in Table 10, the young hopefuls seemed hopeless in terms of managing their auteurships on the show, which ultimately tainted their portrayal as pop musicians. They appeared to be powerless in fashioning their craft according to their preferences and taste due to the issues regarding agency that they experienced. The unwillingness to fulfil the demands of the hybrid’s format seems problematic as it makes the musicians less autonomous in relation to expressing their musicality while developing their own craft on the show.

Table 10. ‘Issues of agency’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“For example, in the sixth week, I was reluctant to cut my hair short but they ‘forced’ me to do that! I can still remember that when they dressed me up, my tears dropped to the boots that I wore. I will never ever forget those moments in my entire life. Just let me be what I wanna be!”
	2.	“In the final, I was again forced to wear a wig and I begged them that I did not want to wear it because it was too heavy, I felt uncomfortable wearing it during the performance. Also, I was forced to wear dresses

		that I did not feel comfortable wearing them – there were some parts of the dresses that were not [fully] sown. So my movements on the stage were limited and then I received criticism from the judges in terms of my body expression.”
	3.	“I didn’t like the song [given to me] for the final as it did not represent me as a singer. The song was great, but it was just not me!”
	4.	“Not all [participants] are versatile singers. Some might have distinctive vocal tones that would not work in any or every music genre. The test should be varied, according to the singer’s capabilities. But I do think that it can kill your talent if you are unable to deliver a good performance. We have to embrace the talent and not burden people [the contestants] with something that they unable to cope with.”
	5.	“But in the competition, it is not OK to test our ability with diverse musical styles or genres. You have to know that we are at a very young age while in the competition – sometimes it kills our self-esteem.”
Hazama	6.	“It is just an entertainment show. Talent is number two.”
Farhan	7.	“Sometimes I was told to play around and talk to the cameras, create

		characters, and do other things unrelated to my main purpose being on <i>AF</i> . I am a laid-back person and to an extent I have to pretend to be someone else [to fulfil the producers' orders].”
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- **Mental well-being**

The result of the instantaneous pop star mechanism and the issues regarding agency that it led to created further problems for the young hopefuls in relation to mental well-being, given the rapid, intense learning and working environment and the excessive fame and stardom that went with it. As illustrated in Table 11, stress and pressure were common feelings experienced by the students during their life at the *Akademi*.

Table 11. 'Mental well-being' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“The bad thing is I had depression when I was 18 years old because of this life-changing experience! The ‘new world’ that I entered was just ‘weird’ for me and I was so naïve.”
	2.	“You have to know that we are at a very young age while in the competition – sometimes it kills our self-esteem.”
Bob	3.	“I started to feel bored and stressed after a month in <i>AF</i> . We are disconnected from the outside world. We just do our routines and that is it.”
Farhan	4.	“It was stressful to do other things other than singing and as you know we

		kind of lost contact with our family, there is no communication with the outside world, just a focus on the new world that <i>AF</i> offered.”
	5.	“The training is compressed into three months. That’s what made me stressed during the <i>AF</i> phase.”
Mawi	6.	“It was kind of a pressure for me to be in that situation when everything is recorded [in the academy].”

- **A mere entertainment show**

With all the weaknesses discussed thus far, namely the respondents’ negative experiences that they encountered in *AF*, it makes sense that the show is ultimately a mere entertainment show that replicates the educational institution model with a pop culture twist. The aspiring musicians’ participation in the show seemed to be based on them playing the role of the reality show’s actors rather than being *the* musicians. Thus, the pop music television hybrid can be considered as one that is highly exploitative of its participants.

Table 12. ‘A mere entertainment show’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Hazama	1.	“It is just an entertainment show. Talent is number two.”
Mawi	2.	“I had no idea about <i>AF</i> before and I thought I was just a singing competition – but it is a reality programme and people want to know ‘everything’ about me.”
	3.	“ <i>AF</i> is not really a credible star mechanism. Graduating from <i>AF</i> and competing with well-known pop

		musicians in the music industry is a real game. <i>AF</i> is just a platform.”
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- **Multidisciplinary training syllabus**

For some respondents, a multidisciplinary training syllabus might be useful for them when trying to become multi-skilled or versatile artists. However, for this particular jazz singer who had determined her own musical direction and identity, she felt it was a burden to learn something that was not of interest to her and somewhat unnecessary.

Table 13. ‘Multidisciplinary training syllabus’ interview content

File	Reference	Text
Farhan	1.	“We have been trained for singing – I like this part – dancing – I liked to learn about this – and acting – this is what I was struggling at.”
Hazama	2.	“ <i>AF</i> provides us with credible teachers to teach us. Basically, <i>AF</i> just gives you a formula [to develop artistic talent and skills through its teachers. We had vocal, acting, dance and stage performance training.”

2.4. Pre-analysis of weaknesses: the pop music television hybrid

The weaknesses magnify *AF*'s harmful aspect as a pop music-television academy. Although the respondents were associated with a credible industry springboard, the simplification of the star-making process and its compressed televised reality format training schedule seemed to be disadvantageous to them, which then impacted on the graduates’ career prospects. This finding recalls the work of Kjus (2017), who has analysed the impact of

reality TV singing contests which trigger struggles over the content and presentation of musical performances that, over time, undermine the credibility of the music and television industries' joint ventures. Such hidden distortions are also evident in the work of Couldry (2008), as he has depicted reality TV as a secret theatre of neoliberalism in that reality television requires its participants and their labour to be relentlessly loyal as well as submissive to public surveillance and external direction, even within the deepest recesses of private life and, most notably, normalising the fragility and impermanence of the opportunities it provides, particularly to its reality participants. Hence, as pointed out by Holmes (2004), it is made abundantly clear that the opportunities are not equal for all within the hybrid system, whilst the public are invited to enjoy this same inequality as it plays out as a serialised spectacle, which is in line with the neoliberal ideology identified by Couldry.

2.5. Opportunities

These opportunities refer to the post-*AF* experience, namely the specificities that privilege the *AF* graduates' profile building as music industry professionals in the pop music scene. There are four elements listed in this SWOT quadrant: self-initiative; instant visibility; networking; and crossover stardom.

Table 14. Opportunities

SWOT Quadrant & Nodes	Description	Files	References
Opportunities	Experiences/elements that offer the potential to progress oneself in the post-<i>AF</i> phase	5	42
Self-initiative	Autonomous musicians	5	18
Instant visibility	Based on the substantial branding of <i>AF</i> as a pop phenomenon	5	13
Networking	Industry reputation: access to industry 'heavy lifters' in the post-<i>AF</i> phase	3	9
Crossover stardom	Ranging from music to acting/hosting/songwriting	2	2

- **Self-initiative**

As illustrated in Table 15, the majority of the respondents raised the notion of self-initiative, also articulated as a trait of independence, whereby they ultimately have the freedom to determine their own ‘destiny’, making decisions in line with their aims, without intervention or influence by any other parties. Whether they are signed to a label or not, they seem to have an autonomous active role in making decisions ranging from artistic decisions to career management. This means that they are no longer bound to the unfavourable environment that hindered their musical ambitions. In addition, they are free to exploit the (associated) reputations that they enjoyed courtesy of their earlier experiences of the show.

Table 15. ‘Self-initiative’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“I had the chance to do an album with my management [Maestro]. But I was asked to do it by myself and just billed the costs to them – the management was so busy with the <i>AF</i> winner at that time and they kind of had no time for me. This is where I produced an album with my own taste! – I had to work with so many great musicians and composers – the people that I look forward to working with.”
	2.	“It won’t make any difference with or without the management. The difference is that [there are] no [payment] cuts from anyone.”
	3.	“I entered another reality show from another TV station, and it was like a jump start to my career.”

	4.	“People started to notice me as a singer-songwriter. I wrote songs for other artists too! Some of them are big stars! That’s an achievement for me! I love being a singer-songwriter!”
	5.	“When I released the duet song, our song was in the top of the chart. I was crying with my duet partner on our phone call when we heard about this news. The star that [was] dull is now shining bright.”
	6.	“I find myself the sponsors for the music video. I personally contacted the entertainment TV producers on social media, told them about my latest duet single – I did everything on my own. You can’t just wait for a miracle!”
Bob	7.	“For me, it is how you react to the opportunity that you have.”
	8.	“I love learning. So, I never stop learning from that point [ever since <i>AF</i> participation]. I expanded my circle of friends with great musicians and got in touch with the <i>AF</i> teachers as it was hard for me to get free formal education and knowledge. That’s my learning process, being around talented and good people. As a result, I earned other things too, which is opportunity, jobs offered by these people.”

	9.	“You know that I never produce [songs] in a cheapskate production.”
Farhan	10.	“I planned my career journey myself with the help of my dad as he had experience in the music industry as a musician and businessman. He used to own a record label during the '90s.”
Hazama	11.	“...I had the opportunity performing in Gempak Astro – I toured quite some places, and joined ‘Meet Uncle Hussein’, the most popular band during that time, as the lead singer – I had one single with them and was released during my <i>AF9</i> participation.”
	12.	“I was so lucky to be offered to join the tour for Astro events [Gempak Selebriti Astro, etc.] although I was not even an <i>AF</i> star, I was just in the prelude stage, not even [a former] <i>AF</i> student. I utilised the opportunity that I had by improving myself, to impress the important people from Astro. I was lucky enough to be in the circle of the <i>AF</i> stars at that time although my name was not that strong as compared to them.”
	13.	“My record deal is one album a year – but I can tolerate and not really follow the contract. I have gone through more downsides in the early [stage] of my career, so I appreciate the deal and not being a demanding and rigid

		<p>artist. I am lucky to get this offer when I am ready for it – I know my direction and Astro Talent [the record label] listens to my ideas and never leaves me out in decision-making. I am satisfied with the management.”</p>
	14.	<p>“Basically, <i>AF</i> indirectly just gives you a formula [to develop artistic talent and skills] – through the teachers. We had vocal, acting, dance and stage performance trainings.”</p>
	15.	<p>“You need to work out the formula after the <i>AF</i> [experience] to keep progressing. Self-discipline is key! That defines your status and attracts people to look forward to you. Also, the character [as a singer] too! –that’s what makes you attractive!”</p>
Mawi	16.	<p>“<i>AF</i> is just a platform. The <i>AF</i> stars can’t rely on this platform only [in the post <i>AF</i>]. The effort in developing talent must be ongoing. It is all up to us to colour our own journey in the industry.”</p>
	17.	<p>“In my early career, it was very experimental – I attempted so many genres – pop, slow rock, world music, soul, R&B. At that time, it was a trial and error period and I wanted to find out about my real music direction – Maestro fulfilled my request on this. I tried not to be seen as a religious and pious singer, but it was hard to</p>

		change that. Now I have discovered rap and hip hop with the spirituality and motivational concepts as my direction.”
	18.	“You have to find a second job in Malaysia as our [music] market is not that big. If you won a [reality] competition, you could not constantly win over the music market constantly and forever. It has ups and downs. You have to find options in your career, find a side income.”

- **Instant visibility**

The notion of the *AF* pop star machinery’s rapidity in some ways impacted the hopefuls quite negatively. However, it is impossible to deny that such ‘adversity’ had a silver lining which apparently did help the respondents with instant visibility in the entertainment sphere. Most of them pointed out how busy they were during the post-*AF* experience, which in many ways opened up windows of opportunity that definitely helped to build their industry profiles. Essentially, this is all due to the profound impact of *AF* as a national cultural phenomenon.

Table 16. ‘Instant visibility’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“It was ‘crazy’ in my early career being an <i>AF</i> star. It was very exhausting because the schedule was extremely packed with everything [such as shows, photoshoots, and road tours].”
	2.	“I entered another reality show from another TV station, and it was like a jump start to my career.”

	3.	“People started to notice me as a singer-songwriter. I wrote songs for other artists too! Some of them are big stars! That’s an achievement for me! I love being a singer-songwriter!”
Bob	4.	“[My life] is totally changed! 360 degree! But I never think that I am a [famous] artist or experiencing culture shock given such an experience. I treat this [life-changing experience] as my work, my career.”
	5.	“I was the first one among <i>AF2</i> graduates who had the invitation to do a show right after the <i>AF2</i> finale – the winner was not even offered any shows yet at that time. Nevertheless, all the <i>AF</i> stars have a very packed schedule – we were extremely busy with our new career! The first three years were amazing – back-to-back jobs! I had been a product ambassador. I really was making money back then! I can see a positive sign of my career. People started to recognise me when I am in public and I just love it!”
Farhan	6.	“I think it was a good medium for me to be exposed to the industry – it is a steppingstone. The three-month period is valuable for me as I had extensive exposure on TV.”
	7.	“It makes you visible as a newcomer.”

Hazama	8.	“Five years before [before <i>AF9</i> participation], I used to be in <i>AF4</i> and people started to recognise my talent. After that, I had the opportunity to perform in Gempak Astro – I toured quite some places, and joined Meet Uncle Hussein, the most popular band at that time, as its lead singer – I released one single with them while I was on <i>AF9</i> .”
	9.	“I was so grateful when I was given a second chance [in <i>AF9</i>]. I have to say now that I was ‘lucky’ to be rejected in <i>AF4</i> .”
	10.	“Because of my performance in the <i>AF4</i> finale [all of the prelude contestants were invited to perform in the finale], people started to recognise my talent – I have ‘shows’ until December. I was so lucky to be offered to join the tour for Astro events [Gempak Selebriti Astro, etc.] although I was not even an <i>AF</i> star, I was just in the prelude stage, not even [a former] <i>AF</i> student. I utilised the opportunity that I had by improving myself, to impress the important people from Astro. I was lucky enough to be in the circle of the <i>AF</i> stars at that time although my name was not that strong as compared to them. That is my learning process, being an artist,

		watching examples from my fellow <i>AF</i> mates.”
	11.	“Thank God that my <i>AF4</i> stable mate, Farhan, offered me the chance to come under her talent management and I finally had my own single as part of the deal.”
Mawi	12.	“To an extent, I was overcommitted with too many jobs offered to me at one time.”
	13.	“I was extremely busy with my career.”

- **Networking**

Having the post-*AF* perk of an instant identity in a way privileged the musicians in terms of networking with key industry figures. This gives a sense that the *AF* musicians' presence in the industry is based on some kind of post-show validation or 'endorsement' from industry figures as the reality graduates freely access industry systems and its economy, earning a professional 'badge' for their creative pop music identities. To an extent, this perk seems to undermine the industry systems as one of the respondents, the *AF9* winner, notes that he was invited to participate in the show without auditioning. That is obviously the result of his industry debut, namely the 'failure' that he had in his *AF4* experience.

Table 17. 'Networking' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	"I am still in touch with the teachers, I never stop developing myself."
	2.	"This is where I produced an album according to my own taste! – I had to work with so many great musicians and composers – the people that I look forward to working with."
	3.	"People started to notice me as a singer-songwriter. I wrote songs for other artists too! Some of them are big stars! That's an achievement for me! I love being a singer-songwriter!"
Bob	4.	"I love learning. So, I never stopped learning from that point. I expanded my circle of friends to encompass great musicians and got in touch with the <i>AF</i> teachers as it was hard to get free formal education and knowledge."

		That's my learning process, being around talented and good people. As a result, I also earned other things, which is opportunity, and the jobs offered by these people."
Hazama	5.	"After that, I had the opportunity to perform at Gempak Astro – I toured quite a number of places, and joined Meet Uncle Hussein, the most popular band at that time, as its lead singer – I released one single with them while I was on <i>AF9</i> ."
	6.	"I was so grateful when I was given a second chance [in <i>AF9</i>]."
	7.	"Because of my performance during the finale of <i>AF4</i> [all of the prelude contestants were invited to perform in the final], people started to recognise my talent – I had 'shows' until December. I was so lucky to be offered to join the tour for Astro events [Gempak Selebriti Astro, etc.] although I was not even an <i>AF</i> stars, I was just in the prelude stage, not even [a former] <i>AF</i> student. I utilised the opportunity that I had by improving myself to impress the important people from Astro. I was lucky enough to be in the circle of the <i>AF</i> stars at that time, although my name was not that strong as compared to theirs. That is my learning process as an artist,

	watching examples from my fellow <i>AF</i> participants.”
8.	“Thank God that my <i>AF4</i> stable mate, Farhan, offered me the chance to come under her talent management and I finally had my own single as part of the deal.”
9.	“In 2011, I was offered a chance to join <i>AF9</i> without auditioning. The show was already on and I was offered an opportunity to take the place of a student who had been eliminated. I can still remember when [the <i>AF9</i> production team] called me for a meeting – the producer and the host were there to explain about the chance. At that time, <i>AF9</i> had no interesting stories [to offer the audience]! So my inclusion is part of the <i>AF</i> story too, it being a dramatic show. At the meeting, I was not guaranteed to win the title but for sure [it was] a second chance [to appear] on <i>AF</i> .”

- **Crossover stardom**

Apart from having a relatively strong endorsement from the music industry regarding their industry presence, the respondents also had the opportunity to access crossover stardom. Noting all the privileges that they had, particularly embarking on the *AF* musical journey, they ultimately had the opportunity to diversify their entertainment industry career paths. This means that they have been free to explore any creative arts

field or to develop optional income streams suitable for their other artistic talents and interests.

Table 18. ‘Crossover stardom’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“People started to notice me as a singer-songwriter. I wrote songs for other artists too! Some of them are big stars! That’s an achievement for me!”
Mawi	2.	“You have to find a second job in Malaysia as our market is not that big. If you won a [reality] competition, you could not win over the music market constantly and forever. It has its ups and downs. You have to find other career options, to find a side income.”

2.6. Pre-analysis of opportunities: cultural entrepreneur

The ‘Opportunities’ are mainly the result of *AF* participation that, in some ways, allows the musicians to become self-enabling and self-empowering in terms of establishing their own pop music identities. This further underlines the newly emerging role of musicians as cultural entrepreneurs, namely music or artist entrepreneurs who persistently seek to construct themselves as subjects of value to music or broader entertainment markets (see Weber, 2004; Lindqvist, 2011; Scott, 2012; Tessler and Flynn, 2016). Doing so requires a range of skills, namely: self-belief; networking skills; bartering and negotiating; understanding and learning from failure; and passion in order to maximise an individual’s chances of success (Dumbreck, 2016). All of these specificities signify the notion of self-initiative, which is linked to the notion of entrepreneurialism that embodies an elastic self, underlining the need for certain opportunism while

manipulating whatever avenues or resources are available, thereby ensuring that the musicians can fulfil their musical ambitions and goals, especially when they have already achieved a certain industry status (King, 2003). Being a cultural entrepreneur seems beneficial to sustaining the musicians' industry visibility and extending symbolic adulation, which in many ways allows them to achieve crossover stardom within the entertainment industry.

2.7. Threats

Threats are reflected through the experiences that the respondents encountered in the post-*AF* participation, which likely hindered their career progression. As emerged in the findings, threats is seen as the most dominant criterion as it accumulated the most extended list of elements within this SWOT quadrant. There are 11 elements listed in the quadrant. They are non-compliance with pop identity standards, contractual disputes, shelf life, lack of support from industrial support systems, social media influence, mental well-being issues, lack of industry contacts, creative arts policy regulation, powerless A&R, prejudice, and cultural barriers.

Table 19. Threats

SWOT Quadrant & Nodes	Description	Files	References
Threats	Experiences/elements that are likely to hinder career progression in the post-<i>AF</i> experience	5	68
Non-compliance with pop identity standards	'Incomplete' package in terms of developing an 'attractive' symbolic pop identity; popularity status matters	5	15
Contractual disputes	Issues arising within the contract signed with talent management	5	12

Shelf life	Music industry staying power	5	12
Lack of support from industry systems	Predominantly from radio and TV with either explicit or implicit inducements imposed on the musicians	2	10
Social media influence	Impact of social media	2	5
Mental well-being issues	Emotional impact of the post-<i>AF</i> experience	2	3
Lack of industry contacts	No strong back-up support in terms of establishing a music career	2	3
Creative arts policy regulation	National policy fails to support creative arts labour	2	3
Powerless A&R	Less guidance and support from labels	2	2
Prejudice	Stigma and weaknesses that are commonly associated with <i>AF</i> stars	1	2

Cultural barriers	Religions, customs and taboos in Malaysian culture	1	1
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- **Non-compliance with pop identity standards**

Pop identity standardisation is hard to identify or define as it primarily deals with the subjectivity of market taste and preference. However, it emerged in this SWOT quadrant as one of the 'Threats', while non-compliance with pop identity standards appeared to be a real issue here. Pop identity standards can typically be understood as derived from three distinct components: "writing, sounds and images" that form symbolic "texts" are seen as the vital element that *must* be 'packaged' attractively in order to enjoy music market attention (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 420). In other words, they *must* be fashioned according to the market's tastes and preferences as one possible way to obtain market appreciation and success. In that respect, musical talent (sounds) is unlikely to be the core element in forming effective symbolic texts as other elements such as style, fashion or outlook (images), or musicians' narratives (writings) could be the dominant elements fashioning a marketable pop identity. As indicated in the findings, the respondents emphasised that talent was not key to establishing a pop music identity. They raised the need to be associated with constant fame, a context in which popularity really does help in order to have career staying power and is part of forming effective pop identity standards in the Malaysian music industry. This can be achieved by being involving in (staged) controversies and the subject of gossip or by receiving international recognition. In addition to fame, the respondents have found that to enjoy the attention and support of the masses, physical attractiveness is essentially a *must*. Also, as the

respondents are predominantly unsigned and self-managed artists, they have found it difficult to always have the monetary capital required to constantly invest in producing their symbolic goods, which is essential to ensuring that their pop music identities are persistently circulated and visible within the pop music market.

Table 20. 'Non-compliance with pop identity standards' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“I think the ones with popularity will be much appreciated regardless of their talent.”
	2.	“When I intended to make a duet with my <i>AF</i> stable mate, Kaer, I had some advice not to – I was advised to collaborate with newcomers, [who are] popular nowadays. I refuse to do that!”
	3.	“Someone advised me to create a controversy – as he said, it is just temporary, and people can get easily forgotten! I said no! I will never create an issue or controversy to hype up my name [in the industry]. I don’t want to be that kind of artist; I don’t want to tarnish my identity with negativity or stupidity. People will always remember that!”
	4.	“Body-shaming is kind of a norm in our society. I used to be body-shamed by a waitress in a restaurant while I was ordering food. The waitress noticed me while passing the menu to me and said, ‘OMG, you are fat now!’

		How can you be this fat?' I didn't know how to react – to act happy or smile at her – as I was so ashamed by her remarks.”
	5.	“You are not attractive if you have a dark skin colour, if you are bald, if you are fat – that is kind of how people value beauty.”
	6.	“So, you have to be ‘recognised’ by the outside world [i.e. the international market] first, then you can become ‘untouchable’ [succeed locally]. It is so sad to see this kind of trend!”
Bob	7.	“Plus, popularity is not my main thing. That’s probably why I am less known to the public, because I treat this as my job. I am not after popularity.”
	8.	“I was probably overshadowed by the newcomers, [with their] controversies and social media-viral stories so that people didn’t really see me.”
	9.	“I am not a good-looking singer, I admit that. If I invest a lot of money in music production, it is not a way for you to get industry attention or appreciation. They look forward more to those newcomers who have the ‘complete package’, as they always said [emphasising looks and personality] that this kind of artist deserves to have radio airplay.”

	10.	“The industry should value quality as the primary criterion, then we can create a better industry in the future.”
Farhan	11.	“...I know that they [my <i>AF</i> stable mates] are trying so hard to sustain themselves in the industry. It is a matter of luck, I guess.”
Hazama	12.	“I have been through the process, watched the show and been around the <i>AF</i> stars. I sense that the show needs character, not mainly talent. And I kind of know how to strategise my career, not being too rigid or demanding with the management. That’s my game plan.”
	13.	“Good voice is subjective. It is [personal] character that defines you as an artist and also differentiates you from others. Fashion is important too, in connection with your repertoire. It is not about selling your talent only!”
Mawi	14.	“You can enter the industry easily if you have money.”
	15.	“Sometimes controversy helps when you need attention. TV is always focused on business and ratings; we can’t deny that. We as artists need to follow that principle.”

- **Contractual disputes**

It seems that the experience of ‘getting signed’ is not always a pleasant one, as the respondents have experienced some contractual disputes given the record and management deals that they have signed. This can be reflected in the clash of expectations between the musicians and the labels or the representatives they signed with, whilst the respondents argued that they have been treated unprofessionally by them and not according to the contractual terms they signed. Nonetheless, it looks like flexibility does help in managing these disputes as the *AF9* winner raised the importance of preparing a game plan to deal with this. This in turn might benefit the graduates in the long run if they are supported by a well-established system that is beneficial in terms of building promising career prospects.

Table 21. ‘Contractual disputes’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“I had the chance to do an album with my management. But I was asked to do it by myself and just billed the costs to them – the management was so busy with the <i>AF</i> winner at that time and kind of had no time for me.”
	2.	“Too bad when the album was just released, the management closed down. I started to struggle to manage myself at this point.”
	3.	“It was frustrating to know that someone stole my songs and claimed them as their own. My manager left me because he wanted to focus on his business.”
	4.	“[The contract] was supposed to be three plus one [i.e. three years plus an

		optional extra year] – but the company closed down after the third year. I am not really sure about the album deals.”
Bob	5.	I trusted the people around me [the management team] as they have experience in this field and just followed what had been planned for me. But there are certain things that I was not happy about, but I was too young and naïve to say them out loud. For example, I had to be on the same road tour as Mawi to promote my album. [He smiles] You know what I mean.”
	6.	“3+1+1 – that was the management contract. For the record deal, I have to admit that I was unaware of that part. That was the mistake that I made! But, when I look at the contract now, it mentions record deals in general, but there are no specific clauses expressing the total number of albums that I am entitled to.”
Farhan	7.	“But, when I was being handled and managed by Maestro, I started to feel the inequality, the favouritism as the management was very choosy about giving opportunities to the artists on its label. From this point, I had to struggle, to do everything on my own, producing my own single, using my own budget, but they are helping me

		to promote the song too, even though it was not a satisfactory outcome.”
	8.	“Initially, I signed with them [Maestro] for five years and I shortened it to one year because the progress was poor – I was advised not to tell the press about it. It was just a management contract and I have no record deals with them.”
	9.	“I can predict that my destiny will be affected after signing with Maestro – there were too many artists under that management though!”
Hazama	10.	“My record deal is one album a year – but I can tolerate and not really follow the contract. I have gone through more downsides in the early [stage] of my career, so I appreciate the deal and not being a demanding and rigid artist.”
Mawi	11.	To an extent, I was being overcommitted with the jobs as I had too many offers.”
	12.	“I have been signed with Maestro just for management only for eight years: 3+1+2+2. In terms of the record deal, they were not stressed about [producing albums annually or not] and it depends on the market’s demands.”

- **Shelf life**

Shelf life refers to the music industry staying power. As emerged in this particular finding, the respondents have learnt that shelf life is a real challenge to maintain as they were battling with three factors that affected their music career sustainability. The first obvious factor raised by the respondents is the industry's 'oddness' in that it treats career instability as the norm. Secondly, the industry support systems and environment are literally harmful in nature, delimiting the careers of aspiring musicians who are trying to be in it for the long haul. Lastly, they had negative experiences with the labels or representatives they were contractually engaged with, especially when the respondents were at a younger age as professional pop musicians.

Table 22. 'Shelf life' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	"Too bad when the album was just released, the label and management closed down. I started to struggle to manage myself at this point."
	2.	"I had a new song, but the radio did not play it. The same goes with TV as well. If the masses do not even have the chance to know or hear us, how can we know that they dislike us? Give us fair treatment. The longer we've been in the industry, the bigger potential that we could offer. Talent should not have an expiry date!"
	3.	"I just don't understand that some industry people treated me differently when I was not popular anymore! Once you praised me before – you

		said that I was talented. When I was not popular anymore, I received cold treatment from several people from the industry – I feel like my talent is gone! Is that how the industry functions? I think those with popularity will be much appreciated regardless of their talent.”
	4.	“Someone advised me to make a controversy – as he said, ‘It is just temporary, and people can easily forget about it!’ I said no! I will never create an issue or controversy to hype up my name [in the industry].”
Bob	5.	“I have been in the industry for 14 years. I can’t deny that it was a real struggle, but I viewed it as part of the job. Plus, popularity is not my main thing. That’s probably why I am less known to the public, because I treat this as my job and I am not after popularity.”
	6.	“This industry needs new things [continuously] from artists. I never missed the chance to come out with new stuff, but people just don’t see it. Probably I was overshadowed by the newcomers, [with their] controversies, social media-viral stories, so that people don’t really see me.”
Farhan	7.	“But, I know that they are trying so hard to sustain themselves in the industry. It is a matter of luck, I guess.”

Hazama	8.	<p>“Because of my performance at the <i>AF4</i> finale [all of the prelude contestants were invited to perform at the final], people started to recognise my talent – I have ‘shows’ [to do] until December. I was so lucky to be offered to join the tour for Astro events [Gempak Selebriti Astro, etc.] although I was not even an <i>AF</i> star, I was just in the prelude stage, not even [a former] <i>AF</i> student. I utilised the opportunity that I had by improving myself, to impress the important people from Astro. I was lucky enough to be in the circle of the <i>AF</i> stars at that time although my name was not that strong compared to theirs. That is my learning process as an artist watching examples from my fellow <i>AF</i> stable mates. However, the following year [2007], I was jobless for a year – I had no money and looked for jobs advertised in the newspapers. I had no singles that year. <i>AF</i> continued for a new season and I was forgotten as there were too many <i>AF</i> stars at that time, I am not even an <i>AF</i> star though! I started to know the struggle and that’s the true lesson for me to understand the industry.”</p>
	9.	<p>“I have been through the process, watched the show and been around</p>

		the <i>AF</i> stars. I sense that the show needs character not mainly talent. I kind of know how to strategise my career, not being too rigid or demanding with the management. That's my game plan."
Mawi	10.	"Graduating from <i>AF</i> and competing with well-known pop musicians in the music industry is a real challenge."
	11.	"But it is hard to sustain oneself in the industry, that's the main challenge!"
	12.	"You have to find a second job in Malaysia as our market is not that big. If you won a [reality] competition, you could not win over the music market constantly and forever. It has its ups and downs. You have to find options in your career, to find a side income."

- **Lack of support from industry support systems**

In particular, the respondents argued that there was a lack of support from media such as television and radio. This was seen as reflected through the popularity-driven practices ritualised by television and radio in which they tend to 'cherry-pick' artists to support and seem to be less concerned with nurturing good art. More tragically, one of the pop musicians mentioned either explicit or implicit inducements that occurred in the support systems.

Table 23. 'The lack of support from industrial support systems' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	"...radio and TV are too subservient to the masses. They could have been

		<p>educating the masses [with good art], to support artists and the industry. The masses for the music industry are the youngsters that are under 20 [year-old music consumer]. Can you imagine that the industry is controlled by teenagers who do not really understand music? It has to be balanced – we can accommodate the youngsters’ preferences, but the media should give space to artists like us. I have a new song, but the radio did not play it. The same goes for TV. If the masses do not even have chance to know or hear us, how can we know that they dislike us? Give us fair treatment.”</p>
	2.	<p>“Double standards! That’s what I meant by that! I just don’t understand why some industry people treated me differently when I was not popular anymore! Once you praised me before – you said that I was talented. When I was not popular anymore, I received cold treatment from several people from the industry – I feel like my talent is gone!”</p>
	3.	<p>“I think those with popularity will be much appreciated regardless of their talent.”</p>
	4.	<p>“One of our fellow <i>AF</i> stable mates – the artist is quite famous too – confessed to me that if you want to send a song to radio [to be played], the</p>

		radio – I have no idea which department or personnel demands it! – will send a quotation to you depending on what you need for your song – the cost incurred for the song to be played at either high or low rotations.”
	5.	“My duet partner flew back from Jakarta [Indonesia] and touched down at KL [Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia] in the afternoon, to send his latest album to a radio station. It is very disappointing to know that his album ends up in the bin in the evening.”
	6.	“So, you have to be ‘recognised’ by the outside world [i.e. the international market] first, then you can become ‘untouchable’ [succeed locally]. It is so sad to see this kind of trend!”
Bob	7.	“This industry [continuously] needs new things from artists. I never missed the chance to come out with new stuff but people just don’t see it. Probably I was overshadowed by the newcomers, [with their] controversies and social media-viral stories so that people don’t really see me.”
	8.	“Exactly! The role of radio stations is different now compared to our time as AF stars. In those days, radio stations just played anything that was sent to them. Nowadays, not anymore! I just don’t understand the criteria for a song to be played on radio. You know that I

	never put out a cheapskate production. Some of my songs are with a full orchestra, but still, the radio did not play or support them. It is so frustrating to see this.”
9.	“Actually, we have a lot of good talent, good-quality songs but they are all have no mediums through which to be channelled.”
10.	“To be hyped on social media first, then you could get support from the industry, is totally wrong! The support system must come first, then the hype on social media follows. That’s how it should be. Just don’t get me wrong, I am never against any newcomers [musicians, especially YouTube or social media sensations]. In my opinion, we should get the same treatment as anybody else. The industry should value quality as the primary criterion, then we can create a better industry in the future.”

- **Social media influence**

The influence of social media has had equally positive and negative impacts on the musicians’ profile building. However, as argued by the respondents, it has disrupted the musicians’ career progression whilst the music industry was transforming itself into a traffic-driven industry, specifically relying on the volume of social media followers, ‘likes’ and viewers in awarding opportunities to musicians. This further manifested itself through

the quite dramatic change in terms of how the industry operates, which is now more dependent on digital apparatus.

Table 24. 'Social media influence' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“The music label once told me that they need to buy viewers for YouTube views to make sure that their artists’ music videos have a high number of views. This is very important as some radio stations use viewing numbers as an indicator that a song deserves radio airplay. From what I heard, it needs to reach a million viewers, then you can get airplay from the radio. But this was two to three years back. The radio now is kind of knowing who is buying [views] or not.”
	2.	“The same goes for Instagram now – it is an indicator too! If you have a high number of followers, you can easily get any opportunity on TV, radio, product endorsements, shows, etc.”
Bob	3.	“Probably I was overshadowed by the newcomers, [with their] controversies, social-media viral stories, so that people don’t really see me.”
	4.	“The viral, viewers or followers trend changed the music industry. Our industry is degrading the industry itself.”
	5.	“To be hyped on social media first, then you could get support from the

		industry, is totally wrong! The support system must come first, then the hype on social media follows. That's how it should be. Just don't get me wrong, I am never against any newcomers [musicians especially YouTube or social media sensations]. In my opinion, we should get the same treatment as anybody else. The industry should value quality as the primary criterion, then we can create a better industry in the future.”
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- **Mental well-being**

As discussed earlier, mental well-being is one of the ‘Weaknesses’ as cited by the *AF* respondents. However, the issue of mental health is also a common problem that the respondents experienced in their post-*AF* lives, one they ascribed to their overnight fame and stardom.

Table 25. ‘Mental well-being’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“At some point, I was too stressed to cope with this new world. It was just three months to totally change your entire life.”
Mawi	2.	“Initially, I was stressed to accept and adapt to this ‘new world’. It took about six months to adapt to that.”
	3.	“They are aware that I was stressed with the packed schedule and this life-changing career and personal life, but they never [intervened].”

- **Lack of industry contacts**

Although the respondents pointed out that they had the advantage of networking, namely access to the industry’s ‘heavy lifters’, they also found it a struggle when they had no strong back-up support from any representatives in terms of establishing a sustainable music career. This further underlined the challenge of becoming independent musicians in ways that extended beyond issues of creativity.

Table 26. ‘Lack of industry contacts’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“My manager left me because he wants to focus on his business. I was so down at this point.”
	2.	“I find myself the sponsors for our music video, I personally message entertainment programmes on social media, tell them about my latest duet single – I did everything on my own. You can’t just wait for a miracle!”
Farhan	3.	“From this point, I had to struggle, do everything on my own, producing my own single using my own budget but they [Maestro] are helping me in promoting the song too even though it was not in a satisfactory outcome.”

- **Creative arts policy regulation**

The respondents raised some concerns regarding the national creative arts policy regulation, which they believe fails to support artistic labour. They also stressed that the lobbying groups need to be more proactive in addressing the wider industry’s problems.

Table 27. 'Creative arts policy regulation' interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Hazama	1.	<p>“Government intervention in outlining policy [is vital]. I would like to compare music and sports. Our government can spend billions of funds on sports, developing the athletes, but why not on music too? Music is part of our culture – musicians and artists are needed for important ceremonies, for example, on our Independence Day celebration. If there are no good artists to entertain people and perform our national anthem, who is going to take on that role? And do you think that this is just a silly matter? No. Another example is our festive season, Eidul Fitr. We need songs or entertainment to light up the celebration. If we don’t take artists seriously, our life would be boring. People need entertainment for their leisure, to release stress or anything. That is our role in society.”</p>
	2.	<p>“On a bigger scale, the Korean music scene is a good example of how the government takes a serious role in supporting Korean culture. Now we are not familiar just with K-Pop music, but we have started to know their language, fashion, foods and culture.”</p>
Mawi	3.	<p>“We have so many associations but their roles are questionable. They</p>

		have shown support for artists who are ill and have poor health conditions by donating some money or funds. It was just that. We need more than that, especially in terms of developing the industry.”
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- **Powerless A&R**

A&R seems to be the vital element in music labels’ production of pop music identities, especially in the recording industry era. However, as the impact of media convergence has deepened, specifically in terms of music and television integration in the creation of pop music identities, A&R may not be as important as it may have appeared, as reflected by two *AF* winners’ experiences (Table 28).

Table 28. ‘Powerless A&R’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Hazama	1.	“A&R needs to be empowered. In the 90s, A&R took control in creating pop music identities. We need to educate our music market as well, instead of just following the demand.”
Mawi	2.	“In my early career, it was very experimental – I attempted so many genres – pop, slow rock, world music, soul, R&B. At that time, it was trial and error and I wanted to explore my direction – Maestro fulfilled my request for this.”

- **Prejudice**

Surprisingly, the prejudice towards *AF* graduates, namely their negative perception derived from their industry representation as ‘instant noodles’, which is commonly considered to be harmful to such musicians, is found to be a minimal threat to them, as only one respondent brought up the issue.

Table 29. ‘Prejudice’ interview contents

Files	References	Texts
Amylea	1.	“Double standards! That’s what I meant by that! I just don’t understand why some of the industry people treated me differently when I was not popular anymore! Once you praised me before – you said that I am talented. When I was not in anymore, I received the cold shoulder from several people from the industry – I feel like my talent is gone!”
	2.	“My duet partner flew back from Jakarta [Indonesia] and touched down at KL [Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia] in the afternoon, to send his latest album to a radio station. It is very disappointing to know that his album ended up in the bin that evening.”

- **Cultural barriers**

Lastly, cultural barriers, which refers to resistance in terms of religious issues, customs and taboos in Malaysian culture, also emerged in the findings and were seen as a minimal threat to the pop musicians.

Table 30. Cultural barriers' interview contents

File	Reference	Texts
Hazama	1.	“Music brings you nowhere in life. You will have no future in a music career. That’s the [social] stigma that we experienced until nowadays. We also have a negative notion about music in our religion [i.e. Islam]. But we tend to neglect that we are the ones who are responsible for music consumption, not the music itself. If you choose and consume it wisely, you will derive benefits. Life is about making the right choices.”

2.8. Pre-analysis of threats: the pop music industry

Overall, the ‘Threats’ are mainly found within the pop music industry itself as reflected by its nature, systems and practices. In fact, the elements of threat found in the unique Malaysian context suggest the music industry’s strong tendency to produce failure which is caused by the industry itself, as probably occurs in the non-Malaysian music industry (see for examples, Negus, 1992; Jones, 2012; Frith, 2018).

3. Reviewing the findings

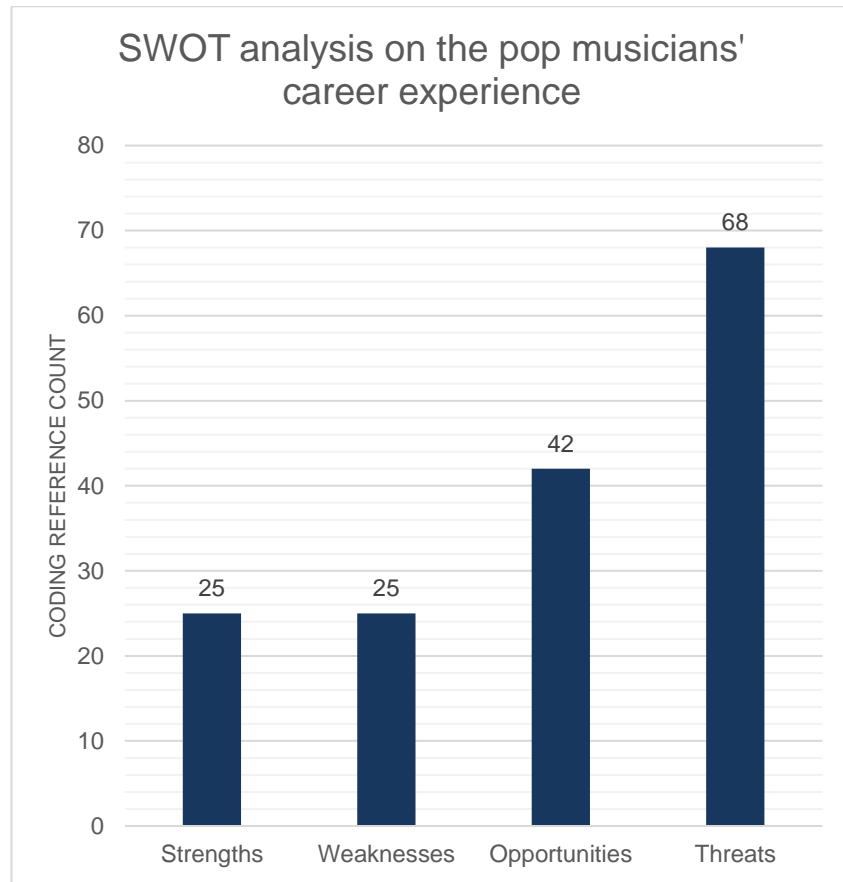


Figure 13. Application of SWOT analysis to the pop musicians' career experiences

Based on the coding reference count as illustrated in Figure 13, the findings indicate 'Threats' as the dominant theme among the four SWOT quadrants. 'Opportunities' emerged as the second dominant theme, followed by both 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses' in the last place.

As shown in 'Strengths' and 'Weaknesses' confined to the musicians' experiences of the hybrid system, the findings indicated a nuance: in relative terms, *AF* was both helpful and harmful to its participants pertaining to their music career development. However, in a wider dimension focused on the post-*AF* experience, the findings indicated the tension between 'Opportunities' and 'Threats', whereby 'Threats' were overpowering 'Opportunities'. This suggested that the musicians'

career experiences seemed to be impacted quite negatively due to the industry’s precarious environment, culture and practices. Despite the perils, in some ways this allows the musicians to become self-enabling and self-empowering in terms of creating sustainable music careers, as indicated in ‘Opportunities’. This was the direct result of their *AF* participation, which inevitably still has some positive impacts, even though not as much as its negative ones.

Table 31. Career experiences of *AF* pop musicians expressed as coding reference counts and percentages

Career Experiences	Coding Reference Count	Percentage
Positive	67	42%
Opportunities	42	63%
Strengths	25	37%
Negative	93	58%
Threats	68	73%
Weaknesses	25	27%

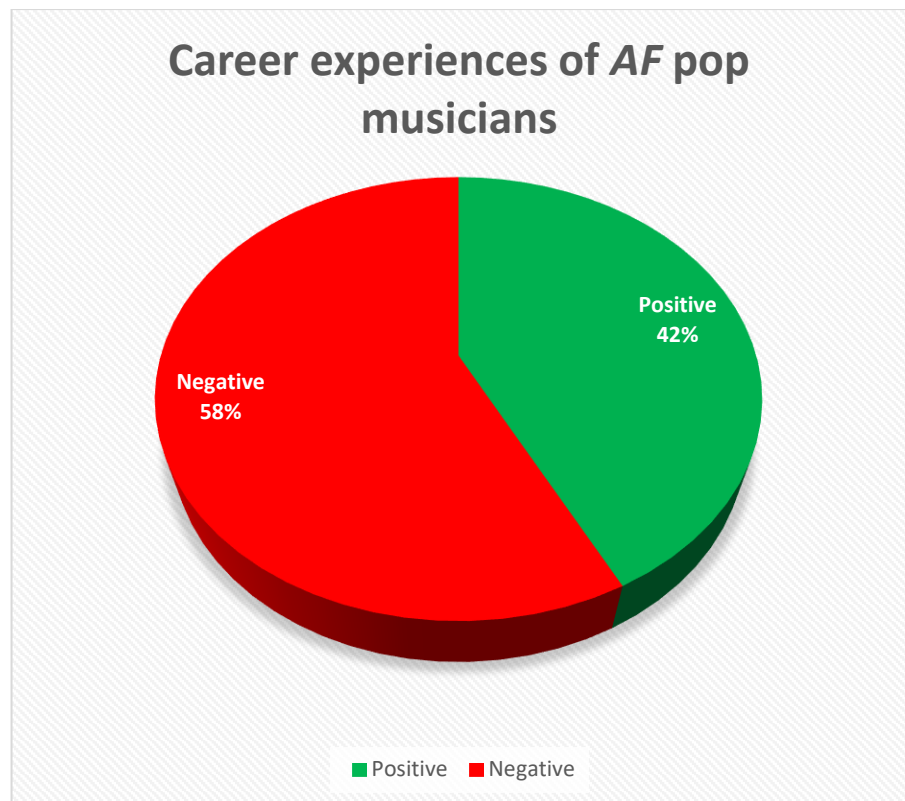


Figure 14. Career experiences of *AF* pop musicians

Table 31 offers a different perspective on how the career experiences of *AF* pop musicians are articulated as either positive or negative based on coding reference counts and percentages. When ‘Strengths’ and ‘Opportunities’ are combined together and viewed as positive experiences, whereas ‘Weaknesses’ and ‘Threats’ as negative ones, the findings still indicate nuances, while negative experiences outnumber positive ones, as shown in Figure 14. The relatively small percentage gap between positive and negative experiences further underlines that *AF* does not entirely help or harm its musicians, whereas their participation in and association with the show have a somewhat negative impact on their career trajectory. Most notably, these findings in some ways have proven that industry concerns and judgements on the *AF* musicians regarding the scepticism associated with them are entirely unfair and contestable, while such worries and criticisms

are poorly judged and unlikely to be a key factor influencing whether musicians have a sustainable music career and profile.

Noting the pattern of findings that emerged in this research has moved the thesis argument on further, signalling that the dimension that needs further attention is disempowered musicians within a disempowering music industry. This further suggests that the musicians' positive experiences signify a sense of purpose and, in the longer term, a form of self-realisation or "good texts" as coined by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p. 190). On the other hand, their negative experiences may signify "frustration, disappointment and a sense of purposelessness" or can be considered "bad texts" that will require further scrutiny (p. 190). Therefore, moving on to the next level of scrutiny, the thesis will analyse the fragility of pop music careers that are 'geared' towards short-term gratification and highly prone to be short-lived. This further underlines the distorting nature of the *AF* phenomenon, namely its tendency to produce disempowered musicians inadvertently created by the hybrid. Most notably, such vulnerable individuals were then circulated within the music industry – the industry that is normalising music commodity failure. By contextualising the adversity the musicians faced, this thesis offers a more comprehensive theoretical perspective on the notion of disempowered musicians and how to equip such individuals with strategised careers in an increasingly disempowering industry.

4. Conclusion

Overall, there is a disconnect or mismatch between the musicians' expectations of what being a contestant on *AF* will mean for their careers and what happens following their stint on the show, given the professional music industry careers they have experienced. This further underlines the power imbalance

that is often reflected in the musicians' career trajectories. These key findings ultimately unfold a new dimension in this thesis, namely the cultural phenomenon of pop music identity production alongside the hybrid's integration within the music industry. Such a phenomenon brings with it a paradox that has a detrimental effect, specifically for those aspiring musicians associated with the hybrid and also on the music industry as a whole, an issue which is worth further scrutiny. As *AF* participants focus on musical expertise whereas *AF* is a television and not a music industry vehicle (even though it pretends to be this), the *AF* format induces in contestants a combination of 'Creative Misalignment' and 'Career Misdirection' – two terminologies that will be coined and introduced in this thesis, signalling two distinct cultural phenomena that demonstrate the process and outcome, respectively, in the pop music identity production of the television-centric mechanism. In that respect, *AF* that is against the background of digitally-driven convergence can be considered as a prime example of Schumpeterian 'Creative Destruction', whilst the contestants pick up the metaphorical bill for this (they are promised one thing and delivered another and all because *AF* measures success only through viewing figures and viewer engagement). Those three phenomena are self-constructed and might be a Malaysian-specific construction (which will be further discussed in later chapters). And addressing this situated context allows one to gain an understanding of the tensions within the three primary representations and expectations, namely between *AF* pop musicians, *AF* as a pop music-television hybrid, and the Malaysian music industry.

**Chapter 5:
Creative misalignment**

1. Introduction

The predominant theme that emerged from pre-analysis of the interviews with *AF* graduates set against my own self-reflection on the process demonstrated that the musicians are in rather problematic situations. From the musicians' experience within the *AF* hybrid production, they appreciate that *AF* is a life-changing experience that is capable of transforming their musical dreams although there have been implications of participating in the show that are somewhat contradicted and mismatched with the musicians' musical interests. From the post-*AF* experience of such individuals, they are aware that associating themselves with *AF* pop star machinery has inadvertently transformed them into cultural entrepreneurs – individuals with a form of cultural capital¹³ they need to deploy in a very challenging and disempowering music industry. From this outcome of the *AF* cultural production phenomenon, it can be said that the musicians are in a kind of 'hall of (distorting) mirrors'. They desire music careers, and there are three mirrors that reflect their desires back to them, but in distorting ways – firstly, their own confection of what it takes to become a successful musician. Secondly, the way *AF* represents this process and how it encourages the contestants to think and behave. Thirdly, how *AF* impacts on the musicians' own self-construction and then places them within the music industry with no further support.

Through these three distorting mirrors, I aim to locate the aspiring but disempowered musicians in what might be referred

¹³In essence, cultural capital is predominantly gained through an individual's initial learning and refers to cultural knowledge and experiences that can be seen as an asset (Bourdieu, 1984). In addition, it is a form of value associated with culturally skills, attributes, awards and recognitions (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002) that are collectively recognised by both the industry (the producer) and the public (the consumer). Thus, possessing cultural capital is seen as a source of competitive advantage, especially in the case of *AF* musicians - it is useful and is the only lifeline for them to deploy in a very challenging and disempowering music industry.

to as a 'creative misalignment'. We should understand this as the contradiction posed by *AF* for all its contestants – that it raises their chances of entering the music industry but distorts that entry, at the same time. Hence, this chapter is a navigation of the roots of each misalignment from both parties, exploring how such misalignments have become established in their own respective rights. In other words, these two parties seem to sing from the same song sheet but dance to a different tune. In light of this paradoxical nature, the disconnection between the two parties occurred in misdirecting musicians who were initially attracted to and by the promise of *AF*, which promise is not delivered in terms of those expectations.

These misalignments have detrimental impacts on the musicians, particularly in the sense of the individuals' talent development and career advancement, although the misalignments occurred subtly and implicitly. To demonstrate the misalignments, I will establish first the ways in which the musicians and *AF* as the pop music television hybrid have sought to align themselves in their own respective rights. Later, I will point out the misalignment of this whole phenomenon that illustrates how disempowered the musicians would be under this contemporary apparatus of pop music identity production according to its specificities.

2. *AF* musicians' *pop-musicking*: the amateur-pre professional continuum

In identifying the notion of creative misalignment of *AF* pop musicians, it is useful to identify the musicians' original orientation (in terms of their career expectations), which can be learnt from their musical experiences. In doing so, it is noteworthy to reflect on the musicians' historical backgrounds that inform us about their early years of musical activities and

involvement before they were transformed as music industry professionals via the *AF* hybrid production. In that situated context, I propose a term, 'pop-musicking', that denotes the musicians' identity construction through musical experiences, reflecting the pop music activity and involvement of such individuals from across the amateur-professional continuum. The term, which draws on Christopher Small's (1998) musicking concept, "is the present participle, or gerund, of the verb *to music*" (p. 9).

In general, Small's musicking concept encompasses human musical activities in the sense of music production, performance and consumption. Specifically, the scholar proposed that musicking "is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing" (p. 9). In pop music activities or, namely, pop-musicking, which is my adaptation of Small's musicking concept, I seek to understand how the musicians' musical identities were established in the pop music activities realm such as pop music-making and production; participating in pop singing/music contests/auditions; involvement in live performances as a solo singer or in a band; and any other related pop music activities that the musicians had experienced.

In the context of this chapter's discussion, both amateur and pre-professional pop-musicking experiences are valuable in illustrating how such activities signify and represent the musicians in regard to the creative identities established in the field of popular music. It is these identities that *AF* relied on to attract the musicians as contestants and then distorted in the name of furthering those identities. Based on my autoethnographic appraisal, I personally explored the formative years of pop-musicking experience with my research

respondents, who are my fellow *AF* stable mates – signed under the same label and management, toured all over Malaysia and beyond, nominated and performed in various significant music/entertainment events and festivals. I have known them as an individual and they are indeed musicians who are primarily passionate about music other than anything else. Before their inclusion in the televised pop academy that is the hybridised pop star machinery, they were seen genuinely establishing themselves as musicians and wanted to make a living with this kind of creative career.

In other words, pop-musicking is truly the essence of the formulation in pop musicians of an identity and of their modes of representation. Therefore, I will begin by first discussing the musicians' pop-musicking experience in the amateur phase that covers their experience *before* their inclusion in the *AF* hybrid system. Please note that this amateur pop-musicking phase will partly convey their early experiences with music (television) singing contests and/or music (reality television) auditions – the musicians' prior experience within such industrial systems. Secondly, I will discuss the individuals' experience in the pre-professional phase, namely their pop-musicking experience *within* the hybrid system, whilst they have been given access to the hybridised industrial system and experienced the amateur-professional transformation as premised by the *AF* hybrid production.

3. The amateur phase: the pursuit of gratification

AF hopefuls can be seen as amateurish musically-driven individuals who are whole-heartedly and passionately caught up in amateur pop-musicking, which is very likely to have been influenced and inspired by the 'parables' and 'proverbs' predominantly rehearsed by more successful musicians, who

can be their pop music idols, families and peers. In this fundamental phase or key stage for the *AF* hopefuls who are developing their musicianship, practising their performance skills and building their identity, at the heart of everything is always the hope for a positive outcome. They absolutely aim for self-satisfaction or gratification in expressing this musicality, hoping that it will satisfy audiences and build their careers. This recalls the work of Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) on creative labour, arguing that the “involvement in the production of good texts [or in the context of pop-musicking] can produce pleasure, satisfaction, a sense of purpose and, potentially, in the longer term, self-realisation” (p. 190). That particular argument resonates in the context of amateur pop-musicking,—wherein musicians can be seen to be ambitious from the outside with perhaps a fixed view of what career progress will consist of.

Most notably, the amateur musicians’ experiences from such activities in this early phase seem valuable for them, as they can be considered as some form of validation of their musicality or artistic talents – appreciating the fact that none of them have any formal music pedagogy experiences or accreditation. For instance, if a musician wins a singing competition, the achievement will encourage them to be more active in pop-musicking and always to construct targets that can measure career progression. This repetition of this pattern of pop-musicking identifies committed musicians (at least in the Malaysian experience). In many respects, amateur pop-musicking experiences epitomise the young aspiring musicians’ true intentions and hopes. They signal how creatively and assiduously musical identities were developed in their early involvement in pop musical activities and, further, how feedback from these experiences goes on informing the individuals’ passion and desire in developing a music career. Take this example:

“My parents had a band that worked in so many places, mostly hotels. I lived in hotels since I was born until I was 16 years old. Seeing them playing music the whole time indirectly influenced me to become [a musician] like them. Sometimes, I used to cover my mother’s position as a singer in the band while she was sick... During my school days, I have always been exposed to stage performance too. My teachers always requested me to sing on any occasions in school events.” (Amylea)

“I started to join a competition when I was nine years old. That was my first attempt, and I started to love the stage, singing on stage. During my school days, I actively entered so many competitions...In 2004, I went to the audition of *Bintang RTM*, which I knew what *Bintang RTM* was all about – I had watched the show since forever. In the meantime and in the same year, I was ‘forced’ by my friends to join the audition of *AF2*, I was just accompanying them in the first place...I was so lucky when I [was] accepted for both competitions – but *AF* notification first came in a week earlier than *Bintang RTM*. So I choose *AF*.” (Bob)

“I started singing when I was 15 years old. At that time, I worked at Sheraton Penang [Hotel] as a lounge singer in a band. I was exposed to jazz music. I used to perform in front of Raja [of] Perlis [Malaysian royals]. That is where I learn about performing on stage, building confidence level, and improving communication with the audience. I can play guitar as well. I have informal music training, taught by my father...I auditioned for three shows – *Bintang RTM*, *Malaysian Idol* and *AF*...I was in the Top 12 in *Bintang RTM*. In *Malaysian Idol*, I was in Top 50...” (Farhan)

“I have no formal music education, but I can play a music instrument and know some basic chords. I was in a singing competition when I was nine years old, but I did not win. That was my first attempt. I entered other competitions after that, but the best I could reach was the 1st runner up – I had never been the champion in any competition... I [was] in the *AF4* Prelude where people started to recognise me...In 2011, I was offered to join *AF9* without being auditioned. The show was already on [air] and I [was] offered to take over the place of [a] student that had been evicted.” (Hazama)

“I used to be a deejay in a supermarket and an emcee at weddings. I was also a singer in a *nasyid* vocal group. I can just play *kompang* [a Malay percussion instrument]. I am active more on *nasyid*.” (Mawi)

Based on the individuals’ stories above, it is apparent that the *AF* musicians’ early involvement in the pop music scene, namely their amateur pop-musicking experiences, is indeed in the musical realm that had their own logic and dynamics but essentially such experiences centred on pure musicality, alone. They are not pop-musicking for any other reason except for the fact that they are musically talented individuals who have a passion for music. For instance, three *AF* finalists, Amylea, Bob and Farhan, have similar narratives as they were actively involved with pop-musicking as early as in their childhood. Born into a very musical family background, Amylea appreciated the experiences of being a child of serious practising musicians, which is literally a challenging one. Her life was a nomadic one as she lived in many places (predominantly in hotels) as her parents were contractual musicians who played in hotel lounges. As she lived in such a musical atmosphere during her upbringing, while being exposed to stage performances at her parents’ workplaces and also at school, such experiences

ultimately shaped her musical interest and developed her talent, and yet influenced her to become a serious musician as well.

In contrast to Amylea's early pop-musicking, Bob actively participated in singing competitions in his early pop-musicking years. In 2004, he attended two music contest television auditions, namely *Bintang RTM*, Malaysia's long-standing music television singing contest, and *AF* season 2, a relatively new music television contest (as perceived by him at that time). He has been a lucky individual as he was shortlisted for both contests but opted to be in *AF*, as the *AF* notification came in first, and forgetting the *Bintang RTM* offer, although the show itself is literally proven to be an effective springboard into the music industry as it produces many pop music icons and identities in Malaysia. In relation to that iconic television singing contest, Farhan was a *Bintang RTM* participant and was shortlisted in the *Top 50 Malaysian Idol* season 1, a local adaptation of the *Idols* format. Her debuts in all music television competitions implicitly denote her seriousness in music, apart from being raised in a musically talented family and having experiences performing for VVIPs in Malaysia in her early pop-musicking experience.

The similar seriousness of pop-musicking narratives was exhibited with the *AF9* winner, Hazama, who was initially known as a (rejected) *AF4* prelude participant. He showed his keenness to be in the professional pop music scene by turning his rejection in the *AF4* prelude into an opportunity. In this case, his easy-going personality does help, especially in establishing industry networking. Apart from that, he has never been a selective musician when it comes to accepting any opportunities or offers. Below are some examples of his remarks during the interview:

"I was so lucky to be offered to join the tour for Astro events [Gempak Selebriti Astro, etc.] although I was not

even an *AF* star, I was just in the prelude stage, not even [a former] *AF* student. I utilised the opportunity that I had by improving myself, to impress the important people from Astro. I was lucky enough to be in the circle of the *AF* stars at that time although my name was not that strong as compared to them.”

“My record deal is one album a year – but I can tolerate and not really follow the contract. I have gone through more downsides in the early [stage] of my career, so I appreciate the deal and not being a demanding and rigid artist”

Owing to the positive character that he portrayed, which is essentially useful for new acts, he was seen touring with *AF* stars while only being a ‘co-star’ (supporting act) in every Astro-organised tour. That peripheral role turned out to be a real fortune for him as his talent was spotted by one of the leading bands in Malaysia at that time, named Meet Uncle Hussain, who sought a new vocalist, resulting in him being appointed as the band’s lead singer. Not only that, his journey in the Malaysian music industry became more thrilling as he was offered a confirmed place in *AF9* (without being auditioned) whilst the show was already being aired (as he stated, this was part of the *AF9* controversial narratives). Most importantly, he has been successful in the music industry in ultimately accessing the music economy as a signed musician – something that he looked for all this while.

Nevertheless, Hazama’s proactiveness manifested in the amateur-(pre) professional transition in the pop-musicking experience is totally in contrast to *AF3* winner, Mawi, who is seen as rather laid-back in his early years pop-musicking. Mawi, a pious individual who comes from a very humble beginning, had been active in pop-musicking particularly in an Islamic pop music

genre called *nasyid* – a type of music that disseminates moral messages and Islamic values (see Matusky and Tan, 2017; Sarkissian, 2005; Barendregt, 2011; Seneviratne, 2012 for scholarly discourse on *nasyid*). Ironically, he had not been very involved in music or singing competitions or participating in auditions in his amateur pop-musicking, as compared to the other aforementioned *AF* musicians. Nonetheless, such experiences demonstrate his effort and interest in pop-musicking on his own terms.

Reflecting my autoethnographic narrative on amateur and pre-professional pop musicking experiences, I was in a band that played in hotel lounges and fine-dining restaurants, won and participated in many singing competitions, joined music reality show auditions but failed to go through to the next rounds, such as in the first season of *Malaysian Idol*, and in *AF2*. My amateur pop-musicking showed some progress when I was shortlisted as a reserve participant for *AF3*. However, I did not manage to obtain a confirmed place in that particular *AF* season (this is due to none of the *AF3* shortlisted candidates rejecting the offer after the notification of acceptance was disseminated to them). Thus, the show producers guaranteed me a confirmed place in *AF4* if I attended the audition in the following year. Fortunately, I did. That is how my pop musicking has led me: from the amateur to the pre-professional trajectory that is ultimately bridged by *AF*.

Nonetheless, based on the amateur pop-musicking of all the musicians exhibited through their music auditions and contests they participated in, there are commonalities whereby public performance experience seemed a norm to the musicians in expressing musical talent in their amateur pop-musicking phase. Music contest participation, on the other hand, is seen as a way of obtaining a further validation of their musicality. Also, Such an amateur stage of profile building exemplifies how passionate the individuals are towards achieving self-realisation

– the ultimate outcome of producing good text, as noted by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), which is exhibited in the musicians’ amateur pop-musicking. This ultimately informs their seriousness in the field of music whilst they are literally pop-musicking for good text in this amateur phase and expecting an optimal gratification for the time and effort they had invested in.

4. The pre-professional phase: *AF* as a primary portal of the misalignment

The transition into *AF* can be considered as a potential portal to the kinds of careers desired by *AF* applicants, which can be seen from amateur pop-musicking to a (simulated) professional level. The reputation that *AF* had as the “national cultural phenomenon” (Shamshudeen and Morris, 2014, p. 143) is likely to indicate that it is the appropriate and promising platform for musicians to unleash their musical talents and get noticed by the masses – a process which brings with it an immediate professional profile. *AF* participation suggests this, but *AF* might have contributed more tangibly to professionalisation had it (in its own terms), for example, created actual professional engagements for contestants within the hybrid system and authorised the hopefuls to access the professional music economy in the pop music landscape.

As I never missed following the show, especially from the first until the third season and witnessing the ‘fate’ of the contestants in their post-*AF* participation, it was a significantly different format from other talent shows (as I have argued). Owing to this, it marked itself out as an attractive proposition to the type of hard-working musician I was. Associating with this profound reality show literally helps to expand the amateur musicians’ horizon of opportunity, which multiplies their power of being ‘seen’ and strengthens their industry visibility, which therefore is a bonus point for such musicians to start the career

and establish their own brand in the music industry. After 'graduating' from *AF*, they are required to sign at least a three-year contract with Maestro, a talent management and music label that is a subsidiary company of Astro – the gigantic, influential media in Malaysia – and get the chance to have (at least) a single produced by the company. For instance, in *AF*'s seasons 2 and 3, all the contestants (12 and 14 contestants for the respective seasons) had the opportunity to have their own singles produced, regardless of how long they had spent as a student in the Akademi or of their place in the competition. This career trajectory of the *AF* graduates sounds exciting and somewhat perfect for individuals who are literally seeking an effective platform to connect them to their 'dreamland', namely *the* music industry.

However, if we look at the economics of opportunity premised by the *AF* hybrid production, there is a strong sense of commodification occurring here. The commodification manifests in the form of an opportunity that is being given to all the participants, regardless of their level of musicality. This further illustrates that, once the participants failed to impress the audience, they would be eliminated from the show. In this case, the musicians seemed to be commodified rapidly. Most notably, the commodification that is taking place here is not entirely concerned about the musicians' merits, namely their musical talent and progress in the Akademi. What matters the most is the presence of individuals who can fit the pre-set *AF* narratives.

I am aware that this televised pop machinery is exemplifying the concept of affective economics (Jenkins, 2006). In this case, what counts is the level of audience engagement with the overall product (*AF* itself) and not the degree of talent exhibited by an individual musician. In that respect, the *AF* hybrid production model serves its own aims, not the aims the show proclaims to serve. First, it is deemed to be an academy with

industry professionals as the teachers that recruits and trains aspiring musicians. But not all *AF* students' musical talent is agreed on and approved by the academy's teachers (Mas *AF2* is the example for this. I will elaborate more on her story in the next section). Second, the exposure that talented and less-talented individuals received was more or less identical; in this way, *AF* was never a meritocratic system (rather, an indiscriminate one driven by audience responses). Their subsequent 'professional' pop careers were therefore based not on any musical ability *per se* but on a profile derived from their receding time as a prominent *AF* contestant. I will discuss the outcome that such 'professionalism' took in the next chapter – but, most importantly, I want to discuss how the *AF* hybrid system has actually fashioned the creative misalignment of such individuals.

To illustrate this, it is vital to reflect the *AF* specificities that are misaligned with what the musicians are equipped themselves for. This means that what they have been working for in the sense of their pop music identity creation is not in line with what *AF* is all about. Bear in mind that, in Chapter 2, I have acknowledged the existing related literature on music reality television, and specified the idiosyncrasies that music reality television shows usually manifest, namely: they are the product of an 'uneasy' relationship between music and television; the musicians are the vital instrument of the music reality television's affective economics; and the shows ultimately transform the musicians into pseudo-stars. Nonetheless, in the case of *AF* and in a more defined dimension, I argue that *AF* is prizing personality rather than musicianship; the music industry is the 'co-actor' in this hybridised pop music star machinery; *AF* is created for television-friendly musicians only. On this basis, we could argue that the shift that *AF* proposed through its "demotic turn" cultivates celebrity culture (Turner, 2014, p. 91). As the

musicians have become the content of the music reality television, what *AF* produced through the demotic turn, ultimately, was a type of celebrity called 'celetoids' (Rojek, 2001, p. 20), which are apparently not stars.

4.1. *AF* is prizing personality rather than musicianship

On being accepted as *AF* contestants, initially the selected musicians will have internalised this as a direct (and upward) continuation of their own, self-initiated pop musicking and career-building. This can be reflected by the pre-analysis of the 'Strengths' in the findings, whereby the *AF* life-transformation ethos seemed to be helpful for the musicians in materialising their musical ambitions and towards them achieving self-fulfilment in their pop-musicking within the *AF* hybrid system. This further underlines the *AF* hybrid's life-transformation ethos consisting of elements such as *AF*'s strong reputation as a national cultural phenomenon; industry training of performing arts courtesy of key influential industry figures; offering pop music market entry that ultimately connected the musicians to their 'dreamland'; and a well-rounded training approach capable of unleashing their creative potential of becoming versatile artists. Taken as a whole, *AF* was an irresistible offer.

However, in order for the musicians to make the most out of their experiences within the *AF* 'hybrid', they needed to face, and work with, the fact that the hybrid's reality was misaligned with their common intention, identification and representation derived from and expressed within their amateur pop-musicking. *AF* preferred actors and personalities over musical talent, because it was not a meritocratic model, it was an audience-led 'democratic' model based on non-musical signals of the apparent worth of participants. This means that music reality

television is not all about the musical talents of the show's participants.

In that respect, Stahl's 'constant auditions' argues that "contestants must audition again and again just to stay in the running" (2004, p. 226), further exemplifying that they have no apparent security to fully entitle them to the transformation offered or the promise of the music reality television show. In the case of the *AF* hybrid star production, there are usually two constant auditions or 'tests' that *AF* hopefuls should encounter: artistry and personality auditions. The artistry audition is a test the students can anticipate and expect whereby their musicianship and stage performance skill are key evaluation criteria. The role of the professional judges is to identify the strengths and weakness of the performance by focusing on technical and subjective elements such as pitching, tempo, pronunciation, stage presence, feel, emotion and other related aspects in performing arts.

Conversely, the personality audition evaluates the students by criteria that are beyond the artistic and aesthetic ones. This audition involves far more subjective measurement, relying on audience response to attributed rather than measurable values. In this, however, there is no rubric or matrix for the students to refer to; this audition bore no similarity to the conventional approach in any singing competition. This means that the students have to build an affective investment (Fairchild, 2007) in the audience in order to pass through the personality audition. For instance, the viewers might be drawn to aspects of certain students' personal backgrounds or towards the ones that have loveable and funny characters. In some cases, the viewers' sympathy was drawn to struggles individual students experienced in different weeks. The sympathy vote always played a part in generating votes for students who exhibited these kinds of stories.

In the artistry audition, there are three audition phases. The first series of the audition is the open nationwide audition. Although this audition is conducted in a closed environment, viewers can access the whole audition process for each *AF* season (especially for *AF1* until *AF6*) on @15, Astro's interactive television channel that provides a chat room for viewers. This means that every single person who attended the auditions has the chance to briefly appear on TV, depending on how long they were auditioned for by the judges. The auditionees are taped, and the recorded footage is then compiled and broadcast nationwide in a delayed telecast on @15. This channel obviously aids in creating the *AF* hype before the premier of the *AF* season and can be considered as an affective and hybrid economic instrument (Jenkins, 2006; Fairchild, 2007) deployed by the TV station in promoting the norms and protocols of participatory culture in the Malaysian audience.

The second artistry audition that the *AF* hopefuls needed to go through is the *Konsert Prelude AF* (*AF* Prelude Concert). At this phase, 20 shortlisted *AF* hopefuls are introduced in a competition to fill only 12 spots to become *AF* students – the 20 hopefuls have to perform in the live telecast show for the first time. These performances are entirely judged by music industry and television professionals. The successful candidates then head to the Akademi to undertake their obligation as students – to be trained to perform and deliver the assigned weekly task. Such an obligation as a student in the Akademi is actually the third or the ultimate audition, which can be considered as the most challenging of all, as the following quotations demonstrate.

“Roughly it was just three to four days that you are really doing the training [from Monday to Wednesday]. You have to present your progress on Thursday in front of the faculty members. On Friday, it is a full day of rehearsal in

the concert venue and Saturday is the day! I worked very hard in the Akademi.” (Amylea)

“In terms of the training period, it would never be enough.” (Bob)

“The training is compressed into three months. That’s what made me stressed during the *AF* phase.” (Farhan)

“In terms of the training period, it was not enough.” (Hazama)

“To be honest, I did not acquire enough knowledge in the three months of training to learn music. In terms of the duration, it was too compressed. If you are lucky and last until the final rounds, you get the chance to learn more.” (Mawi)

The students are required to take up the weekly challenge of presenting the given task publicly in a live concert. Thus, from Monday to Friday, the students are required to work very hard in the Akademi – learning new songs and memorising the lyrics; learning dance and stage choreography; rehearsing their performances in televisual settings on Friday’s night and Saturday’s afternoon at the concert venue; and, finally, presenting their final artistry in a live telecast in the evening. This cycle repeats every week for those who ‘survive’ in the Akademi until the winner is crowned at the end of each season. In other words, the Cinderella will be announced and celebrated at the end of the storyline (Jian and Liu, 2009).

Reflecting on my personal experience of the artistry audition, my *AF* stable mates and I had no options rather than just accepting the assigned weekly task or challenge, which was usually not to our taste or our preferred repertoires; consequently, we struggled to deliver the task. Amylea argued about this explicitly in the interview. Below are the examples:

“I didn’t like the song [given to me] for the final as it did not represent me as a singer. The song was great, but it was just not me!”

“Not all [participants] are versatile singers. Some might have distinctive vocal tones that would not work in any or every music genre. The test should be varied, according to the singer’s capabilities. But I do think that it can kill your talent if you are unable to deliver a good performance. We have to embrace the talent and not burden people [the contestants] with something that they unable to cope with.”

“But in the competition, it is not OK to test our ability with diverse musical styles or genres. You have to know that we are at a very young age while in the competition – sometimes it kills our self-esteem.”

I can relate to Amylea’s experience. For instance, I was assigned a ‘hard’ Malay rock song, titled ‘Biar Betul’ from Akar band – a song that I had never thought I could sing and deliver on stage. All I could do was do my very best, delivering the song with my own interpretation. With the practices and struggle that I had, and of course with the guidance and support of the *AF* teachers, I had positive feedback from the judges on the performance. Surprisingly, I was in the first spot on the voting chart when the voting closed. This particular event denotes that the musicians must comply with the hybrid system that truly challenges their musicianship and all of their other skills in order to survive in the constant auditions.

Meanwhile, in the personality audition, the students who have interesting personal stories and likeable personalities might have a great chance to sustain their place as *AF* students. This means that their personal traits or narratives help them in having additional ‘scores’ that would be exhibited through the popular

vote. On that note, the vote that they receive might not be entirely due to their artistry. Below are some examples to illustrate this:

“I had no idea about *AF* before and I thought it was just a singing competition – but it is a reality programme and people want to know ‘everything’ about me.” (Mawi)

“It is just an entertainment show. Talent is number two.” (Hazama)

“Sometimes I was told to play around and talk to the cameras, create characters, and do other things unrelated to my main purpose being on *AF*. I am a laid-back person and to an extent I have to pretend to be someone else [to fulfil the producers’ orders].” (Farhan)

Mawi, the winner of *AF3*, is the best example of a student who passed with flying colours in their personality audition in the competition. With the title of ‘the King of SMS’ due to the undefeatable popular vote that he gained, he remained in first spot throughout the competition. With his ‘tsumawi phenomenon’, this naïve, pious-seeming individual from a rural background set a benchmark that has never been surpassed in *AF*’s history. In other words, no *AF* participant over any of its seasons has matched his remarkable record. Before he was chosen to be an *AF* student, he was initially rejected in the *AF* Prelude Concert in that particular season, which is clearly based on the merit of the professional judges’ decision. However, he was brought back into the competition due to the ‘pressure’ from his strong fan base (even though he had briefly appeared in that preliminary round). This is all due to the ‘Malayness’ and Islamic images he portrayed in his personality that drew remarkable attention and support from Malaysian audiences, especially the Malay community. The Malayness and the ‘clean’ and naïve personality that he had, ultimately became a valid currency in the

popular vote, which, in a way, has made *AF* achieve its peak popularity as a music reality television show in Malaysia.

Apart from that, there is another example outside of the interview data that helps to establish the personality audition. A student named Mas from *AF* season 2 was a single mother of two children; she was a less-talented student in that particular *AF* season; and was highly criticised by the Akademi's principal, Ramli MS, due to her poor progress in the Akademi. She also always received negative feedback from the professional judges during the weekly concerts. Her personal stories and her poor performances in the Akademi drew viewers' sympathy, which 'saved' her from the elimination rounds. In fact, she lasted in the competition until the semi-final, whilst witnessing many talented students being eliminated from the competition due to a lack of the popular vote. There is, then, a deep contradiction at work here – between *AF* as a programme designed to produce pop stars and *AF* as a programme that mobilised popular tropes outside of pop music to generate affective investment in the show.

Taken together, Mawi and Mas are evidence that demonstrates this hypothesis – where the point is that neither of them had an intention to strategise themselves in the competition in such ways. To a lesser degree, the unique and vulnerable characters of these individuals seem to be manipulated by the hybrid for the sake of gaining audience attention – the key aim of affective strategy. That said, *AF* is centred on prizing personality rather than musicianship. In this way, the *AF* hybrid deliberately rather than accidentally misaligns the career ambitions of the participating musicians with the franchise's aim of building a brand through audience participation. In seeking to make career progress, the participating musicians are misdirected to goals they did not set for themselves.

4.2. The music industry is the ‘co-actor’ in this hybridised pop music star machinery

It must be noted that the hybrid’s distortion of emphasis – towards the personality and narrative and away from musicianship and musical ability, was not opposed by the Malaysian music industry. Instead, the music industry can be seen as a ‘co-actor’, authorising the television industry (which lacks musically-driven experts and entities), to intervene and take the lead in promoting a misleading pop music star mechanism. The academy’s principal, for example, has been allocated to music industry legends. Dato’ Freddie Fernandez (*AF1*), Dato’ Ramli M. S. (*AF2*), Dato (Dr.) M. Nasir (*AF3*), and Datuk Ramli Sarip (*AF4*), are clearly respected music industry figures, considering their own outstanding achievements and significant contributions to Malaysian music. It is worth noting that those music legends and maestros were given the title Dato’ or Datuk by the Malaysian sultans, which genuinely represents their exceptional industry profile, indicating that they are actually the significant characters in the Malaysian music industry (the title of ‘Dato’ or ‘Datuk’ may be equivalent to the title of ‘Sir’ in the UK that is given to anyone awarded knighthood by the Queen or a member of the royal family acting in her stead). However, such influential music industry figures appear to obey the nature of this hybridised and distorted pop music star machinery whilst acting as the ‘co-actor’ or co-producer in this televised pop music identity production. The involvement of significant industry people suggests that they legitimise the simplicity of star machinery suggested by the *AF* hybrid production, despite the fact that they may be aware of the concept of ‘instant noodles’ artists linked with *AF*.

As I have noted previously, the chief purpose of such a hybrid is obviously the ‘killer application’ in the media convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) that eventually is a

strategic entertainment business approach for the music and television alliance or cooperation that works in *glocal* contexts. However, it is fair to acknowledge here that the hybrid is the killer application formulated to 'kill' the musicians' drive and their sense of purpose in pop-musicking, with the help of music industry people. In other words, the hybrid is an advanced model of music labour exploitation in the age of media convergence – the more innovative the media, the more it exposes the musicians to a considerably high degree of precarity, which might force such true musicians into extinction. This may sound dramatic, but that is the end product that the hybrid implicitly delivered – one that made musical ability a poor second to marketable aspects of personality and the contestants' personal narratives.

From a television industry perspective, the hybrid's capability is indeed praiseworthy as "getting the right formula that transforms the right conventions [such as music reality television] into a popular art form is no easy task" (Fiske, 1987, p. 110). This further demonstrates that:

"...it can act as a public midwife to the births of new pop stars, foregrounding its assumed role as transparent, earnest, and benevolent facilitator of the best undiscovered talent it can find, and through this giving us all the drama, tears, pleasure, and pain we can stand" (Fairchild, 2007, p. 356).

From this perspective, by working for (and on) the needs of the audience, the TV-pop hybrid is effective culturally as well as financially. We need to appreciate that music goes to market as a symbolic product, one that consists of the sound, look and story of musicians (Jones, 2012). The problem proposed by the hybrid is by putting 'Story' above 'Look' and both far above 'Sound'. However, this innovation in some ways is usurping the

long-standing pop star mechanism normally owned and ritualised by music companies in which, to a lesser degree, this shift has indicated some apparent glitches, especially in creating a pure, musically-driven creative identity, namely an individual who 'deserves' to be in the music industry. Most importantly, it is a worrying trend of cultural production that represents potential harm to the musicians.

Whilst the televisual narratives are more important than anything in producing music identities, *AF* is literally not a healthy environment for musicians and this is especially significant when we consider that the 'traditional' music industry itself is not exactly a conducive environment either. By placing 'Story' above all other elements, *AF* graduates entering the Malaysian music industry became automatically denigrated as, in that instance, they are exposed to prejudice – the sceptical judgement of their credibility as *the* musicians, which leads to the status of "instant noodles artists" – a reflex negative representation that presents a hurdle they need to surmount. This is a particularly cruel outcome given that, firstly, the musicians enjoyed sufficient talent to enter the show and, secondly, they entered the show on the basis that they would have value added to their *musical* identities. In its turn, all of this gives the lie to the idea that the hopeful musicians enter an 'Academy', a high-level preparation zone, for a music industry career. This can be reflected through the theme of training, as emerged in the interview data, exemplifying that the *AF* students expected an academy learning experience. For instance, Amylea and Farhan have expressed that they were under pressure during the training in the *Akademi*, whereas Hazama, Bob and Mawi seemed to expect a longer training period (these remarks appeared in the previous section: 4.1. *AF* is prizing personality rather than musicianship, from page 189 -190).

The compressed training duration and the pressure exposed to the *AF* students, in a way, indicated that the training regime is aimed at producing audience-attractive contestants rather than improved, 'finished', market-ready pop musicians. Considered in these terms, the hybrid is seen to embody the conventional character of the recording industry pop star mechanism in an innovative but distorted manner. Further, that the distortion is never recognised in Malaysia or has never been treated as a distortion recalls the work of Kjus (2017) on music reality television. This work explores the opportunities and limitations inherent in television and music production collaboration. In the Norwegian context, the scholar argues that the collaboration may look 'harmonious but, to a lesser degree, it can be "out of tune" too.

"The falling-off in popularity [of the show and its contestants] also encompassed a growing critique of the musical quality of the televised programmes and their associated album releases" (Kjus, 2017, p.1012).

The *AF* pop star mechanism also shows a similar pattern as it can be seen as problematic as the *AF* graduates' popularity is ephemeral as they come to exhibit low staying power in the music industry despite being associated with or produced by a hybrid in the Malaysian entertainment sphere. The individuals each have their own level of musical ability, but, by not genuinely working to develop and value this, the hybrid format works against the interests of the individual musicians as well as the needs of the music industry.

4.3. *AF* is made for television-friendly musicians only

From the music industry perspective, as explained earlier, the shift of power in pop music star creation occurs partly because it has been shaped "as a result of technological change"

(Cvetkovski, 2015, p. 1), which could be in the form of the constant pressure of the technological disruption (Fairchild, 2008). As counterproductive in overcoming the disruption, the music and television collaboration exhibited through the hybrid media texts seemed practically workable in minimising the risks and therefore managing the disorganisation effects of the technological revolution in the entertainment industries.

Frith writes about the early music television phenomenon, arguing that:

“...television is an essential part of the star-making machinery of the music business and music accompanies nearly all television programmes, and yet the relationship between the two is uneasy. Television does not seem to be an essential part of musical culture and adds little to music aesthetically. Music has had little impact on the form or aesthetics of television” (p. 277).

He further notes that “it seemed obvious...that the visuals that television could most usefully bring to music were not about reading music but displaying it (p. 287). His observation is literally useful in explaining the idiosyncrasy of music television’s early mutation manifested through media text or entertainment programmes such as *MTV*. Nowadays, the idiosyncrasy has been ‘upgraded’ with the hybrid version of the media text, namely through the formulation of music reality television that is also less concerned about the music’s aesthetics. It simply illustrates the ‘uneasy’ relationship of music and television that has persistently occurred; for all the promotional and marketing advantages television offered the music industry, television formats favour the television aesthetic and reduce or limit the importance of that of the music industry.

In television’s production imperatives, even when musicians are featured, music is less likely to be the central part

of television programming. This apparent paradox echoes the hybrid's crisis whereby the music and television amalgamation may sound harmonious, but it is actually out of tune, as argued by Kjus (2017):

“...when the television producers come to influence the selection of talents and the presentation of the music in the exclusive interests of ‘good TV’. This position can generate friction with the standards and aesthetic ideals of popular music established within the music industry.”
(p. 1023)

It should be no surprise that the hybrid formulation fundamentally produces hybrid media stars, as argued by Holmes (2004), whereby “the contestants become as much TV personalities as pop stars” (p. 151). In that respect and in the case of *AF*, I argue that the hybrid is created for television-friendly musicians only. The musicians are required to advance themselves as people capable of making ‘good TV’, which is an additional burden of effort that is not easy to fulfil. In this scenario, the musicians have to self-fashion their pop music identities by balancing out the character that suits television while clinging on to their music aesthetics (the former usually overpowers the latter). What all this means for musicians who are still essentially at an amateur stage of musicking is that they are suddenly faced with the challenges associated with becoming ‘television-friendly’ musicians. It may be the case that some of these musicians learn the needs of the format quite quickly, but, even if they do, they are not developing in the ways they anticipated.

Taken as a whole, the *AF* musicians experience a totally different model of pop machinery. Inside the *AF* hybrid, they must quickly learn to gain audience sympathy or prepare a strategy to pass the personality audition. When the audiences

are allowed to see the journey of the hybrid's participants (or are involved in the early stage of the star-making process) and are responsible for the fate of the musicians in the music reality talent quest, this active role of the audience is ultimately beneficial to the hybrid creators in ensuring that the hybrid is persistently in a profitable mode. After all, that is what the hybrid is made for. Nevertheless, it is vital to acknowledge the implications of this model for the musicians involved, as they are the key components of the ecosystem.

Among the *AF* graduates that I interviewed, Hazama is the best example of an *AF* pop musician who is well-informed about *AF*'s nature. Plus, he knows how to play along with both the hybrid's and the music industry's 'games'. This totally shows that his failure in *AF4* has taught him to understand the realities of the hybrid's and music industry's expectations. Below are examples from his interview:

"*AF4* also is a means for me to know and understand *AF* and the industry's games."

"It [*AF*] is an opportunity! It is very valuable! This is the way to get [into the music industry]!"

"Basically, *AF* indirectly just gives you a formula [to develop artistic talent and skills] through its teachers. We had vocal, acting, dance and stage performance training. All these are vital elements in producing a well-rounded artist in our entertainment industry."

Meanwhile, the rest of the *AF* graduates (including myself) are expecting and treating *AF* as either a singing contest or an art academy, which is the fundamental misconception exhibited by most *AF* musicians. For instance, the laid-back Farhan seemed to be battling with her own personality as she had to pretend to be 'someone else' to fulfil the producers' orders, such as playing around with the cameras, creating

interesting characters in order to make ‘good TV’ (as explained on page 182). All of these are totally unrelated to her primary purpose in participating in *AF*, which was to become a high-profile and successful *musician*. Meanwhile, the young teen Amylea referred to the occasions when she was ‘forced’ to put on attire and accessories that were uncomfortable for her to move around in on stage, thereby causing her to receive negative feedback from the judges on her stiff body expression. Below are her remarks:

“For example, in the sixth week, I was reluctant to cut my hair short but they ‘forced’ me to do that! I can still remember that when they dressed me up, my tears dropped to the boots that I wore. I will never ever forget those moments in my entire life. Just let me be what I wanna be!”

“In the final, I was again forced to wear a wig and I begged them that I did not want to wear it because it was too heavy, I felt uncomfortable wearing it during the performance. Also, I was forced to wear dresses that I did not feel comfortable wearing them – there were some parts of the dresses that were not [fully] sewn. So my movements on the stage were limited and then I received criticism from the judges in terms of my body expression.”

I can relate to such experiences where most aspects of the students are being determined according to the television aesthetics. As I indicated in Chapter 1, my own experience was similar: I was manipulated into making personal disclosures when my only interest was to perform and to be helped to develop as a musician.

The real testimonies from the *AF* graduates epitomise the root of the hybrid’s friction produced by the television industry-music industry hybridity: individuals having less or no control

over their creativity, repertoire, image and identity in order for the television producers to make a visually enticing and pleasing encounter for the viewers' engagement. This distortion challenges the musicians, inadvertently transforming them into hybridised pop musicians. To a lesser degree, this, in a way, is still an 'opportunity' for such individuals. In the early music and television alliance, as observed by Forman (2002), the music and television show does indeed provide an opportunity for musicians and others in various sectors of the music industry where it is reasonable to regard this "as a positive influence at its inception" (p. 249). The immediate gain for the music industry comes from the perspective of marketing and promotion. Moreover, it is extra mileage for the musicians to appear on television and can be considered as a publicity or media coverage windfall for them— a mediation of their pop music identity as a music product.

Nonetheless, it is inevitable to note that the hybrid has impacted and shaped the aesthetics of musical performance in television (Frith, 2002; Forman, 2012). Optimistically, this dual role undertaken by contestants (actor as well as musician or TV performer as well as music performer) may help the musicians to become well-rounded or versatile artists, allowing such individuals to venture into a wider dimension of entertainment jobs and opportunities that diversify their income streams when they are released into the entertainment industry. Unfortunately, not all of the musicians have the knowledge to exploit this hybrid misalignment, one that takes them all a long way from their amateur pop-musicking experiences experienced over the years before their *AF* participation.

4.4. *AF* as a site of ‘celetoids’ production rather than stars

The affective economics of, especially, the *AF* formula privileges producing pop music celebrities over stars – the primary expression of the creative misalignment endemic to *AF* as a reality TV format. The star status that is offered to the musicians is a fragile one that is easier to understand and recognise as celebrity status. Below is the endemic feature of the ‘celebritification’ of the *AF* musicians that can be learnt from Amylea’s and Mawi’s experience:

“Double standards! That’s what I meant by that! I just don’t understand why some of the industry people treated me differently when I was not popular anymore! Once you praised me before – you said that I am talented. When I was not in anymore, I received the cold shoulder from several people from the industry – I feel like my talent is gone!” (Amylea)

“*AF* is not really a credible star mechanism. Graduating from *AF* and competing with well-known pop musicians in the music industry is a real game. *AF* is just a platform.” (Mawi)

Those remarks from two *AF* graduates exemplify the root cause of the epithet *artis mee segera* (instant noodles artists). This harsh condemnation is a Malaysian version of Rojek’s (2001) equally harshly descriptive expression ‘celetoid’, which refers to the “compressed, concentrated and attributed celebrity” (p. 20) that has a short life-span as a creative individual in the creative industries. As noted by Rojek in regard to celetoids and celebrity, “the latter enjoy a more durable career with the public” (p. 20), proposing that the former is a type of popular identity that suffers a severe lack of industry staying power. To an extent, the former can be considered as the ‘powerless elite’ (Alberoni, 1972),

“...whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent...” (p. 65) in the given social stratification of popular culture.

In celebrity studies, Schickel (2000) introduced the notion of the ‘illusion of intimacy’ – the theory that the masses are intimate with well-known individuals in society. But there is a distance associated with that familiarity (i.e. the public have never met such individuals). In some cases, a celebrity might be known publicly for nothing substantial in terms of their position or achievements – the individual is just “well-known for their well-knownness” (Boorstin, 1961, p. 57) or is probably someone who has the ability to command attention (Gamson, 1994). The type of fame that celebrities might experience might not last for a long time (if compared with that of stars). Several hypotheses can be derived in studying this. One of them that best explains this phenomenon is probably the seasonal and ephemeral celebrity character which tends to be related to “the development and extension of the mass media” (Williamson, 2016, p. 8) that proliferates over time; and the human ‘pseudo-events’ that are entirely constructed for media consumption (Boorstin, 1961).

However, where media consumption is concerned, the individuals whose attention quotient depends on media exposure alone, have little power or control over the quality and frequency of that exposure. This recalls the account of Turner (2014), arguing that “the celebrity’s fame does not necessarily depend on the position or achievements that gave them their prominence in the first instance. Rather, once they are established, their fame is likely to have outstripped the claims to prominence developed within that initial location” (p. 3). In that respect, they can easily be forgotten in the popular culture if there is no continuity in creating constant public awareness of their own ‘branding’ and any necessary discourse that helps sustain their industry visibility.

Stars, on the other, are typically individuals who are absolutely well known and are social agents who have significant public roles in or make contributions to society. Historically, stars are the outcome of the modern phenomenon observed by Marshall (2007), underlining the star system and stardom as a proliferation of the 'fame' of pre-modern celebrity culture that is traditionally understood "with either royalty or as posthumous recognition for great achievements" (p. 9). This means that stars originally embodied celebrity attributes but would not be considered celebrities who are also known publicly. Celebrity ideological values and contributions to society are quite vague and not a 'heroic' type of individual in society. That is why stars are often said to be different from celebrities, although both groups of people are obviously ordinary people with distinctive cultural power and influence in society. To a lesser degree, it can be said that both popular culture identities are not simply well known merely for being well known, and there must be a demonstrable substance to the acclaim they enjoy.

In relation to stars, Shumway (2015) notes that stars typically have achieved their given status through some form of skilled labour that they have which leads them to be considered as part of the elite, positioned at the top level of hierarchy in popular culture, which is much higher in the hierarchy than celebrities. This probably suggests that stars "make big salaries, are a product of a system that pays a few people disproportionately large salaries" (Shumway, 2001, p.176) and are profound social agents who usually have more power to influence the 'stargazers' (as compared to celebrities). Hence, stars embody an intense degree of Schickel's illusion of intimacy, underlining the public figure who has cultural imaginary power (Shumway, 2015) in the sense of the stars' attractiveness that works "both directly and vicariously in the minds of the fans,

who want either to have the star [in very intimate proximity with the star] or to be the star” (Shumway, 1997, p. 88).

The star system and stardom are not accidental phenomena. Klaprat (1985) argues that “stars were created, not discovered, counter to popular myths” (pp. 351-352). Such individuals usually underwent a rather complex process and ‘passed’ a range of ‘social examinations’ before earning the star status ‘award’. This recalls the account of Gledhill (1991), whose work explains the dynamics and complexity that stars embody:

“[A star is] a product of mass culture, but retaining theatrical concerns with acting, performance and art; an industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalised groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiances with statesman and politicians” (p. xiii).

With such multidimensional dispositions, processes and experiences, together with the socio-economically impacts that stars offer to society, such unique public figures have a purpose and function in a society that ultimately unite subjectivities that fulfil both ideological and industrial functions (Marshall, 2007). In creative industries such as the film industry (which is the origin of stardom discourse in academia), the film star and stardom are “always an intertextual and multi-media phenomenon” (Austin, 2003, p. 25). In Hollywood’s production of popular identities, “stars are mediated identities, textual constructions, for audiences do not get the real person but rather a collection of

images, words and sounds which are taken to stand for the person... the stars become a collection of meanings” (McDonald, 2000, p.13). In another dimension, “stars might even seem to be the ultimate example of media hype, foisted on us by the media’s constant need to manipulate our attention” (Dyer, 1986, pp. 13-14), in which such a star model signals the ongoing need for competitive companies to create market successes.

The star system that Hollywood made a focus and a routine but arguably the precedent had been established in the music industry. It was this self-consciously wilful and willed process of which Adorno (alone and with Horkheimer) was so critical. In this, music is (and musicians are) made subservient: “the usual concerns for profit maximization” (Deflem, 2017, p.49). With such economic objectives, “stars can be defined as musicians whose past sales successes are taken to guarantee their future sales successes” (Frith, 2001, p. 35). This scenario indicates that these market successful individuals “require substantial investment but their profile and market dominance enable the production of profits to finance further acquisitions and expansion” (Negus, 1999, p. 48).

When the stars’ identity and branding become a profitable asset to themselves and also to the creative enterprises with which they are associated, their cultural meaning becomes relatively valuable in the music market and “the star-as-cultural-text has some kind of meaning independent of the music he or she has produced” (Marshall, 2013, p. 580). In most cases in the music industry, there is no set amount of time to achieve this independence, as argued by Marshall. To an extent, an overnight pop music-television star could achieve this level of market visibility more instantly (see Forman, 2002, 2012 on music television accounts).

With such power and privilege that music stars embody, they are seen as having more autonomy essentially in fashioning their star image (as compared to film stars). For instance, pop music stars usually have the chance and “ability to write their own music and construct their own image to be utilized on album covers and in music videos affords music stars with more control over their image than film stars who appear in films (generally) written and directed by others” (Wright, 2018, p. 5) – especially when scripts and casting are pre-determined by studios. Television stars are less autonomous as they tend to be reliant on the needs of the formats they serve. Ellis (1992) asserts that, in motion pictures and television broadcasting, television tends to produce not stars but the “personality effect” on figures who are “famous for being famous” (p. 107). This further signals the strong notion of celebrity for the individuals associated with music reality television shows, which can be reflected in the television programming aesthetic that is predominantly visually driven and, most essentially, “organised around an aesthetic of immediacy (rather than reflection)” (Frith, 2002, p. 280). This immediacy is contradicted in music production which centres on exclusive texts that are subject to an editorial model of production (Miège, 1987) and is remote from public involvement. This form of production still depends on marketing and promotion but success derives from the symbolic provision of negotiable meanings that are far more discursive and reflective.

In the *AF* star-making hybrid, the blend of music and reality television formulation has created a paradox – it is not truly the star-making process it pretends to be, *but it is* a celebrity-inducing format. Holmes (2004), in her account on *Pop Stars* and *Pop Idol* examining such hybrids’ mediation of popular music and their consequences for the cultural construction of stardom, argued that “...we are dealing with fundamentally hybrid media stars—the contestants become as much TV

personalities as pop stars” (p. 151). This echoes the work of Forman (2012), as such hybrids have “a proven capacity to ‘create’ new celebrity artists” (p. 333) rather than stars. This further resonates with the work of Fairchild (2007) on the *Idol* phenomenon, arguing that the hybrid is producing a celebrity that embodies a more valuable commodity due to the profound public attention the hybrid gathered. However, the type of celebrity most of the hybrids tend to produce is what has been termed by Rojek (2001) as ‘celetoid’. In addition to that, the celetoids might be seen as temporary or ‘short-term contractual’ labour in popular culture or society who are likely to experience instant gratification whilst they spend only a little time in that privileged place. Such poorly-rooted celebrity can vanish as suddenly as it appeared.

In the *AF* hybrid’s particular and specific construction of celetoid, the instant and simplified star mechanism is far removed from what the public had formerly experienced. This further illustrates that the hybrid has placed a great emphasis on visuals and narratives over sound and music. As such, music seems to be *not* the major concern of the hybrid requirement or measurement in selecting its participants. This means that the individuals chosen should at least have musical talent, whereas such talent is not crucial for the *AF* hybrid production. Rather, the hybrid seeks individuals who are capable of offering pleasingly visual and fascinating narratives that can provoke audience and social media ‘buy-in’.

Nonetheless, it is a truism to acknowledge here that the hybrid formulation is based on the logic of commodification, one that recalls and reaches back to the music-industrial analysis offered by Adorno and Horkheimer (1972). In this version of commodification, the (apparent) innovation is that the audience manufactures the stars. In this mutated form of commodification, the lack of musicianship of the musicians is compensated (even

rendered irrelevant) by narratives associated with limited access to a version of the personalities exhibited by the musicians. But this fulfils the cultural aims and objectives of the hybrid's propagators. What this means for the musicians involved, though, is that their position is inherently precarious and does not derive from their musical ability, which leads them to be disposable artists or celetoids.

The predominant outcome of this hybrid production tends to produce celetoids and it is the epitomisation of an "extraordinarily cynical exercise that offended all the principles of artistic integrity and authenticity" (Turner, 2014, pp. 4-5). This practice does not manifest harm for the hybrid itself as it still effectively runs its celetoid production through the reality show over the years (despite gradually manifesting format fatigue). But the over-produced and misaligned musicians who are the celetoids are forced to internalise the lack of fit with their aims and ambitions. The processes that lead them to *AF* see them exit through a door into a reality which they did not 'sign up for' and are not equipped to deal with.

5. *AF* offers utopia but produces dystopia

From the amateur to pre-professional continuum narratives discussed earlier, it is apparent that both pop-musicking phases involve the deep-rooted intrinsic motivation of the musicians towards pop-musicking transitions. Furthermore, both levels of pop-musicking experiences were common to all the *AF* participants under examination and passionately seeking self-fulfilment in their career advancement. Pop-musicking embodies the utopian promise of "alternatives, hopes, wishes" (Dyer, 2002, p. 20) for the musicians. Amylea's anticipation in constructing her own notion of utopia in pop musicking is pervasive (and is seen on pages 180 -181) as she disagreed with the way *AF*

treated its students/contestants. Below is one of the examples that are worth iterating:

“But in the competition, it is not OK to test our ability with diverse musical styles or genres. You have to know that we are at a very young age while in the competition – sometimes it kills our self-esteem.” (Amylea)

In a wider context, pop-musicking can illustrate how the sense of utopia has been developed and mapped; and how utopianism drives a sense of transforming and evolving to a better version of oneself, musically: from ‘no one’ to becoming ‘someone’ in the industry; from an insignificant amateur musician to potentially an award-winning musician. All of this exemplifies how the utopia pursued is predominantly industry-organised and structured; industry dependent for its realisation. As emerged in the findings, the *AF* musicians are drawn to the *AF*s life transformation. This means that *AF* can be considered as a credible springboard into the industry, which reflects the life-transformation ethos that seems to embody core traditional music business attributes while providing industry training and improving the respondents’ career prospects. As such, the lure for the musician is always “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized” (Dyer, 2002, p. 20). The trail that leads there, though, is inevitably through the industry and its associated well-defined structures and procedures.

In relation to the *AF* hybrid, the type of utopia that is mapped in *AF*s basic premise and in the strivings of its contestants is the democratic utopia. It serves the hybrid’s strategic purpose of staging televisual narratives of the hopefuls’ ups and downs in achieving their musical dreams, and as such may be used to decode both commercial and utopian mappings of character and opportunity structures in the popular culture. Such a utopia’s organisation and mapping are embedded within

the ideology that success in music is a rarity and an elusive quality of specially-talented individuals. Even so, the hybrid does not truly embrace the elements of musicality or musicianship.

Within the hybrid system, the embodied constant audition ideology or democratic utopianism simply denotes that the hybrid's hopefuls should work out an effective formula to achieve the sense of utopianism they seek, as emotionally and as entertainingly as they can. Whether in the hybridised account or the formerly dominant music industry version of success, the threat of failure is ever-present. To seem to access this continuum of elation to disappointment is a thrill for the audience and keeps them attentive. What keeps the musicians onside, even in such an alien environment is that, if they are lucky, recognition of their musical talents could lead to a fortune. In order to obtain that particular positive outcome, a very uniquely strong, bold and attractive musical identity is needed, and that will be the trading currency in the pop mainstream music market and perhaps one of the long-term resources that the musicians possess for their music business investment (I will further formulate the career strategy in Chapter 8).

Nevertheless, for the musicians concerned, their pop-musicking tended to follow familiar trajectories, recalling the account of Finnegan (1989):

“In their regular music making local musicians and their associates are dominated not by mathematically rational principles but by socially recognized and recurrent practices: the weekly, seasonal or yearly cycles set by and in the habitual musical pathways they jointly share with others...One way of looking at people's musical activities is therefore to see them as taking place along a series of pathways which provide familiar directions for

both personal choices and collective actions.” (Finnegan, 1989, p. 323)

Thus, pop-musicking in general is a way for individuals to assert their desire to be identified as musicians. *AF* plays on and with this process – the contestants are seen to be working as agents of self-expression under contract to the hybrid, whilst the musicians who are particularly perceived by the audience to be autonomous are actually the target of a strategy of control – one emblematic of the hybrid.

On that note, the musicians are oddly required to fulfil elements beyond musicality – something that might or might not have grown out of the specialisms that they established throughout their pop-musicking experiences, while the hybrid seemed to treat the musicality as a supplementary element in the hybrid system. This absolutely is a pressure on the musicians, who have worked through their amateur pop musicking to achieve recognition as musicians, and not television actors. Therefore, the creative misalignment phenomenon ultimately signifies the dystopian despair of the musicians. *AF* caused them to embrace a misalignment with their hopes and ambitions *in the name of fulfilling those hopes and ambitions*. This is particularly difficult to live with for musicians who have no power within the music industry and no ability to control or ignore its habitual and defining methods and imperatives.

6. Conclusion

In the age of media convergence, *AF* is the significant television industry-music industry hybrid that truly succeeded. It has been of defining significance in Malaysia. However, such a cultural phenomenon had a hidden distortion for the aspiring and ambitious musicians who are essential to its success. To be

specific, *AF* can be seen as a distorting lens or mirror, a career misdirecting force that harms the musicians it ensnares. Musicians need to be aware that the music industry is always likely to produce failure in pop music production; it is a lottery. But, the hybrid system is no remedy for this; in some ways, it is far worse, as it ignores individual musical creativity, favouring instead high levels of emotional exposure over which participants have little or no control. This is potentially devastating for the passion and self-image of the musicians concerned. Even so, faced with such a negative outcome many of these musicians found new ways to survive in and prosper within the music market. In the next chapter, I will identify and discuss these innovations in which, to an extent, the musicians have no other option than to transform themselves into something that they would not have imagined.

Chapter 6:
Career misdirection

1. Introduction

It is abundantly clear that the creative misalignment of the *AF* musicians is a distorting process that disrupted the musicians' talent development phase in fashioning their music identities, thereby negatively impacting such individuals in achieving what they dream of – a music career. With such a misalignment, the career that the individuals seek is likely to be elusive as they have been associated with the 'wrong' creative mechanism that comes with its own potential aftermath of public and industry prejudice. Moreover, the musicians have landed into different types of careers that contradicted their expectations in terms of the outcomes they anticipated. This phenomenon as a whole can be summarised as one that will be referred to from here on as 'career misdirection'.

In this chapter, I will discuss this outcome by proposing that the musicians are forced to embark on a career as unprepared cultural entrepreneurs in a music(less) industry. This is something that they are neither equipped for nor did they plan for, as they ultimately needed to transform themselves as cultural entrepreneurs as a way to survive in their music career and create sustainability in the music economy and industry. In addition, the music industry seems to be a passive industry – less receptive to or concerned with the musicianship of such individuals. In such an industrial landscape, the music(less) industry is an industry that has lost its grip on the making of music products and is most likely an arena for popular acts only (howsoever created). That said, the industry is not necessarily for individuals with musical talent. In establishing that, I will sketch the reality of the Malaysian music industry with a brief reflection of the pre-existing pop music identity, namely the non-reality television musicians, and provide examples of how such identities are developed and established through the pop star machinery associated with the leading music companies. The

rationale of this reflection is to illustrate the distinction between the 'conventional' music industry, where music companies are in charge of the production of symbolic goods and commodities, and the *AF* hybrid-integrated music industry that seems to be a music(less) industry wherein symbolic creations are the joint effort or the product of a synergy of music and television productions. Most importantly, the former is likely to appreciate and nurture musical talent whereas the latter seems to do the opposite.

All of these factors are the contributing ones that eventually misdirected the *AF* musicians' careers away from the imagined utopias they pursued through dedicated pop-musicking.

2. Career setting to career misdirecting

"The problem is that there are so many musicians who believe they have the ability to fashion texts as good as, or even better than, those that already exist. A further problem is that the mechanisms that exist as the Music Industry are substantially indiscriminate and inefficient despite the huge stars that they create" (Jones, 2012, p.6).

In this particular account of the music industry, Jones highlights the notion of pop-musicking, which primarily concerns those pop music activities that musicians favour, exemplifying the rites of passage into the music industry and into market success. In other words, through the pop-musicking experience, musicians are always preparing themselves to be a better version of themselves and probably ahead of the preceding musicians' achievement. With such objectives and career setting, pop-musicking would be a rewarding experience that absolutely encourages the musicians to pursue a self-realisation that always seems to be on offer, always seems to be 'up ahead'.

Nonetheless, if the musicians fail to achieve self-realisation in pop-musicking, this experience is likely to steer them away from setting up careers as musicians. This can be argued as the starting point of the notion of career misdirection that occurs in the case of *AF* graduates. To establish that, here are some examples essentially illustrating experiences against self-realisation, as expressed by the non-winning *AF* contestants in the interviews:

“To be hyped on social media first, then you could get support from the industry, is totally wrong!...The industry should value quality [musical talent] as the primary criterion, then we can create a better industry in the future.” (Bob)

“I have a new song, but the radio did not play it. The same goes for TV. If the masses do not even have a chance to know or hear us, how can we know that they dislike us? Give us fair treatment. The longer we’ve been in the industry, the bigger potential that we could offer. Talent should not have an expiry date!” (Amylea)

“Initially, I signed with them [Maestro] for five years and I shortened it to one year because the progress was poor – I was advised not to tell the [entertainment] press about it.” (Farhan)

These experiences essentially point out a problem that defines the Malaysian music industry, implying that the industry’s system seems to be a site of endless exploitation of musicians even as it makes some of them hugely influential stars. The *AF* graduates’ remarks clearly demonstrate their expectations, namely the utopian desires such as their hopes and ambitions in and from the music industry that seemed to disappoint them. Moreover, their unpreparedness in experiencing adversity in their music career is pervasive. This cultural production outcome

of the Malaysian music industry happens to be similar to what Jones (2012) argues concerning his experience and observation in the context of the Anglo-American realm: whether the Malaysian or British music industries create an essentially unproductive environment for music labourers or musicians in which to pursue their professional pop-musicking activities. This means that the industrial system of the industries, especially the Malaysian one, is not entirely capable of supporting and advancing the musicians' musical hopes and ambitions.

In this chapter, please note that the 'industrial system(s)' refers to the *AF* hybrid production or any mechanisms within the music industry that relate to the cultural production of pop music identities. Also, I will occasionally refer to the music industry as *the* industrial system, noting that it is a site that produces musical outcomes or commodities that bases its organisation and standardisation on common industry regimentation and practices.

Nonetheless, what can be learnt from the *AF* musicians' experiences (and with Jones's account) is that the specificity of the industrial system defines the peculiarity of the industry that produces failure as its defining outcome (see also Frith, 2001, 2018; Negus, 1992). Given the precarity that is typically embodied within the Malaysian music industry, especially, it has never been documented or analysed to find the best possible answer(s) to address such a problem. That said, it is noteworthy to highlight here that my analysis is not drawing on a cycle of blame-giving (Deflem, 2017) that usually occurs "from the musician to the producer, from the producer to the manager, from management to the recording company, and so on" (pp. 51-52). Hence, my analysis navigates how the disempowerment of the *AF* musicians occurs, which further reflects the industrial systems that the musicians are involved in and with.

Another dimension that might contribute to the musicians' disempowerment is the intrinsic factor wherein they might always think that they have appropriate skills and talent in terms of fashioning their own music texts. This refers to the utopianism – the musicians' habitus and behaviour in that they are always being ambitious and optimistic creative individuals. They always aim to create musical texts that are a 'hit', not a 'miss' – the former is a type of music product that enjoys market success, whereas the latter fails to capture market attention. Nonetheless, the musicians' musical texts are fashioned with the hope that they will be consumed pleasurably by music users. This can lead some musicians to concentrate only on making music and to fail to consider all the other variables in play when there are music markets to be entered. This oversight or unpreparedness of the musicians becomes especially acute and renders them especially vulnerable when becoming enmeshed in the hybrid system represented by *AF*.

The common problem facing the *AF* entrants in this study is that they were all preoccupied by pop-musicking, and blind to how music markets need to be entered. Unprepared as they were for entry into music markets by 'traditional' routes, they were even more vulnerable where *AF* was concerned. This cultural production of the music industry suggests that the musicians should think of a way to overcome the challenges they face – the ones that extend beyond getting musical performances, songs and recordings 'right', musically. Following turbulent experiences inside and after *AF*, their lack of preparation has galvanised them, in different and interesting ways, to take charge of themselves as cultural producers. This means that there is no way that the musicians could sustain themselves as professional musicians in the music economy and industry if they do not position themselves as cultural entrepreneurs (although they are not prepared for this). In

establishing that, I will first demonstrate how the *AF* musicians have become ‘unprepared’ cultural entrepreneurs. Second, I will outline my argument regarding the music(less) industry – a passive industry – by reflecting on the systems of symbolic music production emblematic of two distinct mechanisms: the long-standing music industry and the *AF* hybrid-integrated music industry.

3. The ‘unprepared’ cultural entrepreneurs

“You can enter the industry easily if you have money.” (Mawi)

For the aspiring musicians, the impact of participating in the *AF* hybrid production system created an outcome that was beyond their expectations where they seemed to be transformed into cultural entrepreneurs – neither a position nor an identity that they would have imagined, and for which they were unprepared in the first place. Reiterating the quote above, Mawi asserted that the music market can be easily penetrated perhaps by anyone who has the financial capability to be self-funded in their own creative products. Most importantly, such a remark from Mawi illustrates that musical talent is not necessarily needed for such an individual who has the capital power to access the music economy. With such a remark, which comes from the *AF3* winner and a Malaysian pop phenomenon (Lee, 2006), it somewhat proposes that the musicians have to position themselves in the music industry as cultural producers or cultural entrepreneurs; even so, their transformation occurred unenthusiastically as they initially aimed to be pure musicians able to access the pop music economy and industry. Ultimately, the music careers that they achieved opened up a new dimension that allowed them to flourish as artists. In that respect, being an artist usually requires entrepreneurial traits for career deals with a multidimensional

creative economy in a wider entertainment market (i.e. television, radio, music, film and fashion industries).

Nonetheless, and echoing the argument of Jones earlier in this chapter, this economy of opportunity that awaits the musicians obviously signals the problem of the industrial system, particularly the Malaysian music industry. This further signals that the musicians found that the industrial systems were not supporting them to advance their music career, and were thus limiting them in having career sustainability as professional musicians. Hence, they have to find other ways to extend their access to the industrial creative economy (especially in music) by diversifying their creative careers in a wider entertainment industry and economy. This scenario demonstrates that the musicians are the main victim of the labour exploitation created by the industrial systems. The systems that are designed in the interests of creative conglomerates are against what the musicians truly needed and hoped for. Hence, under this circumstance, I argue that the *AF* musicians are 'unprepared' cultural entrepreneurs in the music(less) industry – they have needed to confront the negative dimensions of the *two* industrial systems they are been in and are associated with by using entrepreneurial traits to survive in this disempowering music (less) industry.

The reason I put 'music' in brackets with '(less) industry' is to imply and designate that the music industry still looks like a music industry, a recognisable arena of professional pop-musicking where music still seems to embody its core aesthetic, but the industry is *not* actually what musicians or the audience of music users have long imagined. To put it simply, the current music industry is less likely to be a site of purely musical activities than it used to be, especially in the Malaysian context. I am aware that the way I term the industry does not seem to ever be used in brackets, as usually appears in music industry

scholarly accounts. Nonetheless, this is the outcome of the research analysis that signals the idiosyncrasy occurred, especially in the Malaysian music industry that is found through the *AF* musicians' experience (I will discuss this further in the next section and provide examples). This industrial environment has in turn created modern musicians who are highly commercialised (and commodified) from every possible angle. Most notably, the music(less) industry is another contributing factor pressuring the musicians to be cultural entrepreneurs, apart from being produced by the *AF* distorted hybrid.

Owing to these scenarios, the emerging role of the musicians as cultural entrepreneurs surfaced dramatically, as they graduated from the televised pop academy. This further illustrates that the individuals have become more persistent in terms of seeking industry staying power by achieving constant market relevance, especially when they have to endure difficulties that are found in the industrial systems. It should be noted that the difficulties that they face are not due to a lack of musicality (i.e. the music companies find that the signed musicians are not talented anymore and thus stop offering them record deals). The difficulties that the musicians face, to an extent, allow them to do whatever it takes (especially in the creative arts) to prolong their fame and stardom, which requires such individuals to have entrepreneurial traits that help them to survive in the current music industry's increasingly disempowering environment.

This was not easy for the musicians as most of them were not prepared to face it as they were still young and obviously were not business-minded individuals. Plus, they had no experience with the nature of working in the music industry, which in this case, might lead them to make ineffective decisions and moves. This can be identified in the experiences (and observations) of Amylea and Bob:

“One of our fellow *AF* stable mates – the artist is quite famous too – confessed to me that if you want to send a song to radio [to be played], the radio – I have no idea which department or personnel demands it! – will send a quotation to you depending on what you need for your song – the cost incurred for the song to be played at either high or low rotations.” (Amylea)

“My duet partner flew back from Jakarta [Indonesia] and touched down at KL (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) in the afternoon, to send his latest album to a radio station. It is very disappointing to know that his album ends up in the bin in the evening.” (Amylea)

“I am not a good-looking singer, I admit that. If I invest a lot of money in music production, it is not a way for you to get industry attention or appreciation. They look forward more to those newcomers who have the ‘complete package’, as they always said [emphasising looks and personality] that this kind of artist deserves to have radio airplay.” (Bob)

It is clear that Amylea and Bob have somewhat made the ‘wrong’ decision and move in their music careers. First, they are too focused on the element of producing high musicality music products, but this goes against the reality of the current music industry’s practices and the music market’s demand. From the remarks above, they indicate that producing music in the music industry is not entirely about aesthetics and quality. Plus, the industry and its associated media (especially radio) has its own practices that the musicians or music companies should follow (although it is unethical to make a payment in order to get radio airplay).

Having said that, and in most cases, the main drivers of musicians’ identity development as (unprepared) cultural

entrepreneurs are the challenges they have faced (especially the unanticipated ones associated with *AF*). The musicians in question entered a cultural more than a purely music market. The common factors that have contributed to the entrepreneurial identity construction are the need to overcome obstacles and manage risks by the necessity of making choices (Banks *et al.*, 2000; Wardani *et al.*, 2017) in surviving in their career (extending their passion in pop-musicking). This means that their transformation into becoming entrepreneurs is not primarily driven by the urge to build a social reputation and career achievement. But it is a way for such individuals to stay relevant and visible in the music industry in particular, with the misaligned momentum they gained from taking part in *AF*. Below are examples of the *AF* musicians (especially the non-winning graduates) who self-enabled themselves as cultural entrepreneurs:

“I find myself the sponsors for our music video, I personally message entertainment programmes on social media, tell them about my latest duet single – I did everything on my own. You can’t just wait for a miracle!” (Amylea)

I just don’t understand the criteria of a song to be played on radio. You know that I never put out a cheapskate production. Some of my songs are with a full orchestra, but still, the radio did not play or support them. It is so frustrating to see this.” (Bob)

“...I had to struggle, do everything on my own, producing my own single using my own budget but they [Maestro] are helping me in promoting the song too even though it was not in a satisfactory outcome.” (Farhan)

From those examples, the musicians are required to exhibit and demonstrate a range of entrepreneurial skills and

intrinsic qualities such as “self-belief, networking skills, bartering and negotiating” (Dumbreck, 2016, p. 38) alongside “adaptation, innovation and knowledge through failure” (Tessler and Flynn, 2016, p. 69). As such, they are likely to possess attributes such as high tolerance of ambiguity, self-reliance, perseverance, autonomy and creativity (Werthes, Mauer and Brettel, 2018) – ones that are essential in building durability as creative individuals – whilst always being passionate about their work and craft as a way for them to achieve self-realisation (Wright, Marsh and McArdle, 2019). All of these elements explain why they have become cultural entrepreneurs when they are routinely involved in activities that could be construed as entrepreneurial, although they may not realise that they have been transformed into entrepreneurs. That recalls the work of Haynes and Marshall (2018), who found that “musicians’ labour as entrepreneurial misrepresents their activities through an overemphasis on the economic dimensions of their work at the expense of the cultural” (p. 459).

In becoming that particular type of cultural entrepreneur, the musicians are likely to be driven by instrumental attributes (namely the urge to preserve their industry position and privilege). Even so, what motivates them is that they continue to see cultural value in musical ability and, because they do, they could be argued to have a ‘moral’ purpose in preserving and foregrounding this. Taken as a whole, the rationale for the individuals embarking on an entrepreneurial trajectory or self-managed career is not to be a best-selling musician or famous artist across creative or entertainment industries. Rather, they just want to make a decent living (Phillips, 2010; Coulson, 2012) with such creative careers. As such, they are likely to continually formulate a practical approach in terms of achieving a balance between artistic, financial and self-development needs (Werthes, Mauer and Brettel, 2018) to ensure that they have a

career experience and trajectory that helps to maintain their prime interest – that is, establishing and sustaining their music career. Most important is the need to avoid failure. Although musicians' cultural and creative identity does have an influence on their entrepreneurial identity (Werthes, Mauer and Brettel, 2018), it is important to reiterate here that the challenge that the *AF* musicians have encountered in building and establishing their cultural and creative identities is what has sparked entrepreneurialism in them.

Under these (for them) new conditions, the musicians are not required to solely exhibit musical talent. Instead, they need to be business-minded creative people in order to diversify their income streams as artists. At the same time, they also have the chance to diversify their creativity as well. This further suggests the importance of the flexibility it takes to be a music entrepreneur, underlining the need for adaptability in utilising whatever avenues and resources are available. Only by these methods can the musicians fulfil their musical ambitions and goals. Take this example from Mawi:

“You have to find a second job in Malaysia as our market is not that big. If you won a [reality] competition, you could not win over the music market constantly and forever. It has its ups and downs. You have to find other career options, to find a side income.”

Participation in *AF* meant that they had already accessed the music economy and achieved a certain industry status. To become entrepreneurial is beneficial in sustaining the musicians' industry visibility, which helps them to capitalise on and extend the adulation that they had already experienced. By recognising, building on and diversifying from a market position, all this allows them to prolong their existing stardom or to achieve crossover stardom whilst diverging into a range of creative arts careers

such as acting, TV hosting and so on. This career-diversifying strategy is highly beneficial for the individual and helps to sustain their industry presence and perhaps career longevity. In an economic dimension, the income streams that they have across the entertainment industry have probably generated a decent living for such individuals which may allow them to self-fund their own music productions.

The adversity that *AF* contestants have commonly experienced has changed their pattern of economic behaviour, 'forcing' them to appreciate that they should position themselves as "subjects of [cultural] value" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 66) in the music or broader entertainment markets. This scenario further emphasises that "the musicians in modernity [that] are, and always were, simultaneously both cultural and economic figures" (Haynes and Marshall, 2018, p. 476).

Nonetheless, there are benefits to experiencing such a 'reluctant' transformation: the musicians who have pursued this route become and feel re-validated and able to achieve and/or extend the commercial success that they aim for. Most notably, they can easily obtain market entry into any creative field if they want to diversify the creative dimension (it is obviously difficult for 'unknown' and amateur musicians to access such opportunities). In this circumstance, the musicians need to undertake multiple tasks and roles in managing and fashioning their creative craft across the industries they are involved in, which is not itself an easy task.

In essence, this transformation does not reflect the true intention and hopes of the amateur pop-musicking that they have practised for. However, the musicians have no other choice than to transform themselves into cultural entrepreneurs in order to hold on to their musical dreams. This process epitomises how hybrid the musician can be in relation to resisting their true

representation, sustaining willpower and preserving their identification as pop musicians. For example, Mawi (who used to be a Malaysian pop phenomenon) is now a radio announcer on Zayyan FM, an actor and film director; Hazama, who had numerous hits, is starring in films and dramas; Bob became a vocal trainer; and Amylea is now a songwriter for big players in the Malaysian music industry. Although they might be diversifying their careers, they still produce new music releases occasionally.

All of this recalls the classical Schumpeterian handling of entrepreneurialism, which argues that:

“The function of entrepreneurs is to reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention or, more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity or producing an old one in a new way, by opening up a new source of supply of materials or a new outlet for products, by reorganizing an industry and so on” (Schumpeter, 2010, p. 117).

In the case of *AF* pop musicians, Schumpeterian entrepreneurialism can be seen at work in the musicians' entrepreneurship which is driven by the adversity they have faced – it did not and does not entirely exemplify the type of entrepreneur that begins from a clean slate, as it were. The musicians are likely to re-strategise their careers to overcome disruptions, meaning that they end up becoming self-centred individuals who are driven only by their musical ambitions and goals while manipulating any possible opportunities in the entertainment industries or popular culture. The individualism and opportunism help them to foster perseverance and determination in building their industry profiles. Further, they are required to be business-minded individuals who are not

dependent on one income stream, namely a music career. However, they have to be as hybrid or innovative as they can be in maintaining a music career. On that note, they create a unique 'force', diverging into cross-industries in creative arts that ultimately turn them into hybridised artists, thereby allowing them to have career longevity that will be exhibited in various efforts and forces made in the cross industries. They have no other choice other than to exploit their *AF* fame or stardom to establish career stability or extend their commercial success.

Individual transformation as a cultural entrepreneur is indeed a necessity in order to survive in an increasingly disempowering industrial landscape. Even so, they are forced to juggle the need to remain as able musicians – they must continue pop musicking even as they are forced to diversify. A career-diversifying strategy is not an easy one to pursue, establish and manage, but learning to combat disappointment and career-disruption can produce creative benefits.

The musicians' pop-musicking experiences that initially aimed for optimal gratification and embodying utopian desire have been tainted by the notion of unprepared cultural entrepreneurship. As discussed, there is a possible solution to this problem, namely by diversifying their career in the wider entertainment industry while utilising and exploiting the industry status that they have achieved through *AF*'s profound pop culture mechanism. It is just a matter of how the musicians react to and manage the disruption that affects their music industry career (this will be further discussed in Chapter 8). The dystopian despair that they experienced is closely linked to market failure; as Jones (2012) puts it, "it is always a manageable outcome of the industrial process which involves human beings making decisions about the form and content of symbolic goods in production" (p. 35). The career-diversifying strategy (as indicated by the examples of *AF* graduates' experiences) has

demonstrated that the adversity (or failure) is a manageable industrial outcome. As such, it is just a matter of reacting to it and coming out with the best possible solution to it (this will be further discussed in Chapter 8).

4. The Malaysian music(less) industry

I have suggested earlier that the reason I argue that Malaysia is experiencing a 'music(less) industry' is to explain that the music industry still looks like the pop-musicking arena of practising professionals where music appears to embody its core aesthetic in relation to musical activities, especially in terms of cultural production. Nevertheless, the current music industry is now less likely to be a site of purely musical activities than it used to be, especially in the Malaysian context, underlining that musicianship does not really matter in this circumstance:

“Today the commercial production of cultural goods has become streamlined, and the impact of popular culture upon individual has concomitantly increased. This process has not been confined to quantity, but has resulted in new qualities” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972, p. 160).

The development of musicians becoming unprepared cultural entrepreneurs whilst they are 'working' in the music(less) industry echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural industry account above. This shift can be predominantly understood as a result of advances in technological facilities and tools, especially in the media convergence era where music and creative conglomerates are likely to be in a race to create novelty as much as they are likely to innovate. Nevertheless, such a technological-driven novelty creation recalls the account of Tschmuck (2006), who asserts that:

“... the occurrence of novelty in the music industry is not limited to the level of technology; instead, novelty manifested itself also in terms of music aesthetics, legal conditions, labor relations, organization and industry structures, job roles, etc. It would thus be insufficient to reduce the changes the music industry has undergone exclusively to technological transformations” (p. 179).

Concerning labour relations, organisation and industry structures, the *AF* hybrid production’s novelty further implies that the television industry has usurped the role of the ‘traditional’ music industry in terms of pop music identity creation in a relatively rapid and exploitative way. Most importantly, in current music industry terms, the quality of this streamlined star machinery and its credibility in producing ‘quality’ stars is always frowned upon by music industry practitioners whilst the ‘instant’ stars have been overproduced by this mechanism, resulting in music and entertainment industries having become saturated with such stars or artists. Such a distorted phenomenon exemplifies that the industrial process has resulted in new qualities, as noted by Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), which in the case of *AF* musicians tend to be unprepared cultural entrepreneurs. For the musicians, this ‘reluctant’ transformation of themselves signifies that they are ‘operationally disempowered’ (Jones, 2002) as music labour under current music industry conditions. This sounds devastating for the musicians as their musicianship is likely to be ‘denied’; instead, they remain musicians who need musical skills to survive in new product configurations.

The music industry produces more failures than successes (Negus, 1997; Frith, 2001, 2018; Jones, 2012). As argued by Frith (1978), the cycle of music commodity production is that “singers provide the art, managers manipulate it into a saleable commodity and record companies give it a vehicle to

ride on” (p. 76). In relation to the nature of the art provided by the singers or musicians, namely in the creation of music commodities that are popular cultural texts, Shuker (2001) regards such texts as

“... dynamic not static, mediated both by patterns of economic and social organisation and the relationship of individuals and social groups to these patterns. This puts politics in a position of central importance, as culture is viewed as a site of conflict and struggle, of negotiations which constantly confirm and redefine the existing conditions of domination and subordination in society” (p. 25).

This further echoes the account of Frith (2001), arguing that pop music ought to be regarded as a type of music harnessed to commercial rather than artistic imperatives that are designed for the maximisation of public visibility and consumption. As such, it can be said that the musicians and their “artistic careers are dependent upon changing fashions, the contingencies of commercial markets and the responses of audiences” (Negus, 1992, p. 147). This explains that the fashioning of musical texts and identities does not necessarily require remarkable musical talent but needs characters that can captivate and capture the market attention. Further, this signifies that anyone can make it in this current industrial landscape, regardless of their musicianship, as the industry seems to be up to foregrounding the creative individuals’ marketability, as reflected in the music industry’s propensity to produce failure ideology (Negus, 1997; Frith, 2001, 2018; Jones, 2012).

Under current music industry conditions, where a music reality show such as *AF* can produce music celebrities or celestoids, precisely, the industry can be considered a ‘musicless’ one. Arguably, music is forced to take a back seat to the other

dimensions of music products in order to ensure continuous 'buy-in' from music users. Further, the visually-driven music commodities that are likely to be the current approach in fashioning texts (as exemplified by *AF* hybrid production) are evidence that musicianship is just peripheral. Such a novelty in cultural production produces music(less) commodities. With the help of music users and the television audiences that are stakeholders in such music(less) regimes and creation, the music(less) commodities produced are likely to be more vulnerable symbolic products.

As scholars of reality television such as Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue, the mass media is a profound site for the dissemination of new discourses of self-governance and self-responsibility, and forms new modes of thinking and comportment through which people are invited and encouraged "through the enactment of participatory games and lifestyle tutorials that guide, test and supposedly enhance subjects' capacity to play an active role in shaping uncertain outcomes..." (p. 472). On that note, it can be seen that the *AF* musicians who are selected for the show and signed by music companies afterwards are not even "a master in some areas and servant in others" (Stahl, 2013, p. 3), suggesting a devastating new cultural production trend that the music industry passively legitimates. Perhaps now the main music industry companies are a powerless elite (Alberoni, 1972) – one that contracts operationally disempowered pop acts (Jones, 2002) who deliver weekly concerts on national television in prime-time slots whilst lacking any career security.

That echoes the argument of Gamson (1994), noting that this type of 'job' involves a great deal of 'celebrity work' as artists and their music are associated with and produced for cross-industries, for instance, in the marketing of non-music products such as clothing, cosmetics, films and television programmes,

while the musicians are also contractually bound to cover a range of non-recording or musical activities (Meier, 2011; Stahl and Meier, 2012). This includes 360-degree deals which has become standardised across the industry, witnessing music labels acquire the legal rights to exploit a whole new range of revenue opportunities deriving from the artist such as film or television acting, product ambassador and so on (see Karubian, 2008; Pierson, 2009; Marshall, 2013; Siegel, 2015 for 360-degree deals accounts). On the surface, these deals may imply that signed musicians have the opportunity to diversify their income streams, which looks fair to them. Nonetheless, the consequences of 360 deals have indirectly turned the musicians into celebrity, diverting their primary aim of being pure musicians, as they require to undertake the celebrity work as I mentioned earlier. In all of this, *AF* graduates who entered the programme seeking *music* career advancement find themselves under pressure to deliver and exist as multidimensional identities. This exposure to high levels of risk when navigating their careers ultimately impacts the musicians' self-conception as individuals to be valued for their musical ability and further suggests that the music industry is a musicless one.

To illustrate the hypothetical shift from music to musicless, it is useful to examine how the 'traditional' music industry has been reinvented to become a musicless one. In doing so, this will be portrayed through the current hybrid-integrated music industry that seems to embody the reality that musicianship is no longer as crucial as before – the industry that is not necessarily for talented musical individuals. To establish such a point, it is useful to refer to the career of the Malaysian songbird, a Muslim pop diva who is perceived as one of the 'pious superstars' of Asia, called Siti Nurhaliza (Barendregt, 2017).

Starting her career in 1996 after winning a television singing contest in 1995 called *Bintang HMI*, this amazingly talented singer has obtained numerous musical awards and recognition, quality and popular wise, locally and internationally. Most notably, as a musician who was 'born' in the music industry during the recording industry era (where album-selling is the key measurement of artist achievement), she has accomplished an unprecedented achievement as her album-selling contributed to 10 percent of Malaysia's total album sales in 2000 (Kadir, 2000). In fact, she is still relevant in the music market nowadays, with 8.5 million followers on Instagram, which is a remarkable achievement for a 90s musician to have such a high number of followers. To an extent, it can be said that Siti has career longevity in Malaysia. As a public figure, she is one of a kind who:

“...remains, generally, true to herself, often conservatively dressed and known for her polite, small-town behavior (down-to-earth individual or superstar). In a world of kitsch and glamour, this may not seem the best asset, and Siti initially had many difficulties positioning herself within and through the local media; but it is exactly this modest behavior that became her trademark” (Barendregt, 2017, p. 214).

From my experience in the industry, I have shared the same stage as her at various events, and can confirm that this 1990s signing sensation is, undoubtedly, truly a gifted individual musically – no one can deny she is 'Asia's Celine Dion' (universalmusic.com.my, 2021). Most importantly, she knows how to position herself in the music and entertainment businesses, which informs her own strong principles that she holds on to. For instance, it is impossible to find photos/posters/images of her making physical contact with the opposite gender such as hugging or holding hands. Additionally,

I have never seen any publicly circulated materials that exhibit her in a vulgar manner or which contradict Malaysian Muslim culture and norms, meaning that she never totally obeyed the predominant pop music or culture standards but persistently maintained her true modest identification as a musician in Malaysia. She is the profound example of negotiation of her symbolic text, specifically in relation to the label that she signed to, Suria Records, while she has persistently protected her stand on how she should be marketed as a symbolic text.

Apart from Siti Nurhaliza, who happened to be a superstar in the Malaysian music scene in the recording industry era, it is noteworthy too to look at musicians in the same era who failed to have industry career sustainability. As such, my older brother, who was in an alternative pop band called All-X's in the 1990s, offers another opportunity to understand the 'traditional' music industry and career trajectories when the success of a music career was still being measured through album sales. His band's album sold just about 15,000 units; even though I have difficulty accessing the exact figures, this level of album sales would have been considered rather poor for a newly signed artist at that time, especially for BMG Malaysia musicians. This was their only release, as the album failed to recoup the invested amount. Even so, there is much to learn from their experience. Apart from being 'permitted' by the company to write and produce music for his own band, my brother also had the privilege of writing and producing on Noryn Aziz's album (an award-winning jazz singer) and also worked as a session musician for other BMG Malaysia artists' projects.

In supporting and encouraging my brother in these ways, the record company exemplified their pre-convergence power and focus – they helped to develop and nurture 'raw' talent. In allowing musicians the opportunity to develop, we are back in Stahl's territory, with musicians as a master in some aspects but

a servant in others, namely “as an agent of self-expression under contract to a major entertainment conglomerate or a subsidiary company” (2013, p. 3). Under these conditions, my brother with his band was not entirely powerless elite (Alberoni, 1972) in the music industry. The record companies’ approach towards the musicians is literally fair and seems to help aspiring musicians as the companies make an effort to offer add-on value by providing commercial and economic opportunities before releasing them into the music market. This means the musicians were given a chance during that era to be groomed and developed according to their talent and any related creative aspects that they mastered, which created a win-win situation for both the musicians and the record companies.

Hence, based on the individual stories of those musicians ‘born’ into this era in the Malaysian music industry, it appears that the musicians’ direction, ambitions and goals have been treated seriously by the record companies they signed with, which was then manifested through the collective musician/corporation effort. The heart of this collective effort was not just respecting the given musicians’ ideology in fashioning their own symbolic text. Rather, it appeared to create a harmonious relationship between those parties in relation to pop-musicking (for the musicians) as well as a commercial but less exploitative music commodity (for both parties).

In contrast, in the media convergence era which the *AF* hybrid production model came to dominate, it is evident that, in the first instance, the *AF* musicians appreciated the opportunity that they obtained through the show, as congruent with their amateur pop-musicking. The musicians were drawn to elements such as *AF*’s well-earned reputation as a national cultural phenomenon; performing arts training courtesy of influential industry figures; pop music market entry that ultimately helped them to reach their ‘dreamland’; and a well-rounded training

approach capable of unleashing their creative potential to become a versatile artist. The association with this 'dream machine' embodied core traditional music business attributes while providing industry training and improving the musicians' career prospects, which is key to developing the tenacity required in professional pop musicking. To an extent, the musicians expressed that *AF* has connected them to the music industry. Below are the examples:

"Three months ago, you are just a normal person, no one was really bothered about you. Three months after that, you are totally an artist, a star – you are so famous instantly!" (Amylea)

"[My life is] totally changed! 360 degrees! But I never think that I am a [famous] artist or experience culture shock given such an experience. I treat this [life-changing experience] as my work, my career. I never drown in fame as I believe this is my work." (Bob)

Such positive experiences of the musicians indicate that amateur pop-musicking has been extended to the professional level by integrating existing musical attributes and professionalism that help in developing them. These specific attributes indicate that *AF* has its useful aspects that at least gave some substance to its over-romanticised life-transformation ethos.

Nonetheless, the 'weaknesses' that emerged in the key findings magnify *AF*'s harmful dimension as a hybrid pop academy with musically off-course star machinery. Although the respondents were associated with a credible industry springboard, the simplification of the star-making process and its compressed televised reality format training schedule seemed to disadvantage them, which in important and decisive ways impacted the graduates' career prospects. The previous chapter,

Creative Misalignment, highlighted how the musicians' expectations have not aligned with how *AF* was created, which is centred on the syncretism of music and television aesthetics.

This recalls the work of Kjus (2017), who has analysed the impact of reality TV singing contests which trigger struggles over the content and presentation of musical performances that, over time, undermine the credibility of the music and television industries' joint ventures. Such hidden distortions are also evident in Couldry's (2008) depiction of reality television as a secret theatre of neoliberalism whereby it requires its participants and their labour to be relentlessly loyal as well as submissive to public surveillance and external direction, even within the deepest recesses of life privacy. Most notably, reality television, especially *AF*, normalises the fragility and impermanence of the opportunities it provides, in relation to its reality participants, as it is typically produced in a fast-paced production and running order.

In regard to professional pop-musicking in the music industry, the 'Opportunities' key findings in the SWOT quadrant indicated that their post-*AF* experience – namely their music industry careers – demonstrated the notion of 'self' which allowed the musicians to become self-enabling and self-empowering in terms of establishing their own pop music identities and to build profiles; such individuals are less likely/unlikely to be dependent on music corporations' help and support. This is probably because they have been signed for a short contractual term to the music corporations or, in most cases, that they felt that they were not being treated fairly by the labels. Below are the examples:

"I had the chance to do an album with my management [Maestro]. But I was asked to do it by myself and just billed the costs to them – the management was so busy with the

AF winner at that time and they were kind of had no time for me. This is where I produced an album with my own taste! – I had to work with so many great musicians and composers – the people that I look forward to working with.” (Amylea)

“I love learning. So, I never stop learning from that point [ever since *AF* participation]. I expanded my circle of friends with great musicians and got in touch with the *AF* teachers as it was hard for me to get free formal education and knowledge. That’s my learning process, being around with talented and good people. As a result, I earned other things too which is opportunity, jobs offered by these people.” (Bob)

“I planned my career journey myself with the help of my dad as he had experienced in the music industry as a musician and businessman. He used to own a record label during the ’90s.” (Farhan)

“You need to work out the formula after the *AF* [experience] to keep progressing. Self-discipline is key! – That defines your status and attracts people to look forward to you. Also, the character [as a singer] too! – that’s what makes you attractive!” (Hazama)

“*AF* is just a platform. The *AF* stars can’t rely on this platform only [in the post *AF*]. The effort in developing talent must be ongoing. It is all up to us to colour our own journey in the industry.” (Mawi)

In essence, the notion of self signifies the *AF* hybrid production’s effects and the precarious outcomes experienced by the musicians when they attempt to access the music economy as professionals in a musicless industry. The ‘instant noodles’ label such artists received had the effect of turning them into ‘unprepared’ cultural entrepreneurs, as discussed earlier.

Thus, the musicians tend to be exposed to a truly disruptive environment offered by the industrial systems, including both the *AF* hybrid production system and the music industry. In fact, the disruptive elements (or 'Threats' as in the key findings) are the dominant theme found in the Malaysian context in this research exploration. This obviously suggests the music industry's strong tendency to produce failure, a characteristic of this kind of cultural industrial production system.

In his account of the recording industry, Frith (2001) argued that a record company's core activity is star-making rather than record-selling, thereby the latter is dependent on the former. Frith further emphasised that, "the music an act or artist makes has to fit a star image and personality; these days as much money is spent on image making as on music-making and no one gets signed to a record label without a discussion of how they will be marketed" (p.35). In Frith's account, there are two key elements of the recording industry's star regimentation that seem to amount to a holistic approach that helps develop the talent of creative individuals and unleash their truest potential, which is useful in the production of symbolic text. In other words, the recording industry's star formulation seems to be a well-balanced mechanism, in line with the symbolic text usually fashioned for its commercial value while having an add-on value for musicians that is beneficial in terms of progressing their talent (as also indicated in the Malaysian non-music reality musicians' cases as discussed earlier).

These typical scenarios in the recording industry era were revised extensively by the *AF* hybrid system. Frith's account is sufficient to illustrate the interrelation between musicians and record companies in producing symbolic texts aimed at producing pop music stars. A similar holistic approach is exhibited in the Malaysian 'traditional' music industry. First, it is clear that the recording industry produces music stars, and the

music star phenomenon is the main focus of activity shared by the musicians and the record companies. In this, there is no place for a third party outside the record companies in fashioning the stars' text – it is a process generated between the music corporation's departments. Most importantly, such an industrial and internal process means that business is conducted in a discreet manner – the musicians' flaws or anything that the public might find uninteresting is not accessible to them. What the public received was the 'end product', after all the industrialisation had happened behind closed doors. Second, the process of fashioning the stars' text is a negotiation between just these two parties (the musicians and the record companies). In most cases, such a collective process allows musicians to express ideas in the star text fashioning; it is collaborative, not wholly the record companies' call. In this negotiation, the inclusion of the musicians' ideas helps produce a well-balanced outcome and, most notably, is unlikely to exploit the musicians, or at least be less exploitative of them.

What I am arguing here is that the musicless industry seems to be a passive industry – less receptive to or concerned about the musicians' musicianship whilst extensively promoting and producing less-musical musicians or music commodities that will be commercialised in the musicless or entertainment industries in a media convergence culture. To an extent, this notion of the musicless industry has demonstrated that the industry dominates with popular acts only – a site for individuals for whom musicality is not their first or main attribute. In this respect, the truly genuine musicians involved with this musicless industry are the main victims of the current music industry that is a hybrid-orientated one.

Musicians who formed themselves in the period when the music industry was dominated by major record companies worked to a knowledge that was flawed – they expected that

musicality was the only active principle in career advancement. What counted, though, was sales. In the hybrid model that has come to challenge and replace the autonomy of the major record companies, *AF* played on the idea that musicality was what the music industry valued (so the television industry 'stood in' for the major record companies in this instance). This allowed it to further mislead its hopefuls because musicality, in the hybrid model, takes a 'back seat' to emotional exposure. First, on this basis, it can be argued that the *AF* musicians' musical ambitions and goals have been driven by ingesting a version of the pre-existing, non-music reality television musicians and their careers – a conception that is obviously irrelevant to this current hybrid-integrated music industry. Such ill-informed understanding ultimately shaped the *AF* musicians' general expectations, ones that proved wholly inappropriate for a media convergence era. *AF* appeared to be both a form of help as well as harm, as reflected in the musicians' experiences within the hybrid system. It gave them exposure to the music market, but on the terms of a television programme not the music industry. This, in turn, converted a hoped-for 'Utopia' into a dystopian experience of precarity, one that could only be combatted, by some *AF* graduates, through an adaptation to cultural entrepreneurialism.

5. Conclusion

Changing industry and organizational structures may also nurture excess labour supply. (Tschmuck, 2017, p. 164)

It is evident that the *AF* musicians have been overproduced by the *AF* hybrid production. This further indicates that the *AF* musicians have come to epitomise the shift in the industrial systems that, to an extent, pursues novelty (and excitement in general) in both cultural production and consumption. Most notably, novelty has, in turn, disempowered musicians in the

saturated music industry. The music industry has been overtaken by the television industry and has become a music(less) industry as a result – one that foregrounds the ‘story’ of musicians over their musical expression.

In all of this, the pre-convergent music industry was not a reliable guide for aspirant musicians. The heuristics of music-industrial production (see Flynn, 2019) provided ‘advice’ that tended to be glib and misleading. Essentially, such young musicians have been guided by the ‘parables’ and ‘proverbs’ rehearsed by more successful musicians and music industry personnel, namely that careers are made by having ‘great songs’ and by ‘being in the right place at the right time’. Such phrases mean everything and nothing. Overall, whether under the old or new system, advice to new entrants on career preparation is severely wanting; it is not just *AF* that misdirects. Musicians who concentrate solely on their musicality face a choice between becoming celestoids, or unprepared cultural entrepreneurs who are prone to be either dispensable stars or disposable creative labourers. Regardless of how talented or less talented they are, whoever can develop durability and competitive staying power deserves to be in this fluid yet increasingly disempowering music industry.

The distorted phenomenon that the *AF* musicians have encountered signals a later phenomenon called ‘creative destruction’. The destruction that the industrial systems offers hinders the musicians from achieving self-realisation in pop musicking, which ultimately disrupts their musical ambition in the music industry and, therefore, does perfect harm to their utopian desire. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

**Chapter 7:
Creative destruction**

1. Introduction

From the analysis in Chapter 5, it is evident that the notion of creative misalignment that is found within the *AF* hybrid system is a distorting phenomenon. For the *AF* musicians who aligned themselves precisely as musicians, this happened *not* to be the main quality that the *AF* hybrid expected from its participants. In this distorted phenomenon, the hybrid has created a paradox that is exhibited through its televised pop music academy that purported to be a talent grooming and nurturing mechanism. In the end, this alluring and promising 'dream machine' failed to deliver on its promise.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the careers of *AF* entrants were misdirected. The *AF* musicians produced by the hybrid were eventually transformed into 'unprepared' cultural entrepreneurs in the music(less) industry. This mode of cultural production misdirected their musicians' careers and thereby contradicted their primary interest, namely to have careers in the music industry, demonstrating that their industrial presence and experiences are largely ephemeral.

Both creative misalignment and misdirection are alarming red flags, signalling a major distortion of the industrial systems. In turn, these negative states provoked an outcome that might best be described as 'creative destruction'. This chapter will illustrate how creative destruction is an implicit and highly complex phenomenon that can be identified within the experiences of the *AF* musicians. Such a phenomenon problematises the ongoing career fortunes of the musicians concerned.

2. Creative destruction: from a musicians' music economy perspective

The rationale for choosing the term 'creative destruction' as a major distortion of the industrial systems predominantly derives from previous terms, creative misalignment and career

misdirection, the adversity that the musicians faced that literally affected them negatively.

It should be noted here that creative destruction is not a new term in scholarly discourse. The term appears in a range of multidisciplinary contexts and refers to the recognition of the role and forms of revolution evident within a wide range of discourses associated with analyses of technology, economics, sociology, politics and culture. In relation to this chapter's discussion, there are several existing works on creative destruction that are useful to develop its argument (Schumpeter, 2017; Cowen, 2002; Harvey, 2006; Rogers and Preston, 2016).

This chapter's deployment of creative destruction is mainly inspired by the Schumpeterian use that originated from within the context of the study of economics. Schumpeter emphasises creative destruction as "the process of industrial mutation... that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (2017, p. 73). Cowen (2002) views creative destruction in relation to culture and globalisation by demonstrating that culture is inherently dynamic and the same time, typically hybrid, witnessing cultural genres and media in a state of constant alteration, with some forms growing and mutating whilst others fall into marginality and even oblivion. Harvey (2006), on the other hand, argues that creative destruction is all about neoliberalism. He further asserts that "neoliberalization has swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment, entailing much destruction, not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers, but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life, attachments to the land, habits of the heart, ways of thought, and the like" (p. 145).

In a music industry account, Rogers and Preston (2016) addressed creative destruction “in terms of a crisis of digitalization, where new media innovations are widely perceived to be radically undermining the fundamental economics of the music business and collapsing the established order” (p. 53). In that account, the scholars found “the kind of crisis ‘moment’ that has commonly been (and indeed still is) adjudged to afflict the music industry, diminish its economic significance and fundamentally undermine those corporate power structures that evolved across the twentieth century” (p.53).

It can be seen that most of the themes that emerged in those creative destruction accounts are generally about revolution or major innovation and change that can cause upheaval in the pursuit of new goals. The notion of creative destruction speaks to the fact that change can have long-term effects that can be positive or negative depending on the relative positions of constituencies impacted by the change. In this case, it is a particular category of musicians who are impacted by the introduction of *AF*. On this basis, the creative destruction that I propose can be seen in the form of destruction at the microeconomic level. In taking this course, I acknowledge that the concept derives from studies at the macroeconomic level, but my case is that the process elucidates the *AF* musicians’ case in an effective way.

The *AF* hybrid production and the music industry have combined to change-the musicians’ music economy. This further emphasises *AF* as a profound innovation within and across the music and television industries. This is an innovation that takes power from the music industry and transfers it to the television industry, with profound and immediately negative repercussions for aspirant musicians. In other words, the notion of innovation here seems to be a double-edged sword: musicians remain at the centre of production, but the innovation runs counter to their

best interests. In this context, I will further analyse specifically how the industrial systems are destructive from the perspective of aspirant musicians formed in a time of major record company dominance of the music industry. Secondly, I will introduce the notion of creative injustice – a component of creative destruction that is embedded implicitly within the musicians’ experiences within the industrial systems. Lastly, I will further reflect on the creative misalignment proposed by the televised pop star machinery that somehow has been legitimised and approved by the music industry.

Such an invention in the music and televisual landscape further exemplifies the major distortion – one is truly destructive and offers a high degree of dystopia to the musicians. At its worst, this innovative recombination of television and music industry stifles the musicality that musicians invest in. At the same time, it is a winning formula for attracting and retaining viewers when the internet draws their attention away from TV screens. Creative destruction is the outcome of a qualitative leap in TV programming.

3. From invention to innovation: the distortion of the industrial systems

Both industrial systems, namely the *AF* hybrid production and the music industry, are implicated in an episode of creative destruction that impacted musicians and their career patterns and choices. Even so, neither system appears in any outward sense ‘harmful’ to aspirant musicians. Instead, they both appear to be musician-friendly, both offering to make dreams come true. Ultimately, this identical game plan of exploitation embodied by both the *AF* hybrid and the music industry has potentially detrimental effects on the musicians’ experience, as they can

easily become transformed into short-lived and dispensable creative labourers who can be easily replaced over time.

I analyse the hybrid and the music industry as a single major phenomenon of creative destruction not just because both industrial systems have produced an implicit creative destruction phenomenon or clearly distorted outcome for musicians. As music reality television formats have become legitimised and 'accredited' by the music industry, this new form of scouting musical talent has mushroomed over time.

In the Malaysian music industry, there are various hybrids apart from *AF* such as *Malaysian Idol* (2004-2005), *One in a Million* (2006-2008), *Mentor* (2005-2019), *Kilauan Emas* (2011-2015), *Gegar Vaganza* (2014-2021), *Big Stage* (2018-2021), *All Together Now Malaysia* (2021), and many more. With a range of different types of formats and creative contents, this development indicates that the birth of such pop hybrid brands in Malaysia is indeed celebrating the ideology of democratisation whilst inviting the public to watch and 'participate' in those televised democratic pop systems in co-creating or co-fashioning the next singing sensations. Further, In these hybrids, it can be seen that they are likely to be the most preferable way for music or talent management companies to sign new musicians or talents – this is due to the fact that the participants are the new 'hybrid media stars' (Holmes, 2004), namely the popular acts that have gained the attention of television and music audiences to the advantage of the creative enterprises seeking to market them to music and television audiences.

The proliferation of the music reality television hybrid, its lure and promise of career advancement, cannot help but attract hopeful musicians. In the case of *AF*, the hybrid provided a new site for such aspiring individuals to express their talent and creativity and seek recognition, and so aids them in materialising

their musical dreams. Therefore, the introduction of the hybrid into the entertainment industry, in general, may seem an entirely positive development to all parties involved in the hybrid's ecosystem. In that sense, the new landscape of production has the hybrid appear as an 'employer' with the musicians as 'employees' and the audience as the 'consumer' of the hybrid product. This configuration resonates with the work of Hill (2015) in examining reality television as a cultural phenomenon, highlighting those three stakeholders that completed the music reality television ecosystem, noting that "reality TV producers, participants and audiences co-create cultural experiences, events and trends" (p.7). However, as I have found out through the study of *AF* musicians, the co-cultural phenomenon that *AF* generated with the help of the three stakeholders produces a distorted phenomenon we can identify as an instance of 'creative destruction'. This phenomenon seems to be an implicit catastrophe that awaits the musicians who became caught up in *AF*.

As argued by Schumpeter (2010), creative destruction is an essential feature of capitalism and concerns "the process of industrial mutation...that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (p. 73). In some ways, this resonates with the phenomenon of 'constant alteration' as proposed by Cowen (2002) – one capable of gradually revamping the industrial landscape in general. However, such constant disruption further results in a 'crisis', as Rogers and Preston (2016) put it, meaning that industrial turmoil comes with the territory of innovation.

In relation to the industrial systems that I am exploring in this chapter, please note that I am not entirely concerned to address the notions of capitalism (Schumpeter, 2017) or neoliberalism (Harvey, 2006) that are seen as fundamental to

this creative destruction theorisation. Rather, I am more interested in addressing the revolution or the alteration of the industrial systems as in the changing industrial processes that ultimately mutate or redefine the industrial norms and common practices within any given industrial system. In other words, I aim to identify how the processes of innovation represented by *AF* disrupted the musicians' pop-musicking. To do this, we need to establish and navigate the source of the destruction.

“Economic leadership in particular must hence be distinguished from ‘invention’. As long as they are not carried into practice, inventions are economically irrelevant. And to carry any improvement into effect is a task entirely different from the inventing of it, and a task, moreover, requiring entirely different kinds of aptitudes. Although entrepreneurs of course *may* be inventors just as they may be capitalists, they are inventors not by nature of their function but by coincidence and vice versa. Besides, the innovations which it is the function of entrepreneurs to carry out need not necessarily be any inventions at all.” (Schumpeter, 2017, pp. 88-89).

Schumpeter (2017) has made a clear distinction between an innovative entrepreneur and an inventor. This further explains that “an invention is a novelty that has never existed in the language of economic theories of innovation”, as argued by Tschmuck (2006, p. 179). The scholar further adds that “an invention is not automatically an innovation. Innovation has occurred only after the invention is successfully put on the market. Consequently, we must not equate the inventor with the innovator” (p. 179). In the case of the *AF* hybrid production and its musicians, it can be said that *AF* as a new invention is not fully aware of its impact on the key workers who run the motor for the invention. The invention formulated, namely the *AF* hybrid production, is predominantly based on the interests of the

inventor or creator, which is the television station, which happened to fulfil the economic imperatives and the excitement of the inventor in producing novelty in the Malaysian entertainment sphere. The novelty creation may sound interesting in the inventor's terms, proposing that the invention created be something exciting to the target market and its audience and thus act as the best possible instrument for the inventor's market domination. As such, *AF* as an invention in the Malaysian entertainment industry is the product of the Measat Broadcast Network System (MBNS) that undeniably possesses current and high technology facilities and resources – and is the leader in the Malaysian broadcasting industry.

“MBNS had invested RM 1 billion (AUD333 million) to build fully integrated broadcast and production facilities in Kuala Lumpur to support the largest multi-channel television business in Asia, outside Japan (Astro, “Financial Annual Report 2004”). The MBNS's All Asia Broadcast Centre (ABC) is the nerve centre of MBNS operations for the broadcasting of programs within Malaysia and other markets within its satellite footprint. The all-digital facility accommodates the latest in broadcasting equipment and systems, providing the company with a technological edge in its commitment to offer the highest quality broadcasting services. The complex is strategically located in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), on a 29-acre site at Technology Park Malaysia, Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur. With a total floor area of 350,000 square feet, the ABC is reputedly one of the world's largest and most advanced all-digital broadcast and production complexes.” (Maliki, 2008, p. 37).

Based on the sophisticated and current technological facilities and resources that the MBNS, the inventor of *AF*, possessed, together with the fund invested particularly on *AF*

production that is deemed to be MBNS's most expensive local production (Maliki, 2008, p. 38 cited in the Astro Annual Report, 2005), it sounds like the inventor is capable of producing an electrifying invention and outcome that is eminently capable of meeting its expectations, particularly in terms of its financial investment. This means that this investment aims to produce an invention that is deemed profitable to the company. This investment can be considered as a success in MBNS's efforts to increase its market share of the Malay audience with the help of *AF*, witnessing that the Malay audience is the fastest-growing segment of MBNS's audience profile (Maliki, 2008). Additionally, "it was only after MBNS's successful airing of *AF* that other local television stations started producing their own reality TV programs like *Audition* (NTV7), *Mentor* (TV3) and *My Star LG* (TV9)" (Maliki, 2008, p. 122).

Thus, the presence of *AF* in the entertainment and broadcasting spheres has led to the development of new inventions of the same reality television genre from MBNS's 'rivals'. In a way, this signals that *AF* is an effective invention that is the leading music television show in Malaysian history and is indeed a triumph for MBNS as the show and brand creator. Nevertheless, the novelty of this invention comes with a lack of innovation that can be identified in its predominant outcome, namely the oversupply of 'instant noodles artists' in the music or entertainment industries. Despite manifesting its efficiency in the bigger picture, *AF* as an invention of the television station has another relatively problematic story, particularly in music industry terms.

In the field of popular music, Toynebee (2000) explores the concept of innovation by identifying innovation that derives from problems in the music industry. He asserts that "the problems with [the] concept of innovation can be explained as a function of the market environment – turbulence makes for a fast turnover

of records and artists within the system” (p. 13). This underscores Tschmuck’s observation that “an innovation has occurred only after the invention is successfully put on the market” (2006, p. 179). In the case of *AF*, this means that *AF* as an invention could not anticipate its impact on musicians’ careers, especially following their participation in the programme.

It is inescapable that *AF* produces careers that are different from the ones they imply. This distorted cultural production has further suggested that redress is made to create a fairer deal for the *AF* graduates. Seen in these terms, talent management, record deals and so on might be perceived as innovations of the *AF* hybrid invention specifically designed to address the musicians’ post-*AF* involvement. This could act as a means of a post-support system for the individuals to adapt to different industrial systems and environments, especially in the music industry. However, the precariousness of the music industry system and environment is not just a myth but a reality; the music industry as a ‘working’ site is a challenging place for musicians to survive, as indicated by the key findings, ‘Threats’. This meant that the innovations that *AF* has provided are inadequate from the perspectives of the *AF* musicians. This further implies that the musicians have reluctantly transformed themselves into unprepared cultural entrepreneurs or, to use Schumpeter’s term, ‘innovative entrepreneurs’ (Schumpeter, 2017) as a way to react to the flaws of the invention and also the inadequacy of the existing *AF* innovations provided for its graduates.

In this way, it can be said that the *AF* musicians inadvertently became the key element of creative destruction embedded within the industrial systems as they are the elements whose positions needed to be transformed to allow the industrial system of music to be transformed through *AF* as an invention.

In all this (in fact as its condition) the musicians were unaware that they had been manipulated by the industrial systems because their attention was concentrated on the transformations their own pop-musicking encouraged them to seek.

In addition, the musicians are enmeshed within the rapid cycle of being monetised endlessly by the *AF* hybrid. This hybrid needs such individuals to effectively run the hybrid's operation, requiring them to play their part and accept their place in the instant star mechanism. As a result, the musicians become disposable and/or pseudo-stars – the type of stars who are “mediocre, hurried and constrained cultural products” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011, p. 190) or more precisely celestoids. This is due to the fact that the musicians are produced in such an instant mechanism that is not really concerned with their fate post-*AF*. Where the graduating musicians are concerned, though, they become released into the very saturated music industry, resulting in their experiencing a very tough competition for a stable spot in the industry. Moreover, the competition is getting more challenging and intense as the musicians have to compete with other music reality television ‘graduates’ and also non-music reality television musicians – the existing professional musicians who have been able to create a good reputation outside of TV talent shows through their own pop-musicking experiences in the music industry. If we envisage this competition taking place in an already precarious industry, the *AF* musicians’ industrial experiences are likely to contribute to escalating the creative destruction phenomenon.

Music reality television musicians have no apparent security as they are constantly being ‘tested’ to stay in the running in a vicious televised star production and system that, to an extent, has little time or inclination for valuing and appreciating the ‘real’ talent of the reality television participants. This fundamental inattention to musical talent *per se* is also

apparent in (and therefore compounded by) the music industry itself – an industry that is often seen as a precarious working environment, as observed by Attali (1985), proposing that the industry is a “battlefield” and a “struggle” (p. 20). In this way, the seismic effects of creative destruction continue to reverberate after *AF* graduation.

Hence, both industrial sites, namely the *AF* hybrid and the music industry, are likely to be a theatre of war for the musicians when they are implicitly ‘destroying’ themselves through competition among each other; competition for market attention and recognition of their talent and presence in the music industry. This aspect of the phenomenon ultimately implies that the individuals are the key essence of creative destruction. All of this combines into a high degree of adversity that can easily lead them to failure as they have been released onto an extensive battlefield in the saturated music industry. To put it simply, both industrial sites run with the implicit creative destruction ideology that is strongly associated with the capitalist ideology. As a result of this creative destruction, the musicians seem to be the innocent ‘victims’ in this sophisticated invention that is constantly and endlessly ‘abusing’ their creative talents, whilst such music labourers are typically prone to be the main target of control of the entertainment conglomerates in which the ‘bottom line’ of companies trumps the mental health and well-being of musicians. It is evident that most *AF* musicians have expressed that they have been dealing with great pressure with the student role and obligations in the music reality television show. In that respect, the following are examples of how musicians’ mental health and well-being have been affected as a result of their participation in the *AF* hybrid system:

“The bad thing is I had depression when I was 18 years old because of this life-changing experience! The ‘new world’ that I entered was just ‘weird’ for me and I was so

naïve...you have to know that we are at a very young age while in the competition – sometimes it kills our self-esteem.” (Amylea)

“We are disconnected from the outside world [for the sake of serving the reality format]. We just do our routines and that is it.” (Bob)

“It was stressful to do other things other than singing and as you know we kind of lost contact with our family, there is no communication with the outside world, just a focus on the new world that *AF* offered” (Farhan)

“It was kind of a pressure for me to be in that situation when everything is recorded [in the academy].” (Mawi)

On the other hand, below are the examples of how the music industry affected the well-being of Amylea and Mawi:

“At some point, I was too stressed to cope with this new world. It was just three months to totally change your entire life.” (Amylea)

“Initially, I was stressed to accept and adapt to this ‘new world’. It took about six months to adapt to that...they [the management] are aware that I was stressed with the packed schedule and this life-changing career and personal life, but they never [intervened].” (Mawi)

Therefore, it is fair to say that creative destruction has a psychological impact on the musicians.

4. Implicit creative injustice relating to the musicians: the minor destruction

Both the industrial sites have their own ways of concealing their flaws, namely their impractical and/or self-centred nature that should cause musicians to stay away from them. As established in the previous chapters, the *AF* hybrid may look innocuous to the musicians in the first place whilst it entices the hopefuls with its promise of life-transformation ‘magic’. Further, it is also difficult for the *AF* musicians to spot the harmful nature of the music industry generally as the industry is well used to focusing specifically on utopia, strongly romanticising its contribution to fame and stardom, and always highlighting success rather than failure to the public. The musical hopefuls come to all this with nothing to work with or on but the narratives made available to them. But the reality can be harsh indeed. I appreciate that it would be almost impossible to expect that all musicians should end up being ‘celebrated’ without testing their resilience at all (all my respondents had experienced lows as well as highs), but what can be learnt from this scenario, and is important to stress here, is that the *AF* musicians, especially, have not been treated seriously or with due consideration in either industry. To establish such a course, it is important to reiterate the experiences of the *AF* musicians that were found in the interviews:

“I think the ones with popularity will be much appreciated regardless of their talent.” (Amylea)

“I am not a good-looking singer, I admit that. If I invest a lot of money in music production, it is not a way for you to get industry attention or appreciation. They look forward more to those newcomers who have the ‘complete package’, as they always said [emphasising looks and personality] that this kind of artist deserves to have radio airplay.” (Bob)

“It [AF] is just an entertainment show. Talent is number two.” (Hazama)

“But it is hard to sustain oneself in the industry, that’s the main challenge!” (Mawi)

“But, I know that they are trying so hard to sustain themselves in the industry. It is a matter of luck, I guess.” (Farhan)

From these statements, it can be said that the industry greatly appreciates popular individuals. This means that the individuals who are famous are likely to be receiving appreciation from the industry, and talent is not what the industry focuses on in allowing them access to the music economy and industry. That is the true challenge that the musicians have to face as they obviously endure hardship in creating career sustainability. Further, there is no effective formula that can guarantee that the musicians can go through these challenging industrial systems effortlessly.

The experiences of the musicians within the industrial systems (in both *AF* and music industry systems) are truly challenging as both systems are clearly formulated to be exploitative (although neither present themselves in this way). As mentioned elsewhere in the previous chapter, a hybrid media text such as music reality television is a killer application, as Jenkins (2006) primarily noted. As such, it can also be considered a killer application that is capable of ‘killing’ the passion of music labourers, negatively impacting them and reducing their chances of career sustainability. Amylea, the most ‘vocal’ musician that I interviewed, raised her concern about this, echoing that *AF* was a killer of ambitious and passionate music labourers, whereas the music industry seemed to act similarly. Her remarks are as follows:

“But I do think that it can kill your talent if you are unable to deliver a good performance [on *AF*]. We have to embrace the talent and not burden people [the contestants] with something that they are unable to cope with.”

“Double standards!...I just don't understand why some industry people treated me differently when I was not popular anymore! Once you praised me before – you said that I was talented. When I was not popular anymore, I received cold treatment from several people from the industry – I feel like my talent is gone!”

This recognition recalls the ideology of creative injustice as proposed by Banks (2017), who argues that “the cultural industries are far from ideal in the ways they allocate and dispense their opportunities and rewards, and that creative *injustice* – evidenced in patterns of discrimination, misrecognition and inequality – is now an endemic feature” (p.145). This situation resonates in the argument of Hesmondhalgh (2013) proposing that:

“the way the cultural industries organise and circulate symbolic creativity reflects the extreme inequalities and injustices (along class, gender, ethnic and other lines) apparent in contemporary capitalist societies. There are vast inequalities in access to the cultural industries – and these persist in the era of digitalisation. Those who succeed in having their work circulated widely [in public] are often treated shabbily and many people who want to create texts struggle to earn a living” (pp. 7-8).

In the case of *AF* musicians, the notion of creative injustice appears when one party has been discriminated and his or her rights has been denied by the other party, who seems to have authority or power over the other. On that note, the *AF*

musicians as creative or music labourers not only have no power week-to-week on the show, but find themselves in a powerless position on and after graduation. Most of them felt that they have been 'abandoned' after the fame and stardom that they obtained have been diminished and are no longer 'profitable' individuals to the company they have signed with. Through the findings of this thesis, most of the *AF* respondents have identified that they have been mistreated by both *AF* and the music industry. Amylea spoke up about the mistreatment or inequality that she had experienced from the *AF* hybrid and the music industry. Below are the examples:

"Not all [participants] are versatile singers. Some might have distinctive vocal tones that would not work in any or every music genre. The test should be varied, according to the singer's capabilities"

"...radio and TV are too subservient to the masses. They could have been educating the masses [with good art], to support artists and the industry"

The other *AF* musicians raised similar concerns as Amylea. In overcoming the mistreatment and inequality, Mawi expressed the expectation that the lobbying groups, namely such as musicians and artists' associations (i.e. Persatuan Karyawan, Persatuan Seniman), would be proactive in contributing to the development of the creative labourers of the music industry. On the other hand, Hazama, echoed this suggestion from Mawi by stressing the need for the government to regulate the best measure in terms of the music industry's policy:

"We have so many associations [for musicians and artists] but their roles are questionable. They have shown support for artists who are ill and have poor health conditions by donating some money or funds. It was just

that. We need more than that, especially in terms of developing the industry.” (Mawi)

“Government intervention in outlining policy [is vital]. I would like to compare music and sports. Our government can spend billions of funds on sports, developing the athletes, but why not on music too?” (Hazama)

Nonetheless, this kind of experience or dissatisfaction about *AF* and the music industry not only occurred among the *AF* graduates that I interviewed but also seemed to be the typical experience for most of the musicians who had been through these *AF* hybrid and industrial processes.

As reported in Utusan Online, Nana, a former contestant on *AF1*, raised a sense of inequality concerning the impact of the *AF* mechanism on its graduates and also the industrial treatment on the music reality television musicians. She argued that, on behalf of her *AF* stable mates: “we are all still capable of going further but are not given the opportunity by the industry” (Mohd. Radi, 2017). Meanwhile, the *AF2* winner, Zahid, in an interview with MyMetro, has expressed that he had to be a ‘multi-tasked’ musician who was not only seeking music career sustainability but also to diversify his source of creative income in order to survive as an individual and eventually ‘work’ in the wider entertainment industry (Rahman, 2019). He expressed that this situation has led to frustration as he had attempted many times to ‘survive’ in the mainstream music scene by endlessly producing and releasing his music. Unfortunately, such attempts seemed to be ineffective as he had to do something else outside the music industry in order to just ‘survive’ or maintain his visibility in a wider entertainment market. A similar pattern of career trajectory occurred with a relatively current *AF* graduate, Sharul *AF2015*. As reported in Mstar, he mentioned that his presence in the music industry after his *AF* ‘graduation’ was not

as impeccable as he thought it would be, whilst considering the fact that he survived the competition and was one of the finalists of the 12th season of the show (Sakri, 2020). Plus, Sharul asserted that he would be persistent in establishing a music career and would treat it as his main priority, although he seemed to be occupied with other activities than music, such as acting and television hosting.

It is indeed a challenge to only focus on building a music career after graduating from *AF*. Based on my personal experience, all the *AF* participants are required to sign a three-year talent management and record label contract with the TV station's subsidiary company, Maestro, in their post-*AF* participation; I was obviously included in this agreement. The contract-signing process has not happened as most people thought it would (i.e. the musicians have the chance to understand the contractual terms and conditions beforehand, and perhaps the contract is signed in a formal environment with the presence of someone who can be a witness). I can still remember how all the *AF4* graduates (including myself) were 'forced' to sign the contract when we graduated from the televised pop music academy. This signing 'ceremony' happened in the middle of the night in our hotel rooms while we were literally exhausted after all-day shooting for a telemovie in Penang, Malaysia, for a telemovie that was meant to be one of our post-*AF* participation perks or activities. I opted not to sign the contract, before I had the chance to understand it and speak to my personal manager, Badrul Hashim. Fortunately, the Maestro's representatives respected my decision. But it was disturbing to see my fellow *AF* stable mates sign the contract on the spot, with no chance to understand what it was offering them. All they understood was that they were being offered record and talent management deals for a specific period of time. I was aware that they were being positive and expecting that the deals

they signed were positive. Furthermore, they thought that the deals were the only way for them to materialise their musical, career dreams.

Following that event, the company was still managing me as an artist, although there was no legally binding agreement between us, and, oddly, they had never asked me about signing the contract. However, after six months with the company, I could not see myself having a bright future in music as I was just being allocated token payments and mostly unpaid promotional live performances or shows – I think that is probably the consequence of not signing the contract. Nevertheless, the company had too many talents to manage at that time (all the participants from *AF1* up to *AF4*) and tended to focus on the winners and finalists who were the most popular or in demand. I found out that the company was not demonstrating any effort to 'sell' artists; they tended to wait for the offers to come in. On one occasion, a big client, namely IKEA Malaysia, approached my personal manager and expressed interest in inviting me to perform at the 2006 New Year Celebration Concert. As I was still under the (unsigned) management of Maestro, my personal manager asked the client to deal directly with the management. That is a sign of respect to the management, and I endorsed my manager's decision on that. After the client contacted the management and discussed the offer, the client informed my personal manager that they had to choose another artist (non-Maestro artist) to replace me. The client said that Maestro had no problem letting me do the show. But the management offered a bundle package where the client could get another three Maestro artists, together with me, for the new year concert. This bundle package obviously cost more than the client allocated for a single artist. I was totally speechless when I heard this. As far as I can remember, I literally had no invitations for New Year's

Eve events or concerts, and literally spent the night watching the new year's countdown on television at home.

With the singing contract 'ceremony', the 'weird relationship' with the management and treatment that I had, I was literally in an environment and support system that were unhealthy, especially for a newcomer like me. I started to feel that the *AF* life-transformation ethos was an unwarranted one, so I decided to disengage with the company. I raised my concerns with the top level of the company with the help of my personal manager (thankfully, I have had this important person to guide me since the day I graduated from *AF*). After discussions, I was no longer trapped in *AF*'s ineffective, extended fantasy as they finally agreed to release me. This is how I ultimately managed to resolve the creative injustice imposed on me by Maestro.

All of the narratives from the *AF* graduates above expressed a similar feeling: frustration. They have not been given the 'opportunity' whilst they are truly seeking the opportunity. If they were to be given the opportunity, they expected their talent to be first considered and valued. Unfortunately, this has not happened. Moreover, the opportunity that is being offered is an exploitative one where the musicians are becoming a target of control, which can be seen occurring as early as in the contract-signing stage. This signifies that the musicians have not been treated seriously or with respect. Sadly, such a treatment is likely to propose that the *AF* musicians are low-status music labourers. This further explains the common fallacy of the *AF* life-transformation ethos, its professionalism, fame and stardom that most *AF* musicians have experienced. With the precarity of the music industry as a growing phenomenon that denies musicians the chance to realise their sense of utopianism at the heart of their pop-musicking, the appearance of an apparently once-in-a-

lifetime opportunity appears to be illusory, and one that transforms utopia into dystopia.

5. The paradox of television's flow and music's editorial productions model: the major destruction

Music reality television or the hybrid media text is undeniably phenomenal in a wider entertainment landscape in most local and essentially global contexts. Through Jenkins' media convergence ideology, "every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across media platforms" (2006, p. 3). Music reality television as a hybrid media text can be considered a killer application, echoing Jenkins' convergence theory – one impeccable mechanism that works on different dimensions. One of the impacts that this killer application offers is obviously the capability to be a *glocal* showbiz franchise or format spin-off, which exemplifies the hybrid as a powerful economic force that is truly beneficial for the hybrid creators to fulfil the ideology of profitability, which is the aim of all the creative conglomerates in the entertainment sector. For instance, the most notable music reality television 'predecessor', the *Idols* format, has "dominated global television for the past 15 years" (Hill, 2015) and, in fact, is still effectively the longest-running format or music reality TV brand currently. On the other hand, the hybrid has, in a way, provided a new opportunity for musicians as creative workers, giving them what is usually hotly-contested access to television – which, since the rise of MTV, has been an essential component in career-building.

The music and television industry amalgamation in the early 2000s was in many ways a breakthrough, particularly from the musicians' perspective (Forman, 2012). As music reality television formats mushroomed over time, the intrusion of television, as an industry, into the 'ground' occupied for so long

by record companies was a significant development. Television simply exploited the narrative that the record companies had propagated for decades: that a magic wand could be waved that would transform 'ordinary' musicians into stars. By making this narrative publicly accessible, *AF* and similar 'reality' shows grew impressive audiences. Even so, the myth of the television version of this story was, and remains, that talent is there to be found and that talent will triumph. The ultimate reward for a lucky and 'talented' individual entitles that person to a music industry career. As a result, the music television hybrid production can be considered as a legitimate path for the career development and advancement of aspiring amateur musicians (although only a few are able to manifest the success whilst many are struggling and failing to survive).

This further highlights that the mechanism created by both media industries has been a legitimate and widely accepted formula that is approved by the music industry, particularly, in relation to the pop music identity (star) machinery. Plus, Goodwin (1992) writes that "the commodity form of pop (music) has always needed other discourses of visual pleasure that are unavailable on disc" (p. 9), which implies that the music and television 'hybrid' is likely to be the perfect invention for that and thus seems to be a harmless mechanism, especially to the musicians situated within such a hybrid production. Hence, in general, it can be said that the hybrid appears to be a sophisticated invention that offers a fair 'barter system' to both the stakeholders, namely the hybrid's producer and its labourers. However, through the creative misalignment discussed previously, I argue that the sophisticated hybrid pop machinery is actually a faulty formulation whereby there is a stark contrast between music and television models that creates further friction within cultural production, a friction that musicians 'pay for'.

According to Miège (1987), music products can be considered one of the editorial cultural commodities. In the sense of music production, he notes that, “by virtue of the uncertainty and indeterminacy of a commodity’s use value, publishers/producers of cultural commodities are forced to spread their risks. By resorting to ‘catalogues’ of products, the failure of success is offset by others” (p. 274). The commodity’s use-value refers to the form of the commodity’s body itself, iron, linen, etc., its tangible, sensible form of existence, as argued Marx (1978). Nonetheless, in music production or for musicians as cultural commodities, their musical character or musicianship – prominent elements of the commodities - can be seen as the use-value that represents themselves as the commodities’ currency in the market. As such, it is the role of the music producers or labels to manage the fashioned musicians’ use-value and to see how effective the commodities are in the music market. The heart of this activity is obviously to generate revenue streams and be able to cope with minimising the risk of failure. In other words, music production with its editorial model is a complex process and requires a good amount of production time to ensure that the quality produced meets the industry standard, or at least follows the industry’s common requirements and regimentation. Most importantly, the editorial model that embedded music production implies the complexity of the process that has its own specificities and business targets. At the very least, the model is designed (and expected) to produce cultural commodities that are able to retain the return of investment in music commodity production.

The music production model is totally contradicted by the television production model. Miège (1987) writes that the television broadcasting model is meant for filling large segments of the media schedules and thus television programming and its production model “must be uninterrupted, constantly renewed

and therefore produced on an unbroken conveyor belt” (p. 276). He further argues that:

“Flow products and editorial cultural commodities are therefore becoming increasingly ‘alike’... neither that the categories lose their specificity nor that the specificity will be stripped of its socioeconomic and cultural importance. For instance, flow products are generally rented out by distributors or networks for one or more showing, while cultural commodities are bought outright by individual consumers” (p. 277).

This echoes what Forman (2012) has observed, highlighting the pros of the music and television amalgamation, which implies the economic possibilities of the new medium that are in line with the typical music industry’s economic interest. Either it does or it does not; this probably means that the music or television products must be ‘sold’ at the end of the day – that is what Miège suggests. The problem then is that the two industries have different approaches to risk, and different conceptions of their overarching product (see Kjus, 2017 and Cvetkovski, 2015).

In that context, Kjus is aware that the impact of the convergence of music and television production models has a friction that has detrimental effects on both the process and the outcome. He writes that the “structural differences between these industries (TV and Music) trigger struggles over the content and presentation of musical performances which, over time, undermine the credibility of the joint venture” (p.1011). His argument echoed Frith’s account that scrutinised the uneasy relationship between music and television (2002) that focused on the era of *MTV* and the early inception of the music reality television format. Frith highlighted that “music has not been a

central part of its programming” and thus “the television audience is rarely conceived as a music audience” (p. 277).

Hence, the implication of such a hybrid media text in cultural production, as observed by Holmes (2004), “has produced a new type of text that is more conceptually and politically dangerous because it promises a kind of pseudo-agency as a guise for an ultimately conservative text. What we are presented with is programs that provide their own discourse or commentary on the relations between audience and text, and audience and popular culture” (p. 169). Thus, she argues that “we are dealing with fundamentally hybrid media stars—the contestants become as much TV personalities as pop stars” (p.151), especially in this cultural production phenomenon.

In the case of *AF* musicians, the individuals’ struggles are pervasive in the negotiation of the in many ways incongruent music and television aesthetics. For instance, Hazama has established that *AF* as a music reality show is a mere entertainment show wherein the music aesthetic or talent is just a peripheral: “It [*AF*] is just an entertainment show. Talent is number two.”

Such evidence implies that television is very dominant in that music-television collaboration. This further demonstrates that, when “one of the parties involved controls more of the process or product than the other – for example, when the television producers come to influence the selection of talents and the presentation of the music in the exclusive interests of ‘good TV’ (Kjus, 2017, p. 1023), it generates friction with the standards and aesthetic ideals of popular music. Also, the friction arises “in the encounter between different industry models, and in the fact that the talents who gained fame via the flow model of broadcast television were in fact left with little time to create an album for sale via the editorial model of the music

industry” (Kjus, 2017, p. 1023). This scenario occurs due to the rapid pace of hybrid production, which has the effect of reducing last year’s winner’s status as attention is switched to the new round of the annual competition. Even so, the winners and some high-profile ‘losers’ enjoy media attention in a way that they might not have done without appearing in the show.

In a classical notion of stardom, stars usually carry cultural meanings and/or ideological values. This further underlines that such public figures are likely to be highly skilled in terms of labour, talent and/or reputation and thereby are likely to be high-paid creative workers in the hierarchy of popular culture (see Dyer, 1986; Gledhill, 1991; Marshall, 2007; Shumway, 2001, 2015). In general, stars are understood to be individuals who have enjoyed and provided profound achievements and contributions in their field of expertise in society and, therefore, are an effect or a product of mass culture (Gledhill, 1991). Additionally, such public figures are predominantly exhibiting their ‘strengths’ rather than ‘weaknesses’ for public viewing. This further exemplifies that the ‘normal’ star text is one of continuous and sometimes seemingly invincible strength; in contrast, *AF* stars tend to be ones whose weaknesses gains them public sympathy.

Take, for example, the mid-90s global pop sensation Britney Spears. She has a pop music identity that has been fashioned in and on music industry terms even though she is arguably not *that* musically talented. Most importantly, her pop music identity has been a polished one for the time she has served the music markets. In a documentary show on BBC Four titled Flat Pack Pop: Sweden’s Music Miracle that explores the uniquely Swedish songwriting formula created by record producer Denniz Pop, the documentary host, a music journalist named James Ballardie, had the chance to interview the Cheiron Studio team, the creative individuals responsible for many global

pop hits, including Britney's earliest songs (such as *Baby One More Time* and so on). In that interview, the Swedish music composers and producers explained that they were not really convinced of Britney's musical talent and personality when they were first introduced to her.¹⁴

Cheiron Studio Team: "I think we went to a café the first day and start talking about music and dreams...I remember first time hearing her singing, she looked very average. I thought, 'How this is gonna work, who's gonna like this?' But she was nice but really quiet."

James Ballardie: "Did you sense any star power there?"

Cheiron Studio Team: "Nope! But then we received the [music] video... I was like, 'Oh my God!'" [she was impressed with the end product].

Such a set of judgements is unexceptional, particularly for the 90s, when record companies had become adept at fashioning the musicians they signed into marketable symbolic goods – the mainstream pop musicians usually passed through some sort of transformation before their products were made visible to the media and public. Any 'flaws' of the talent would be concealed or balanced with other elements (such as visual and narrative) that completed the musicians as a marketable symbolic good. From my experience watching my older brother, whose his band was signed by BMG Malaysia in the mid-90s, I can see that the company was not only concerned about the artistry (or the sound). The label also placed great emphasis on the images of the individuals in the band – each band member had a distinct look and image as a signed pop musician. This exactly recalls the distinctive characters of the Spice Girls band

¹⁴ The show is no longer available on BBC Four, however it is available on YouTube, where it was uploaded by an account called Techno disco lover (2019).

members, where every person in the girl band had a different personality, character and sense of fashion. Thus, reflecting these examples, the transformation that occurs within the star-making music companies' mechanism obviously in the recording industry era illustrates that the pop music identity will only be circulated to the public when the star is ready and polished.

This means that this long-standing recording industry approach does not explicitly emphasise the star-making process in progress (publicly), thereby not disclosing such musicians' transformation as symbolic goods (in contrast to what happened in the case of *AF*). In the star text creation process we associate with the 1990s, the stars themselves, together with the companies they signed with, did their best to conceal anything that might be presented to the public that might ruin their impact as star texts for the stargazers' viewing. Nevertheless, most of the hybrid star machinery "apparently promised reality of quite a different order—the exposition of the internal workings of the music industry and, crucially, its manufacture of celebrity and stardom" (Holmes, 2004, p.148). Therefore, the classical star ideology apparently is no longer relevant to the *AF* hybrid, suggesting that such an old-school star notion is outdated in this current music industry.

"Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone. We can distinguish two logical separate stages. First, the person is a body, a psychology, a set of skills that have to be mined and worked up into a star image. This work, of fashioning the star out of the raw material of the person, varies in the degree to which it respects what artists sometimes refer to as the inherent qualities of the material; make-up, coiffure, clothing, dieting and body-building can all make more or less of the body features

they start with, and personality is no less malleable, skills no less learnable” (Dyer, 2001, p. 5).

Where *AF* was concerned, its formula left nothing to chance; the producers knew that they wanted the show to be driven by key characteristics – exposing emotional vulnerability in the contestants and then portraying the struggle to overcome adversity. Winning *AF* was a reward for a good narrative more than it was for musical ability. On this basis, the musicians needed to comply with the hybrid’s requirement in fashioning the musicians’ star texts, especially with the hybrid system. With little autonomy in fashioning their own star texts, the musicians are still left with the responsibility of complying with whatever text they have been configured as. This is truly injustice; musicians are denied their right to express creativity in order to fulfil this hybridised star model.

As the simplified *AF* hybrid star system breeds instant stars rapidly and is deemed to be distributing economics of opportunity on a big scale to the hopefuls, the predominant outcome of this cultural production is more failure than success among the hopefuls. That said, there is not much difference with the notion of failure in recording industry terms, as noted by music industry scholars (see Toynbee, 2000; Frith, 2002; Jones, 2012, among others). But the point here is, the failure of some acts is seen as the guarantee of the success of others: the successful acts ‘succeed’ apparently because of their ‘talent’, but the outcomes are contrived; the successful acts succeed because they have appealed emotionally to the voting audience. This is the industrialisation of failure: in order for there to be winners, *there have to be losers to validate the winners.*

The problem for the winners then is that they are obliged to sign contracts with the producing company under which the company is not truly obligated to support and develop the instant

stardom attained by becoming a show winner. The stars' aura wanes quite dramatically and at the same time lessens their cultural power in society, which therefore places them as low-status labour in the hierarchy of cultural industry workers. The *AF* contemporary star mechanism demonstrates that the *AF* star mechanism is actually one of the factors that contributed to creative injustice, essentially a key driver of creative destruction. *AF* offers musicians, even winning 'stars', no stable way forward in career development terms; as Jones (2012) puts it: the "music industry as a practice is one stacked against the market success of musicians" (p. 35). Industrial practices of the old or new hybrid variety go on producing failure in the name of enjoying a formula for lasting success.

Overall, the *AF* system is of benefit only to the owners of the Malaysian franchise. The system exploits its contestants, who are forced to conform to a pre-determined pattern of behaviour. For the majority, perhaps for the entirety, market failure is the outcome of the *AF* process for individual musicians; meanwhile, the show's success expanded series after series.

6. Conclusion

"The experience of the work of art as immediately endowed with meaning and value is an effect of the harmony between the two aspects of the same historical institution, the cultivated *habitus* and the artistic field, which mutually ground each other. Given that the work of art does not exist as such, meaning as an object symbolically endowed with meaning and value, unless it is apprehended by spectators possessing the aesthetic disposition and competence which it tacitly requires, one could say that it is the eye of the aesthete which constitutes the work of art – but only if one immediately remembers that it can only do so to the extent that it is itself the product of a long collective history, that is,

of the progressive invention of the 'connoisseur', and of a long individual history, that is, of prolonged exposure to the work of art. This relation of circular causality, that of belief and the sacred, characterizes any institution which can only function if it is established simultaneously within the objectivity of a social game within dispositions ready to enter into game and participate in it" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 289).

What can be learnt from the above remarks? Banks (2017) has responded with a simpler definition, by writing that "artistic beauty is of social manufacture, brought into being by experts and connoisseurs whose elevated social positions rely on being able to express themselves as 'lovers of art' capable of identifying an essential beauty that is invisible to others" (Banks, 2017, p.16). I second this. In the era of media convergence, any parties in the media industries can make their own revolution or reformation of their organisational structure and purpose and create a hybrid identity or branding that is able to fulfil their desired aims and objectives. In this way, they can further self-proclaim or self-appoint themselves as the experts in what they intend to achieve, in which such expertise is only measured by the power they possess financially, technologically and culturally. This contradicts what Bourdieu has argued, whereby only the art enthusiasts are subject to such an entitlement and responsibility due to their proven credibility and expertise. Although Bourdieu's remarks are rather general, they show the importance of having the right people, expertise and mechanism in fashioning art, therefore adding and enhancing value to the produced art. *AF* fits Bourdieu's analysis by encouraging spectators to believe that they possess the necessary expertise to identify pop music 'art' when they encounter it. This further underlines the need to formulate the right balance of ingredients between art and commerce in fashioning creative commodities. In this approach, it suggests treating such labourers seriously

and appreciating their effort to be the frontline workers who run the industrial systems, essentially, the key people that contribute to the cultural phenomenon that absolutely fulfils the economic purposes of both parties, equally. *AF* musicians are labourers who deserve, at least, some appreciation of their effort. To put it simply, it is just a matter of offering justice that concerns distributing equality and respect towards the musicians who want their crafts to be valued accordingly. Neither industrial system plays fair with musicians.

This noted, it is inescapable that popular music is a commercial sphere in which musicians rely on intermediary forces to reach markets. This is a process that does not admit the audience to the design stage, yet this is what *AF* insists on promoting. In this model, musicians suffer and some address must be made to that suffering. Ultimately, it is musicians who take the risks that allow the format to work. If this is recognised, then a strategy of risk management should and could be extended to those musicians.

The term 'sustainability' is ubiquitous nowadays, especially where consumer products are concerned. A sympathetic consciousness of sustainable supply has developed. These concerns could be extended to the music industry. Musicians are its raw materials and as such they should be treated with respect and supported to develop careers, not be used up quickly and ruthlessly in a television gambit that prizes constant novelty over sustained creativity. With such a hope, in the next chapter, I will put forward a contemporary career strategy for musicians that derives from the experiences of the *AF* musicians.

Chapter 8:
The contemporary pop musicians' career strategy

1. Introduction

The analysis from the previous chapter demonstrated that the industrial systems under consideration – the television format of the *AF* hybrid together with the music industry – both exhibit the phenomenon of creative destruction. To confront and deal with such corrupted systems and to stimulate the best possible response for musicians, this chapter argues a contemporary career strategy for the hybridised but disempowered pop musicians. This chapter aims to unlock the musicians' career staying power, proposing that durability is the essential trait to sustainability wherein the *AF* musicians have been actually made for durability (as indicated in their experiences). The main proposal will be that the musicians should emulate the *AF* hybrid production format that is a media convergence 'product' by mirroring its disposition. In this way, I further propose that the *AF* musicians negotiate across three different spectrums: as a text, as a symbolic product and a self-enabled individual. The negotiation of these three dimensions is a counter-active productive formula – a way for the musicians to reverse the disempowerment that impacted on their music careers in a way that makes them capable of creating textually 'rich' cultural texts. Such texts can allow the musicians to expand their creative horizons to reach a broader entertainment landscape. By adapting to a multidimensional creative aspect, this strategy ultimately enables the musicians to uphold their prime interest of being creative individuals and achieve sustained power in the music industry – the industry that they are passionate about in the first place.

2. Unlocking the musicians' career staying power: from durability to sustainability

“Graduating from *AF* and competing with well-known pop musicians in the music industry is a real challenge.” (Mawi)

“I have been through the process [failed in *AF4*], watched the show and been around the *AF* stars. I sense that the show needs character, not mainly talent. And I kind of know how to strategize my career, not being too rigid or demanding with the management. That’s my game plan.” (Hazama)

The above two statements from *AF* winners imply two different situations. Mawi noted that competing among the *AF* students (or within the *AF* ‘league’) was not as intense as in the music industry whereby the *AF* graduates work for (extending) commercial success, competing with the established non-music reality television musicians. Hazama, on the other hand, found out that there is a need to reflect on *AF* as a music reality show wherein such a reflection might provide a further clue regarding what the current music industry is all about. Taken as a whole, both statements from *AF* winners signal the sense of durability – a trait that all the *AF* musicians should possess, as having a music career require musicians to know how to compete in a wider league, namely the music industry. In addition to that, the musicians should prepare themselves with a strategy that can be derived from an industrial system such as the *AF* hybrid.

It is apparent that the *AF* musicians are not in the recording industry era, where musical ability was the currency for musicians in building industrial reputation and status. As they are in the era of media convergence, where the music industry relies on the television industry for pop music star creation, they need to react to the changes that *AF* as a music reality show embodies in order to equip themselves with creative solutions to this new hybridised experience of disempowerment. Throughout this research analysis, it is fair to say that the musicians should adapt or continue to establish themselves as hybridised musicians to confront the disempowerment they experience. As such, to derive a contemporary career formula, it is useful to

assimilate the way that the hybrid-integrated music industry operates.

In illustrating that, it is useful to further reflect on Jenkins' (2006) account of media convergence. Jenkins argues that convergence "refers to a process, not an endpoint" (p. 16) – one that "represents an expanded opportunity for media conglomerates, since content that succeeds in one sector can spread across other platforms" (p. 19). This illustrates that it exemplifies the industrial process – the constant development that diversifies the revenue streams of the media or creative conglomerates that are obviously profit-seeking entities. It has then a further corporate virtue of managing the risk of such commercial enterprises and thus has the potential to minimise the financial loss from investments in creative commodities of commercial enterprises in the media industries. To put it simply, "in the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across media platforms" (p. 3), as observed by Jenkins. On that basis, the media convergence phenomenon is an ongoing process and there is probably no end point to it.

With that particular aim, the media industries that collaborate in creating hybrid media texts (i.e. music and television industries that produce the *AF* hybrid) as a profit-seeking strategy will deploy any means or media that help their businesses function towards establishing a sustainable branding for the show. *AF* is a media product in-media industries that are driven by "more properly the results of social and economic forces, so that any technological logic they possess is only apparently intrinsic" (Gitelman, 2006, p. 11). This is what drives the existence of the music reality television hybrid in the media convergence era. With the economic imperative that the hybrid creators respond to, adapting to and exploiting technological

change, it is a formula based on a perfect blend that creates new opportunities for all concerned.

The media convergence process produces novelty incessantly and reinvents economic relations in favour of the media's economic interests. On this basis, it is better for creative labourers, in this case the *AF* musicians, to position themselves as commercial enterprises or, essentially, as cultural entrepreneurs, behaving as music companies might. In doing this, they risk what took them into music industry in the first place – a passion for making music – but, as they become so disempowered under existing relations, they need to find a way to fight back. The better informed they become, the more resilient they will be. Instead of relying on systems and structures that disempower them, they need to develop alternatives based on their own needs.

The main reason for such a strategy proposal is because any industrial outcome, especially in music, is manageable as it involves humans in making decisions about the form and content of symbolic goods in production as well as their fate in the market (Jones, 2012). On that note, such a disempowerment actually trains the musicians to be 'tough' creative labourers, which inadvertently trains them in understanding and thus creating a sustainability factor in themselves, if we look on the disempowerment from a different perspective. That said, the disempowerment that the musicians face is manageable, which resonates with the argument of Jones. To put it simply, the musicians absolutely have the power to manage and navigate their careers to the intended 'destination'. They have the power to fashion themselves as a text on their own terms – preserving the music they favour and identify with and taking all of this into the market in much the way Siti Nurhaliza did in the mid-1990s, which has been discussed previously; or the way Hazama positioned himself in the music industry after he learnt from his

second chance that he had in *AF9*, after he was rejected as an *AF4* contestant. The following are examples of him taking control of his own fate:

“Five years before [before *AF9* participation], I used to be in *AF4* and people started to recognise my talent. After that, I had the opportunity performing in Gempak Astro – I toured quite some places, and joined Meet Uncle Hussein, the most popular band at that time, as its lead singer – I released one single with them while I was on *AF9*.”

“Because of my performance in the *AF4* finale [all of the prelude contestants were invited to perform in the finale], people start to recognise my talent – I have ‘shows’ until December. I was so lucky to be offered to join the tour for Astro events [Gempak Selebriti Astro, etc.] although I was not even an *AF* star, I was just in the prelude stage, not even [a former] *AF* student. I utilised the opportunity that I had by improving myself, to impress the important people from Astro. I was lucky enough to be in the circle of the *AF* stars at that time although my name was not that strong as compared to them. That is my learning process, being an artist, watching examples from my fellow *AF* mates.”

“I [was] so grateful when I was given a second chance [in *AF9*]. I have to say now that I [was] ‘lucky’ to be rejected in *AF4*.”

Hazama’s experience indicates that the musicians need to be durable enough to adapt to industrial changes that sometimes disrupt their musical ambition and goal, ones that demand them to be something else, something new and different. When they exhibit a durable character, they can more easily generate career-sustaining power. They can achieve this by reacting ‘creatively’ to the adversity that they encounter and find ways to bolster the durability of their pop music identity that

would enable them to work towards career sustainability and longevity in the music industry. In fulfilling that objective, the musicians should be aware of how to fight back against those forces that misaligned them with their musical identity and worked against their expectations – where all of this career misdirection derives from the distorted industrial systems that neglect to ‘care’ about the ‘fate’ of music labourers.

If we reflect on the distorting forces associated with and endemic to the *AF* hybrid production format, one key result is that it is almost impossible for the musicians to develop a strategy for industry sustainability, especially if they are only concerned about building musicianship. With the little time these musicians spend in the privileged but destructive environment, it is difficult for them to build and develop industry durability— they suffer rather than enjoy and learn from this type of industrial experience. Added to this, they must live with the prejudice against their credibility, namely the negative portrayal of their industry status (instant noodles artists), a devastating soubriquet attached to such hybrid media stars. In other words, *AF* graduates have not entered the music industry in the way they anticipated they would, especially by solely using the pop-musicking experiences that they had. In this scenario, what the musicians require then is a ‘fix’ – a strategy that begins from where they are.

Having said that, the musicians can be counteractive in such circumstances by preparing themselves with a strategy that acknowledges the industrial system’s capabilities and accepts the adversity they are likely to be exposed to in such systems and outcomes. As such, a strategy with three dimensions begins with them taking responsibility for themselves as a text; as a symbolic product; and works through them becoming self-enabled in all aspects of their identity and offer. The key to this career strategy is to magnify the elements that are useful when

fashioning creative or cultural texts that can become standardised in the age of media convergence.

3. The pop musicians' career strategy: the musicians' negotiations in three different dimensions

“Text-creators are entirely self-selecting, but this does not mean that the creation of new texts is a random affair. It is reasonable to assume that new text creators have recipients in mind as they fashion their texts, but recipients have to be reached and the defining mode of reaching recipients, even as the internet facilitates this as never before, is still to encounter them in markets” (Jones, 2012, p. 114).

Jones highlights the process of text creation and how it delivers to the intended recipients. He primarily emphasises that text creators are self-selecting in fashioning the texts but such a process simply does not occur by chance. What is useful to reflect on in Jones's account above is the notion of self-selection that is actually a complex process that the text creators have to deal with. This further requires that the text creators possess the necessary skills and resources. As such, the capacity to produce symbolic texts that are in line with the current production trends and are ultimately capable of catering to market demands and thus securing market attention is crucial here. In relation to this, I will demonstrate how the *AF* musicians must undertake such a process to be in a position to become self-enabled and independent creative workers who are self-fashioning their own texts.

Please bear in mind that the context that I am discussing here is how to produce a total package of symbolic text in pop music – and how to create an effective pop music identity whilst considering the conventional elements that typically define the cultural production process. This can be linked with

Hesmondhalgh's symbolic creativity ideology in cultural industries (2013), which discusses both tangible and intangible aspects of producing cultural or creative texts.

Symbolic creativity: The process, common to all human societies, by means of which symbols – mainly writing, sounds and images – are brought into being. (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p.20).

In cultural industries, three distinct components, as described by Hesmondhalgh above, are the key ingredients to symbolic good production. Such ingredients that can be applied to pop music identity production, particularly in producing a cultural symbolic text, are seen as the vital elements that should be taken into consideration by the text creators in order to produce a standardised, industrialised and marketable symbolic cultural text. This means that the pop music text as a 'straightforward' music production that produces music only, as naively perceived by *AF* musicians, is the biggest misconception that the musicians have. In reality, music production always embodies underlying processes and objectives that are not in the musical realm, whilst it involves more than music aesthetically in such a production of musical texts.

For instance, Lewis (1983) notes that music as symbolic communication is an ordered system of meaning and symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place. He adds that "there is a framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgements" (p. 136). As such, this further illustrates that the music produced by musicians is a multimodal encoding of several 'messages' that are exhibited through the combination of text, image and sound, and sometimes through the combination of sense faculties: the auditory, the visual, the tactile and so forth (Elleström, 2010).

Meanwhile, music acts can be considered as the main vehicle of delivering the messages to the targeted audience that, to an extent, can be a conversational medium of the musicians to the audience. In that respect, Jones (1990) writes that “pop songs provide young listeners with a set of public discourses (about emotional or romantic relationships, for example) which both play back to people their own situations and experiences, and provide a means of interpreting those experiences” (p. 69).

Those scholarly accounts are sufficient to illustrate that pop music production actually addresses two cultural dimensions: the production and the consumption of both the producer and the audience. Further, those accounts explain that music as a symbolic cultural medium is the interaction between the music creators and the music users. Nonetheless, such an interaction conveys underlying messages or stories embedded in the music texts that are part of ‘symbolic creativity’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). On this basis, such texts do not only consist of musical (and related) sound, but also require a great deal of ‘written’ and visual elements. This is to ensure that they can be an effective vehicle for the text creators to ‘communicate’ effectively with the intended audience – to convey the texts’ messages and create market attention and discourse about the texts. In these terms (and unlike the preoccupations of AF musicians), popular music texts are wider than music, alone. Pop music production deals with the complex activity of musicians who produce symbolic products that engage end-users through a combination of sound and image, and written and spoken texts.

Literature on popular music’s industrial character identifies it as manifesting in three different spectrums: through record sales; media publicity; and live music activities (for example, see Frith, 1988; Toyne, 2000; Shuker, 2001; Longhurst, 2007; Zwaan *et al.*, 2009; Jones, 2012). The first

spectrum creates a means of commercialising popular music. The second one illustrates that the music produced becomes viable through any media platform that is capable of creating hype for the music that will be released in the market. The third spectrum simply points to the fact that live music scenes help the musicians establish their market presence, thus creating an engaging musical experience for the targeted audience.

Those three spectrums define the range of normal activities that most of the signed musicians are required to undertake. I consider them as the fields and means of 'pop music regimentation', which are incredibly beneficial for musicians, offering experiences that are able to build and advance the musicians' industrial profiles. However, not all young aspiring musicians or newly-signed musicians have this pre-informed knowledge about pop music and commercialisation, especially in the Malaysian context.

As emerged from my own analysis of the *AF* pop musicians, they all were preoccupied with advancing their professional pop-musicking, in the belief that their musical activities would eventually transform them into music stars after they had spent some time in the industry. In addition, the musicians showed a lack of awareness of the importance of considering other elements than music in producing cultural texts – the practice that is crucially needed in pop music. As a result of this misunderstanding, the musicians' industrial 'life-span' became short-lived, which in turn required them to have entrepreneurial skills to save their careers. Although the musicians reluctantly became cultural entrepreneurs, this showed what opportunities can be made, especially when learning to convert challenges into opportunities. In this way, there is an advantage for the musicians in being individuals associated with the national cultural phenomenon that is the *AF* pop star machine.

Following this course, I formulate a contemporary career strategy that is predominantly inspired by the *AF* musicians' experiences and, at the same time, by reflecting on the nature of the *AF* hybrid production. On that basis, the career strategy is still obeying and preserving the conventional elements associated with conventional pop music production ideology. This thereby suggests that the musicians should negotiate between three different dimensions in fashioning their text, namely, as a creative text, as a mediated symbolic product and as a self-enabled musician. Figure 15 illustrates the negotiation process and further describes the elements contained in each of the proposed identities that will be elaborated on in the next section.

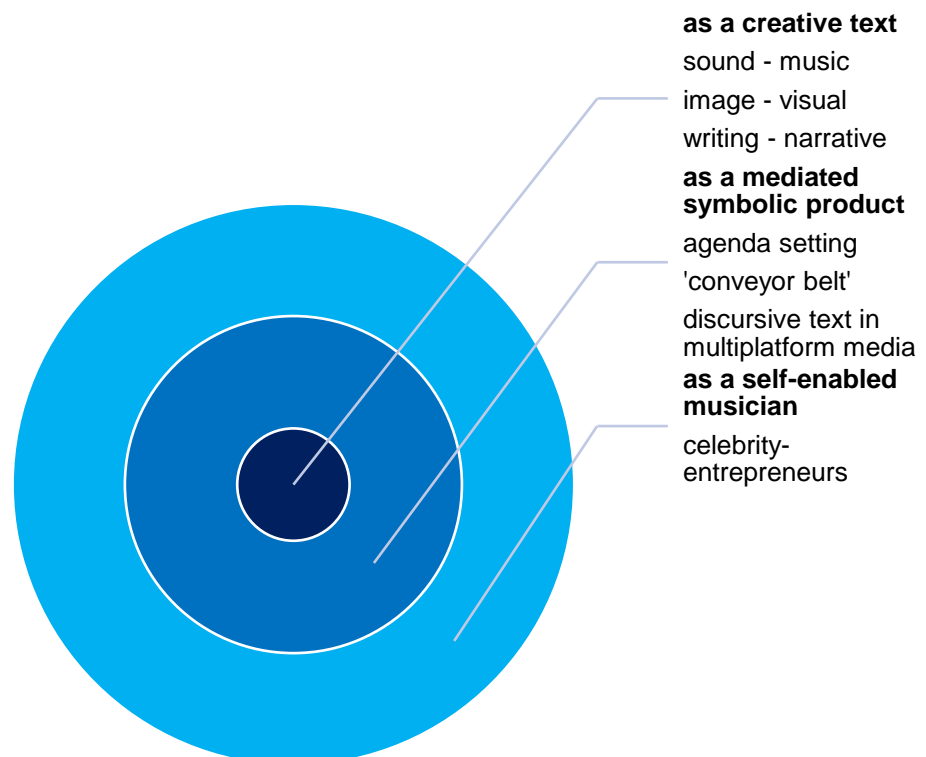


Figure 15. The musicians' negotiations in three different dimensions

3.1. As a creative text

On this basis, the creative text is the aspect that emphasises the creation of the whole package of such individuals being creative practitioners or, in a simpler term, as artists. In this sense, the musicians have to move away from the perception of being ‘true’ musicians who are only interested in music. Rather, they are being required to become artists –creative practitioners who deal with all of the elements of ‘symbolic creativity’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). As noted by Hesmondhalgh (2013), symbolic creativity refers to the process of fashioning the complete package of the symbolic good from the key ingredients, namely “writing, sounds and image” (p. 20), and is the best definition of what the creative text is all about. In relation to *AF* musicians, ‘sounds’ seem to be the first core element that is needed in fashioning their creative text, whereas ‘image’ and ‘writing’ are likely to be the later elements for their text creation.

Nevertheless, the creative text proposed here is truly a semblance of the normality of the conventional music industry’s outcome in fashioning text, namely music symbolic goods. However, it should be noted that the proposal of a creative text further emphasises the elements of image and writing that indicate that music, which happened to be a core element, is just a basic requirement that completes the process of symbolic goods production.

3.1.1. Sound (music)

Sounds, best understood as the music or musicality of the musicians, are obviously the key preliminary element that is required for a distinct creative text. In short, sounds are the musicians’ representation, especially in terms of how they commercialise this particular creative text aspect in the music industry. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the musicians

have to be profoundly musically talented – it is sufficient for them to just exhibit a relatively good level of talent in singing skills, which somehow implies that “...dazzling musical ability is not necessarily prized” (Warwick, 2015, p. 11) in the pop music scene. For example, the *AF* hopefuls who attended the audition are first evaluated by the television and music personnel in the sense of their singing ability in the first stage of the audition. In most cases, if the hopefuls are too nervous or lack confidence or stage presence, even though some of them can sing quite well, they tend to be rejected by the judges. This is probably due to the fact that the *AF* hybrid is looking for ‘television friendly’ or visually ‘attractive’ individuals, as I proposed elsewhere in this thesis. Nevertheless, if the hopefuls pass through this stage, they can move to the next stage (or the audition room), which is the personality test.

Recalling my first audition attempt in *AF* season 2, I was too nervous singing in the audition room whilst being filmed and watched by other auditionees and, most importantly, right in front of the judges. I can still remember that I just had to sing for less than 30 seconds in the audition room and the judges asked me to stop singing and raised a red card, signalling that I had failed that audition stage. From that experience, I realised that I was deficient in some way as a performer. Owing to that experience, I came back with a more confident personality and improved image in the next audition round for that particular *AF* season in Kuala Lumpur (which was a month later and the closing one of the *AF* season). It was indeed an effective re-formulation of myself as I then passed through the artistry audition stage and moved to the next audition room, namely the personality audition.

However, I failed at this stage as I found out that confidence in singing is totally different from confidence in communication, which was the skill that I lacked at that particular moment – the

latter is crucial too, as important as the former, especially when dealing with a music and reality television show. The experience as a whole showed me that there was a need for me to fix the whole 'visual' aspect – the element of my creative identity that apparently signalled a weakness that hindered me from passing through that earliest entry into the *AF* hybrid system. Owing to the rejection that I encountered, the experiences taught me how to ace the *AF* audition. I returned the following year, which was *AF3*, after having work experience as a male vocalist for a band that played in hotels and a fine dining restaurant (this type of work setting obviously sharpened my communication skills, especially on stage, when I was required to interact with the live audience). In that *AF3* audition, I was fortunately selected as the reserve contestant and ultimately was given the chance to be a contestant in the following season, *AF4*.

The rejection that I experienced through the *AF* auditions might be similar to that experienced by Hazama, the winner of *AF9*. As established previously in this thesis, he was an *AF4* Prelude contestant, but he failed to secure a place in that particular season. Nonetheless, he managed to be in *AF9* and won that season. Apparently, he was aware that the musical aspect is needed in the *AF* hybrid, but it is not that necessary. As he argued (and as quoted several times in this thesis), "It [*AF*] is just an entertainment show. Talent is number two." Added to this, he further argued that:

"Good voice is subjective. It is [personal] character that defines you as an artist and also differentiates you from others. Fashion is important too, in connection with your repertoire. It is not about selling your talent only!"

A similar argument was made by Bob, who has been recognised by an international competition named the World Championships of Performing Arts in Hollywood, California. He observed that:

“I am not a good-looking singer, I admit that. If I invest a lot of money in music production, it is not a way for you to get industry attention or appreciation. (Bob)

Echoing the same theme as Bob, Amylea asserted that musical talent should be the first element to be valued by the industry and further stressed that musical talent could not be ‘disappeared’. In that respect, her remarks below imply that musicality is indeed not a central focus in producing a standardised, industrial pop music or creative text in this current music industry.

“Give us fair treatment. The longer we’ve been in the industry, the bigger potential that we could offer. Talent should not have an expiry date!” (Amylea)

These accounts demonstrate that music or musicality is essential but not the only thing that is needed for the *AF* hopefuls to get ‘spotted’ in the *AF* audition; get appreciated in the *AF* hybrid production; and not the only trading currency of the musicians in the Malaysian music industry. Further, it is evident that the element of music or musicality should be supported with something that is visually pleasing, such as an image or personality that offers another interesting aspect to the creative text. This visually-driven element exactly recalls one of the *AF* hybrid’s key features that centrally give a privilege to musicians that have the capability to attract the audience of watching the show and to be part of this hybrid pop star machinery.

3.1.2. Image (visual)

In relation to ‘image’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), which is best referred to as visual in the context of this chapter’s discussion, it is an embodiment of the (re)invention of the pop identity that ‘excites’ the masses or specifically the intended audience to ‘gaze’ upon. Moreover, the type of identity created or established

in the visual aspect is likely to be perceived as a 'unique' image that is to an extent meeting an absence in popular culture in general. In other words, the visual aspect is the aspect concerned about musicians' identification in the music industry, especially how the musicians position and commercialise their visual aspect in the music industry.

As argued by Hazama earlier, the musicians' sense of fashion is vital as related to their musical genre. This means that the visual is the element of self-fashioning identity creation that may or may not necessarily be concerned with the musicians' appearance, or their sense of fashion and style as individuals who are involved in popular culture.

Richard Dyer, in his exploration of how stars could be understood as a cultural or ideological text, has noted that stars usually embody "both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it" (1986, p. 87), not entirely focusing on the tangible visual aspects such as the musicians' appearance, namely fashion and style. In that sense, it can be said that the image that most of the stars publicly portray through their star identity, as Auslander (2015) puts it, is "performative in the sense that it is not simply a characteristic of a person but, rather, a set of behaviors through which a person enacts an identity" (pp. 11-12). That further underlines the attractiveness, as noted by Shumway (2015), that is "usually experienced as sexual, but that may be a more general personal magnetism or 'star quality'" (p. 303). For the *AF* musicians to have this outcome, "it is also an interactional accomplishment undertaken jointly by musicians and their audiences each of which has a role to play in its realization" (Auslander, 2015, pp. 11-12). That said, the interaction fundamentally "correspond[s] to two components of audience response: desire and identification" (Shumway, 2015, p. 303).

For instance, a global 'durable' and long-lasting pop star such as Madonna epitomises how careful and innovative management of a 'visual' can absorb and retain the attention of an audience over an extended period of time. In other words, the way she curated her visual aspect illustrates how durable her perseverance is in establishing her star image that is, to an extent, creating a phenomenon, as her star image is 'visually' fascinating for the audience to watch and be inspired by.

"The Madonna phenomenon of the 1980s was underpinned by her charismatic personality and captivating stage presence, her sexuality appealed to young males, while her predominantly girl fans identified with her strong character and emphasis on being her 'own person', in control of her sexuality and her career" (Shuker, 2001, p. 128).

Apart from deploying the elements of gender and sexuality as key identifications of her popular identity, she also portrays the lifestyle of her social class in society that entices her fans or followers.

"[Madonna is]...the apparently ordinary woman who has merited success and wealth because of an ineffable star quality, whose fame simultaneously holds out the promise of success to her fans and affirms that her glamorous lifestyle, expensive possessions, and extravagant, ever-changing tastes in fashion are worth imitating and aspiring to" (Warwick, 2015, p. 10).

Nonetheless, what can be learnt from the Madonna phenomenon is how it can act as a guide for creating an image alongside a musical offering. In that respect, it suggests that a pop musician or star should advance their visual aspect as in the popular culture term.

"In the pop world, a star may present an aspirational, but achievable, model to fans, so dazzling musical ability is not

necessarily prized. What is essential for a pop star is the ability to make a splash, and a sense of glamor, characteristics most readily associated with a woman such as Madonna” (Warwick, 2015, p. 11).

The Madonna phenomenon epitomises rules of behaviour that perfectly exemplify the notion of the image or visual aspect as part of the creative text dimension that I propose. In the case of *AF* musicians, they need to not be preoccupied by musical excellence; they need to think of the whole visual ‘package’. It is the visual aspect that conveys individualism, which helps to create traction in the music market above and beyond music. This ultimately extends the images “beyond the medium in which they work and they become part of the larger cultural imaginary” (Shumway, 2015, p. 301).

In the Malaysian music industry, Siti Nurhaliza is probably quite close to Madonna but in a modest and Asian manner. As noted previously, in Chapter 6, she is a Muslim pop diva who is perceived as one of Asia’s new ‘pious superstars’ (see the quotation from Barendregt (2017, p. 214) on page 175). She keeps reinventing herself over time, mostly through her musical outlook or branding, by working with different composers and trying to explore new music genres that are up to date with the current music trends. Her musical strategies and sounds are experimental and explorative. Siti started off with and aced the pop music genre, and later explored traditional Malay music, receiving a remarkable reception from the music market and industry. One of her recent releases is a religious album made by collaborating with religious musicians in Malaysia. She is indeed one of a kind: a pop music idol who has become part of the cultural imaginary, not only for the public but also for other (aspiring) pop musicians in the Malaysian music industry. In fact, several Siti-wannabes arose in the industry who musically sounded like Siti (including her vocal tone and singing style) and

exhibited a similar modest mannerism to the one that Siti initially portrayed. Unfortunately, such wannabes failed to have the same market reception as Siti, having only a short period of 'shelf-life' in the music market.

With a strong notion of cultural imaginary that worked in both industrial and music consumer levels, Siti's image or visual dimension is unique in her own terms, whilst she keeps holding on to being a modest 'pop princess' (Barendregt, 2017), which apparently worked in Malaysian culture. Most importantly, the establishment of such a cultural imaginary established, together with the music repertoire revolution that Siti is associated with, has helped her in securing market attention whilst offering the market something new or exciting from her that ultimately adds value to her visual dimension quite consistently as a pop musician or star in Malaysia.

In the case of *AF*, Mawi can be considered as a pious pop star too. As established elsewhere in this thesis, this pious-seeming individual from a humble background and with his naivety has won over the Malaysian audience tremendously.

"I had no idea about *AF* before and I thought I was just a singing competition – but it is a reality programme and people want to know 'everything' about me...it was kind of a pressure for me to be in that situation when everything is recorded [in the academy]." (Mawi)

Although his naivety caused him some pressure, this visual dimension was truly enticing for the viewers. In addition to that, his Islamic character worked very well in the *AF* hybrid, although it is rather awkward to see such a character or personality appear in Malaysian pop (music) culture.

Through the Siti and Madonna phenomenon, it can be said that a discursive and engaging image or visual of the artists plays a vital role to 'keep the ball rolling'. Unfortunately, this aspect of

the creative text that I propose is something that has been *misregarded* in the *AF* musicians' creative text dimension. Amylea, Bob and Farhan (and myself) can be considered as musicians who were too concerned about developing musicianship and thus inadvertently *misestimated* the importance of curating the visual aspect of our creative text that would be literally helpful to support and advance our musicianship. To put it simply, we did not realise that musicians should consider developing and establishing a visual dimension. On that basis, it can be seen that we have pre-informed knowledge about a music career that is ill-informed wherein knowledge that is irrelevant in this current, media-converged music industry. Although the quotes below may appear a few times in this thesis, they are noteworthy to reiterate those experiences of the *AF* musicians, implicitly signalling that they are not truly concerned to establish and develop the visual dimension.

“I am not a good-looking singer, I admit that. If I invest a lot of money in music production, it is not a way for you to get industry attention or appreciation. They look forward more to those newcomers who have the ‘complete package’, as they always said [emphasising looks and personality] that this kind of artist deserves to have radio airplay.” (Bob)

“I worked very hard in the Akademi. I was always with the teachers, asking questions and trying to utilise the opportunity that I had.” (Amylea)

“It was stressful to do other things other than singing and as you know we kind of lost contact with our family, there is no communication with the outside world, just a focus on the new world that *AF* offered.” (Farhan)

Such experiences of the *AF* musicians illustrated that they have been seriously focusing on the aspect of music and less

bothered about portraying an interesting visual aspect in *AF* (as seen in the experiences of Amylea and Farhan). This might look like a mundane televisual aspect to the viewers as the individuals were just offering the tele-musical aspect that all *AF* students are capable of. In the music industry, on the other hand, the visual aspect is apparently key, as illustrated in the Siti and Madonna phenomena. It can be seen that the *AF* graduates such as Bob (who seems to be less confident about his appearance and look), have indicated that the Malaysian music industry is appreciating musicians who are good-looking and have an interesting personality.

Taken as a whole, it is almost impossible to deny that the visual aspect is fundamental in establishing and supporting the musical aspect of the musicians wherein there is a need for the musicians' creative text to be self-fashioned carefully (although to an extent it can be staged or planned), which therefore cannot be taken slightly by musicians as the text producers.

3.1.3. Writing (narrative)

If the *AF* musicians can fulfil the proposed visual aspect, the next aspect that needs to be considered in the musicians' 'symbolic creativity' in fashioning their creative art is the 'writing' (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This can be more readily understood as *narratives* of the musicians such as their personal stories or backgrounds (as seen in the Mawi, Madonna, Siti phenomena). It is most important to have supportive material that can be deployed through agenda-setting that helps to articulate the creative text established visually and musically. This is similar to Morrow's (2018) 'storytelling', which he identifies as a key process for artist management within the creative and cultural industries. Morrow used the 'stories of youth' as the agenda that usually embodies the narrative of young aspiring musicians in the pursuit of obtaining a professional music career.

“...the start-up phase of some artists’ careers, in ways that are in line with the youth orientation of some sectors of the creative and cultural industries, as well as in terms of this being a process that self-managed artists and artist managers have to engage in throughout a career – constantly reinventing themselves and thinking about what else they can do in their attempts to continue to fascinate an audience” (Morrow, 2018, p. 82).

As such, the agenda-setting here requires more than telling stories to the audience. Rather, it may be a fabrication of stories or narratives that can be manifested through agenda-setting that seems to be essential as a means of sparking market attention and creating public engagement. Before discussing the agenda-setting (which will be further discussed in the next section, in regard to the mediated symbolic text), it is important to understand further what narratives mean in this context of the discussion.

In that respect, it is useful to reflect on Bal’s *Narratology* (2017). According to this scholarly account, it is a field of study that is “the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events – of cultural artefacts that tell a story” (p. 3) that have a variety of purposes and serve many different functions. This can be applied in reading and analysing cultural subjectivity as well, especially in regard to the creative identity that is a symbolic process and an intangible cultural product. Bal’s account illuminates narratives in the combined sense of conception, analysis and evaluation, which further outlines a systematic framework that explains how narratives function, are formed and eventually interpreted (see also Bal, 1985, 1997, 2009 for the previous editions of the book). On that basis, Bal highlights three key concepts, namely *narrative text*, *story* and *fabula*.

“A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and ‘colouring’ of a *fabula*. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors... An *event* is the transition from one state to another state. *Actors* are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To *act* is defined here as to cause or to experience an event” (p. 5).

In the application of three such key conceptions in this chapter’s discussion, the *narrative text* represents the sound and image – the combination of the first two elements that form the creative text, as I proposed earlier in this chapter’s discussion. The narrative texts of those two elements are offered to their intended audience in line with the text creator’s aims. Meanwhile, the *story* is the content of the narrative text that holds and conveys the essence of individualism and the consciousness of the text creators, which contributes to their becoming a symbol of cultural imaginary in society. This manifestation has in turn ‘coloured’ the *fabula*, which further proposes the agenda-setting that lies within text-fashioning. Agenda-setting, which can be considered as an *event* that is managed and performed by the musicians who are the *actors* of the *fabula*, is key to their ensuring that the texts’ circulation in the public sphere remains consistent and effective.

Apart from Mawi, who undoubtedly offered a fascinating and narrative text for the *AF* hybrid, Hazama’s narrative text also contains something that is useful to reflect on. Although he was a hopeful in the *AF4* Prelude and failed to get a confirmed place in that particular season, his journey towards a confirmed place in *AF9*, which was five years later, is something that is inspiring

and eye-opening to both the *AF* viewers and to his senior *AF* graduates. Below is his experience, explaining his journey to becoming an *AF9* participant, which further signals the aspect of narrative that is at work in *AF*.

“In 2011, I was offered a chance to join *AF9* without auditioning. The show was already on and I was offered an opportunity to take the place of a student who had been eliminated. I can still remember when [the *AF9* production team] called me for a meeting – the producer and the host were there to explain about the chance. At that time, *AF9* had no interesting stories [to offer the audience]! So my inclusion is part of the *AF* story too, it being a dramatic show.

From Hazama’s narrative text, it suggests that his narrative – that begins from his failure in *AF4* to his acceptance and success in *AF9* – literally worked for him. Plus, his narrative shows that the *AF* hybrid literally appreciated musicians with a narrative that is able to make ‘good TV’. On that note, this means that musicians literally need a narrative text and further suggests that the *AF* musicians need to aim to create an identity that exceeds their music, one that is discursive and will generate the market hype that raises their visibility in popular culture, generally. Lazarsfeld and Merton (2007) have noted this similar pattern of cultural production outcome but in regard to mass communication, popular taste and organised social action:

“The audiences of mass media apparently subscribe to the circular belief: ‘If you really matter, you will be at the focus of mass attention and, if you are at the focus of mass attention, then surely you must really matter’” (p. 236)

With this outcome, the musicians’ narratives and creative text as a whole tend to offer the highest possible degree of public visibility until the hype begins to wane. If this occurs, it is a signal for the musicians to refresh or correct their offer. However they

do this, they must draw from and on a solid and strong creative identity, one that projects their personal identity, magnetism or 'star quality' (Shumway, 2015).

Overall, it can be argued that the musicians' narratives are the counterpart and complement to the sound and image elements that together combine to form and to maximise a creative text. This further underlines that "a range of social conditions must be in place that enable an individual's talents and personality to become recognised as skilful and charismatic" (Marshall, 2007, p. 4). This can be linked with the *AF* musicians' pop-musicking experience as the narrative may not entirely entitle them to be perceived as skilful and charismatic. Instead, the narrative does add values to their creative text, which somewhat leads such individuals to close proximity to being charismatic and skilful.

Reflecting on the nature of *AF*, it may not be a real problem for the *AF* musicians to develop their own charismatic personas in the *AF* hybrid system as *AF* is literally 'nurturing' individuals to be television musicians –ones who have interesting stories and personal background. In fact, the musicians should imitate how the *AF* hybrid constructs and manages its narratives' dimension, which can be seen as a powerful force in making the show visible to a wider entertainment market. The very premise of the show (realising the dreams of aspirants) suggests the charisma of 'Cinderella' figures who come to stand out from the crowd. Most specifically, the striking feature of the show is that it organises and produces magnetic charismatic personalities (Cvetkovski, 2015), characteristics evinced by the show's judges (who have 'made it' – in part because they are charismatic individuals). This further demonstrates that music reality show judges have their positions because they have music or entertainment industry track records. Plus, they also almost always present themselves as 'larger-than-life' characters who have succeeded because

they are exceptional human beings. Whether this is true or not is not the issue; the issue is that an exaggerated personality is a memorable one and this is a lesson the *AF* musicians can usefully learn.

3.2. As a mediated symbolic product

According to Shuker (2002), mediation is “the act of interpreting between two parties in order to effect/affect a relationship between them; the act of channelling social knowledge and cultural values through an institutional agency to an audience” (p. 189). As noted by O’Sullivan *et al.* (1994), mediation can be seen as one of the chief purposes of mass media, further underlining that they are the corporate mediators between the various fragmented groups, classes and hierarchies of modern society. Hence, mass media and mediation are likely inextricable.

In pop music culture and industry, it is impossible to deny the interconnectedness of music press, television and music radio and the richness of these media contribute to the pop music culture (Percival, 2011) and industry. To put it simply, pop music production and mediation are inseparable logic. Nonetheless, mediation and the *AF* musicians may sound unusual as the musicians are not a mass media entity or a corporate mediator. What I am trying to propose here in relation to the mediated symbolic product is that it is a creative text that consists of the three aspects discussed earlier, namely ‘sounds’ (music), ‘image’ (visual) and ‘writing’ (narrative). When these three aspects are combined, they ultimately form a symbolic product that is ready to be marketed in the music industry. This means that the symbolic product is ready for market entry and is prepared to be mediated in order to reach the target audience. In this way, the musicians should manifest the hybridity of their creative texts by making them available on multiplatform media.

In other words, they need to utilise the social media platforms that they can self-access, such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and so on, to make their symbolic product circulate and reach as many audiences as possible. Hence, the musicians are likely to assimilate the conventional media roles and functions in popular music. On that note, I argue that the mediated symbolic product that I propose here reflects the media's operational behaviour in commercialising musicians' creative texts.

It is apparent that the *AF* musicians have noted the impact of social media platforms in the music industry, which somehow revises how the music industry operates. The following are examples of their observations:

“The music label once told me that they need to buy viewers for YouTube views to make sure that their artists' music videos have a high number of views. This is very important as some radio stations use viewing numbers as an indicator that a song deserves radio airplay. From what I heard, it needs to reach a million viewers, then you can get airplay from the radio. But this was two to three years back. The radio now is kind of knowing who is buying [views] or not...The same goes for Instagram now – it is an indicator too! If you have a high number of followers, you can easily get any opportunity on TV, radio, product endorsements, shows, etc.” (Amylea)

“To be hyped on social media first, then you could get support from the industry, is totally wrong! The support system must come first, then the hype on social media follows. That's how it should be. Just don't get me wrong, I am never against any newcomers [musicians especially YouTube or social media sensations]. In my opinion, we should get the same treatment as anybody else. The industry should value quality as the

primary criterion, then we can create a better industry in the future.” (Bob)

Such evidence indicates that it is vital for the musicians to produce mediated symbolic products as numbers of viewers and followers seemed to be the new benchmark for them to be in the current pop music industry. Further, the musicians needed to act like a media agency or outlet that consistently provides interesting content to the masses. Their creative content should then have a high tendency to be mediated in multiplatform media and be discursive, which could ultimately probably widen their economic opportunities. For instance, *AF* consistently produces a new set of mediated pop music stars every year chiefly in pursuit of profit, fulfilling the hybrid economic interest. Thus, by replicating the nature of the media, the musicians are in the position of a creative enterprise rather than being purely music aesthetes. Additionally, they are likely to widen the horizon of the creative text that seems to offer multidimensional effects that offer them advantages economically and culturally.

In that respect, the mediated identity can be considered as the musicians’ vehicle in developing a fluid and dynamic creative identity. Such a vehicle is best supported by a socio-political instrument such as agenda-setting on the produced symbolic goods. This is to ensure that the mediated creative products and their market outcome would optimise as much time as possible in terms of their market visibility and lifespan. In addition to that, such an approach is likely to create a type of musician with a mediated identity that can be featured in multiplatform media, which is obviously beneficial, especially in establishing the musicians’ sustainability as music or creative labourers.

3.2.1. Agenda-setting

To illustrate that agenda-setting is salient to the construction of a mediated symbolic product, it is worth reflecting on the agenda-setting theory that is predominantly understood in the news media perspective. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda-setting theory generally describes the power of the news media outlet that is capable of influencing the salience of topics that are in line with the public agenda. For instance, in regard to agenda-setting and politics, McCombs (2005) has argued that the media affects politics by shaping the importance assigned to different social problems by the public. This further demonstrates “the impact of heavy news coverage of certain issues on the public’s judgment of the importance of that issue and increase the accessibility of that issue from memory” (Ewoldsen and Rhodes, 2019, p. 85). This makes the issue the most important and prominent topic of that particular moment (McCombs, 2004) in which raises the accessibility (Price and Tewksbury, 1997) of the salient topic or issue that ultimately contributed to the public discourse. This ultimately illustrates the ability of the media to make particular attributes of a phenomenon salient with the help of agenda-setting (Arendt and Brantner, 2015).

From the body of the scholarly works, it can be said that “agenda setting has become an issue of theoretical interest in political science, mass communication and policy-making as scholars seek to explain why certain issues gain prominence and attract the attention of the media, professions, the public and policy-makers” (Cavazos and Szyliowicz, 2011, p. 475; see also Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Carpenter, 2002; Arendt and Brantner, 2015; Lee and Tandoc, 2017).

There is not much difference in agenda-setting in popular music. According to Burns (1998 cited in Reinisch, 2003), “agenda setting argues that the more a story is emphasized by a news medium, the stronger that story’s chances are of being

perceived as important” (p. 27). In the age of a media-converged music industry, agenda-setting is probably the implicit regimentation that lies within pop music commodity production incorporated with media such as television. This can be linked with the work of Goodwin (1992) that scrutinises music in television:

“The [music video] clips must encompass a delivery of pleasure that relates visuals to the music that is being sold, that provides an experience of use-value offering a promise of further use-values in the commodity itself (pp.70-71).

The cultural production process as argued by Goodwin (1992) explains how the agenda-setting is being posited particularly in the music commodity production but in an implicit manner. Although the type of agenda-setting does not involve any salient topics or issues that matter to the wider society (as in the case of politics, for example), it actually signals both the importance and effect of deploying media such as television that seems to be the vehicle for agenda-setting, especially in media industries. As in the pop music industry, the agenda-setting demonstrates the capability of the pop music commodity that can be featured in multiplatform media and marketed across media industries. This further highlights the multidimensional effect that the pop music commodity would potentially offer if it were created with a specific agenda. As I have argued in the previous section of this chapter, the musicians deal with three distinct elements in fashioning their creative identity, namely sound (music), image (visual) and writing (narrative). In dealing with such elements, visual and narrative are likely to be interconnected essentially in setting up an agenda for the pop music commodity, whereas music is likely to be a stand-alone element that is somewhat impossible to fuse with the agenda-setting, especially in the case of the *AF* musicians. Thus, this implies that those two elements are the possible angles that

would be highlighted in advancing the agenda set by the pop music commodity creator.

Hazama is the best example among the *AF* musicians who seemed to have agenda-setting in the pursuit of a professional music career. The following remark from him embodies a strong sense of agenda-setting:

“I have been through the process, watched the show and been around the *AF* stars. I sense that the show needs character, not mainly talent. And I kind of know how to strategize my career, not being too rigid or demanding with the management. That’s my game plan.” (Hazama)

On that note, it is noteworthy to highlight here that his past experience with *AF4* was really helpful for him to reflect on and understand what and how to deal with the *AF* hybrid and the music industry. As noted by him, he participated in Astro-organised tours, which inadvertently allowed him to be in the circle of key industry people. His presence in such a helpful and productive setting, especially for a music hopeful like him, allowed his talent to be recognised comprehensively by the key people, which also allowed him to start networking in the industry. Although he may not have planned this move, his narrative demonstrates that agenda-setting would be useful for the musicians by being self-managed individuals that can have a plan of their musical journey. In other words, agenda-setting can be considered as a pragmatic approach by the musicians to achieve what they seek in the music industry – to get their produced creative texts circulated in multiplatform media, thus allowing the texts and the musicians to get the attention that they are longing for.

3.2.2. 'Conveyor belt': discursive text in multiplatform media

When the symbolic product has been fashioned from the underlying agenda, it further requires an approach or medium that is capable of elevating the agenda, which leads to the rather constant public visibility of the symbolic product in the music market. In that respect, the symbolic product needs to be mediated in as many possible mediums as possible. That said, there is a need to adapt to the television production model, as noted by Miège (1987), namely the flow model with its 'conveyor belt' character.

Miège (1987) noted that the television broadcasting model is meant for filling large segments of the media schedules. The scholar outlined that the television programming "must be uninterrupted, constantly renewed and therefore produced on an unbroken conveyor belt" (p. 276). This is to ensure that television programmes supply endless content to the television audience. With less time and effort spent on editing television shows that are mostly focused on rather basic audio and visual aspects, this television model is able to make the television contents flow out quite, easily especially in comparison with the editorial model of music production, which requires a rather a complex and labour-intensive process (i.e. the process of delivering the end music product to the music market obviously takes more time as it does not only involve the musical aspect; it involves the other two elements of creative texts, as I proposed, namely visual and narrative).

With the character of a conveyor belt, it does not mean that the musicians have to produce their symbolic texts quite rapidly, thereby neglecting the music production mode, as mentioned earlier. Rather, I propose that, in advancing the *AF* graduates' creative texts with this notion of a conveyor belt, the musicians should manifest a sense of constant and consistent visibility of

their creative texts by using any means of multiplatform media. Most notably, to create such an outcome, agenda-setting should be posited as the vehicle in utilising the flow model.

Before I further explain such aspects, it is important that the musicians' creative texts are multidimensionally 'attractive' and have a high tendency to get the audience's attention. This can be done by fashioning interesting images to sell for visual attraction and pleasure; the discursive narrative of the music produced or of the musicians themselves; and having sound or audio that is filling the demands of the targeted market. When the musicians formulate a reasonable blend of those elements, the creative identity produced should be ready to be circulated to the targeted market, which underlines the fact that the symbolic creativity process is carefully planned and crafted, and occurs within a reasonable timeframe and not in a hasty manner.

However, it is inevitably to agree that this conveyor belt ideology might imply a negative impact on the musicians – the public might get sick and tired of seeing the same individuals who appeared on television (which is what happens to music reality shows that suffer format fatigue because they are easily visible in the market or overexposed). As such, it is still not entirely harmful in that it would taint the musicians' industrial status or identity. In fact, it is a wise and beneficial move for the musicians as it is not easy to maintain the visibility of their creative identity in the public sphere, ultimately developing affective economics in a micro and personal scale. As such, it is the current industrial trend and practice to which the musicians need to adapt quickly. Bob implicitly highlighted the conveyor belt nature where the industry appreciates and needs continuous contents from the musicians. Below is the example:

“I was probably overshadowed by the newcomers, [with their] controversies and social media-viral stories so that people didn’t really see me.” (Bob)

After all, this industrial trend explains that a winner takes it all. On that note, whether the musicians like it or not, they are required to adapt the hybridity manifested by *AF*, especially in its consistency in producing a set of talent pool of music hopefuls; and in terms of how the music industry actively produces new sets of pop musicians and continues such a regimentation despite the industry producing more failures than successes.

The potential impacts of the agenda-setting incorporated within the conveyor belt notion are likely to create a discursive symbolic product. This discursive nature enables the product to be mediated obviously via conventional mass media such as television, radio, magazines and so on. In addition to that, the rise of social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter offers an opportunity for the musicians to extend the discourse of the produced symbolic product. In this respect, the musicians are self-autonomous individuals, especially in determining to what extent they want their text to be discursive; and accountable for any outcomes that they might obtain regarding this whole self-production of the symbolic product.

In the music industry specifically, there has been a scholarly account (that it is useful to reflect in this chapter’s discussion) exploring the influence of social media on customer relationships by examining the use of social media by music festival attendees (Hudson *et al.*, 2015). In this study, the results show that “social media does indeed have a significant influence on emotions and attachments to festival brands, and that social media-based relationships lead to desired outcomes such as positive word of mouth” (p. 68, see also for examples Harrigan *et al.*, 2017; Anderton, 2019). What can be learnt from this study is that it

implicitly illustrates that social media can be the agenda-setting vehicle that is capable of creating public engagement in due course.

If we look at the definition of social media as noted by Carr and Hayes (2015), it is “internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content” (p. 49), whereby allowing “users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously” (p. 50). Hence, the notion of ‘masspersonal communication’ that can be linked to social media here is a semblance of agenda-setting – ‘mass’ is likely to propose the publicness whereas ‘personal’ is the intended objective of the communication that is designed based on the content generator interest. On that basis, social media seems to aid the masspersonal communication that can be considered as the agenda-setting, which undeniably encourages the high level of discourse of the text circulated on the given medium.

3.3. Self-enabled musicians

“You need to work out the formula after the *AF* [experience] to keep progressing. Self-discipline is key! – That defines your status and attract people to look forward to you. Also, the character [as a singer] too! –that’s what makes you attractive!” (Hazama)

Based on Hazama’s remarks above, it can be said the *AF* musicians are ultimately enabling themselves to manage every possible dimension and aspect of their own destiny in encountering the disempowering industrial systems for the sake of having a sustainable professional music career in the Malaysian popular music scene. To put it simply, the musicians have no other choice than to self-enable themselves in fashioning, managing and promoting their symbolic products.

This relates to most of the *AF* musicians' experience, as they independently handle such affairs, which recalls the utopian desires discussed before.

"I find myself the sponsors for the music video. I personally contacted the entertainment TV producers on social media, told them about my latest duet single – I did everything on my own. You can't just wait for a miracle!"
(Amylea)

"You know that I never produce [songs] in a cheapskate production." (Bob)

"...I had to struggle, to do everything on my own, producing my own single, using my own budget..."
(Farhan)

These comments exemplify that the musicians attempted to minimise the chance of having a dystopia. By self-fashioning their own creative texts, self-managing the produced symbolic products and being self-promoters of their own mediated symbolic products, this was a way to ensure that they were not wasting any opportunities anymore but were optimising any possible resources that they had to create a satisfactory outcome for the effort they invested.

3.3.1. Celebrity-entrepreneurs

Fairchild (2007) articulates musicians in reality television are 'celebrity musicians'. This recalls the argument of Holmes (2004) about such musicians that are "fundamentally hybrid media stars—the contestants become as much TV personalities as pop stars" (p.151). On that basis, I advance such accounts especially by reflecting on the Malaysian case, arguing that musicians in reality television are celebrity-entrepreneurs – creative individuals who fundamentally work in popular culture,

commercialising any artistic talents that they might possess, as a way to survive as musicians and to have music career sustainability in the first place.

“You have to find a second job in Malaysia as our [music] market is not that big. If you won a [reality] competition, you could not constantly win over the music market constantly” (Mawi)

From Mawi’s observation and experience above, it can be said that focusing on music only is not a sensible move for him. Knowing him who was a Malaysian pop phenomenon, he expressed that a music career in Malaysia has no apparent security, although he has been in the highest hierarchy of stardom in Malaysia. Plus, he felt that the music industry is indeed a precarious creative arena and further suggested that there is a need for musicians to diversify their creative careers, as a way to maintain their music career.

It is evident that the musicians are likely to become celebrities rather than purely pop musicians. For instance, Mawi has become an actor, film director and radio deejay; Hazama is now actively starring in films and television dramas; Bob is a vocal coach; and Amylea is now a successful songwriter for big names and herself (only Farhan has not exhibited a career-diversifying move, staying as a jazz singer). Hence, these findings ultimately propose that the musicians are most likely to be celebrity-entrepreneurs – the type of creative workers who are not focusing on one dimension of creative arts only as their career pathway. As noted before, their entrepreneurism is not primarily driven by the ideology of profit-maximisation. It is primarily driven by the precarity that they found in the music industry which somehow sparked the innovation in them. As such, the innovation that manifested through career diversification is just a way for them to survive and sustain their

passion in their music career in the first place. In this way, this allows the creative workers to become the subjects of cultural value in a wider entertainment industry that offers the opportunity to diversify their income streams too. This is an advantage for them, although it is obviously something that they have not anticipated in terms of their career trajectory, as their utopian desires in terms of music somehow indicated that they wanted to achieve self-realisation. Such an outcome ultimately signals that they worked to be stars through their pop-musicking.

Nonetheless, the musicians' experiences have indicated the flattening of distinctions between stars, celebrities and personalities, further signalling "the lament about the decline of status and value which attends modern celebrity" (Redmond and Holmes, 2007, p. 6), particularly in a media-converged music industry. On that note, that is not the main concern. It is acceptable to have a decline of status and value, especially in the case of *AF* musicians. Stardom, celebrity or personality (or instant noodles artist) is not something that we need to be concerned with here as we are dealing with pop musicians with staying power issues. The most important aspect the musicians are likely to be concerned with is to create durability in the challenging and changing music industry. This means that it is bearable for the musicians to embark on their professional industrial journey as celebrity-entrepreneurs before finally landing on their preferred creative career. In this way, their self-enabled and self-reliant dispositions allow them to explore which creative sectors suit and work for them. Such experiences are valuable as they allow the musicians to be in several creative industry sectors, particularly in a wider entertainment industry, illustrating that the musicians have no issues in gaining market entry to various creative industries.

Most importantly, this career-diversifying strategy offers various income streams to the musicians wherein they are

capable of creating financial stability. At some point in the musicians' journey in the various creative careers that they might venture into, if they have reached the stage where they have the financial stability and capability to invest in themselves without relying on the entertainment powerhouses or corporations, this will be a positive sign that they have the resistance – the strong disposition of staying power as creative or cultural beings in the public domain. As such, this will ultimately liberate them to access the music economy for as long as they would want to, leading them to have career stability especially in music. Having said that, they have to position themselves as celebrity-entrepreneurs, exploit and monetise every possible opportunity, for their own good, to ensure that they can stay in the music economy system for as long as possible. This is the reason why the *AF* musicians that I interviewed are still actively pursuing music careers despite the challenges and hardship they endure. Therefore, it can be said that they do have the durability and the staying power that allow them to still be pop-musicking, although not as actively as before. Their career diversification is indeed helping them in preserving their passion in music.

4. Conclusion

“Popular cultural texts are regarded as dynamic not static, mediated both by patterns of economic and social organisation and the relationship of individuals and social groups to these patterns.” (Shuker, 2001, p. 25)

The three stages of negotiation that I have outlined, namely creative text, mediated symbolic product and self-enabled musicians, suggest that the musicians' whole identity or representation is dynamic; it considers the situations that they are in. In the Malaysian context, the process and outcome of the media-converged music industry is apparently different from the

ones that have ever been ritualised by the conventional music industry. This is in line with the account of Shuker above, further underlining that there are actually several stakeholders that are implicitly involved in forming the texts by considering their beliefs and demands, whereby the symbolic text production is not solely embodying the musicians' role and representation. Plus, such stakeholders have their own systems of operation or economies of behaviour that are usually unmatched with the aspiring musicians'. Due to the dynamic (and turmoil) in this cultural production process that involves several 'co-producers', the musicians are the main party that is truly responsible for any outcomes that they might get in terms of the symbolic product produced, especially when dealing with failure.

Therefore, the three dimensions of negotiation is a counter-active productive formula – the way for the musicians to revive the disempowerment that has occurred in their music career, especially in the Malaysian context. Taken as a whole, the key to this strategy is to be self-centred musicians who embody the ideology of individualism – the ones who are actively involved in every creative dimension, especially in decision-making and making sure the wanted outcome of the produced texts is achieved. This further expects the musicians to always be innovative creative practitioners who find the loopholes in the industrial systems that can be exploited for their long-term benefits. The industry's nature and system, since forever, have always been associated with a high degree of exploitation at every possible level, which in turn is unfavourable and unequal for the musicians.

“Passion’ becomes a necessity in the neoliberal workplace because its work of denial erases contradictions and legitimates the extended appropriation of the worker’s time (what Andre Gorz (1999) called the

‘total mobilization of [the worker’s] personality’ in work)”
(Couldry, 2008, p.6)

The above remark is useful to ponder as there are two themes related to this chapter’s discussion – ‘passion’ and ‘total mobilisation’ – that I think are closely linked in deriving a conclusion for the chapter. First, passion is essentially a key for musicians to possess and it embodies a rather broad connotation if we just highlight that musicians must have passion. Thus, what the passion should encompass is the type of passion that allows creative labourers to easily adapt to changes in appropriate manners. To put it simply, the kind of passion I am referring to here is one that preserves the musicians’ musical ambition and goals, and permits them to react to any situations they are probably in, without forgetting their true intention of being involved in the music industry. In this sense, total mobilisation, namely career diversification, is essentially helping the musicians to find options to maintain their music careers whilst venturing into various fields of creative arts.

Nevertheless, I am aware that there is no assurance that my proposed career strategy *will* work in all cases of music reality television graduates, as pop music and the industry involve a complex relationship between music producers (e.g. music composer, musician, etc.) and music consumer that are hugely subjective; thus, it is difficult to anticipate and come up with an effective blueprint for a successful music career. But at least this is an attempt to strategise a pop music career that is traditionally understood as a career with no apparent security for the musicians and one which highly embodies uncertainty. Most importantly, such a career is in a media-converged music industry that deals with a high degree of inauthenticity in every possible dimension whilst the stars that this industry produced are in several important senses artificial (Shumway, 2014), including the industrial systems and regimentation that are

derived typically against authenticity. At the very least, the proposed contemporary career strategy is a reflection and analysis based on the musicians' true stories – the real testimonies of individuals who have been through the industrial systems in realising their musical dreams. And, in human civilisation, we have always learned from the past to create a better version of ourselves in the future. The same applies in the context of the musicians' pop music career and the music industry.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

1. Concluding thoughts

From this thesis's exploration, it can be said that my enquiries concerning the *AF* graduates' career experiences have illustrated that the musicians are 'operationally disempowered', recalling the work of Jones (2002) on the music industry. From my analysis of the *AF* graduates' career experiences, I have found more than just disempowerment, signalling the vulnerabilities of such individuals as creative labourers in the music industry. Rather, the industrial systems that are distorted and being so manipulative to aspirant musicians have slightly driven this thesis's enquiry to acknowledge something that is probably out of the initial discussion parameters. This is where the three meta concepts emerged, namely creative misalignment, career misdirection and creative destruction, that indirectly informed the *AF* musicians' experiences.

As established, creative misalignment is the concept that illustrates the musicians preparing for something that is mismatched with the *AF* star machinery expectation. Owing to this, the musicians have become unprepared cultural entrepreneurs in the music industry or the concept that I termed career misdirection. This is where the industry is seen as less appreciative of musicianship, or I coined this phenomenon as musicless industry. Creative destruction further explained the whole industrial situation that disrupted the musicians' music economy. In other words, these meta concepts illustrate the harm of the industrial systems, which in some ways are not totally supportive of young aspirant individuals in their music careers. All of this demonstrates that the musicians have always been the target of control – the main victims of the industrial systems.

“On one side are the heroes – the musicians, producers and performers (the creative artists); opposing them are the villains – the record companies and entertainment corporations (the commercial corrupters and manipulators)” (Negus, 1996, p. 46).

Reflecting on Negus’s remark above in deriving a conclusion for this thesis’s exploration, the musicians might be seen as heroes in the music industry as they are traditionally being perceived as music practitioners who appreciate and value music as music, whilst such individuals reject the ideology of commodification, which seems to be a ‘virus’ gradually destroying their passion. In a way, these creative individuals establish the importance of treating music aesthetics seriously, which literally informs their true representation and identification in the industry. On that basis, they could be seen not only as the heroes as described by Negus; they are actually popular servants in the ‘glitz’ who work in a very precarious industry that offers no apparent security to them, especially in the sense of honouring their services to the industry. For the ones who have managed to sustain their position in such a capitalist system, they are the survivors. This further indicates that they have tried to survive with the constant but implicit disruption that has been brought by the music and creative corporations that were endlessly corrupting the systems and manipulating them with their terms about the economics of opportunity determined for the musicians. Such exploitation of the musicians could not take place without a mediation employed by the music corporations and which usually occurs in the music industry with the help of an instrument or approach that seems to help the industry in the first place, but actually offers some potential harms to the musicians, especially in developing their profile building.

Despite all the danger the musicians have been exposed to, there is a silver lining that they have not actually realised.

Although the reality TV stars are perceived as ‘instant noodles’ artists, this type of artist apparently embodies the ‘sustainable diet’ elements that benefit their survival in a wider entertainment market. On that note, it is just a matter of being aware that they are actually effective popular identities who have a remarkable impact on the Malaysian entertainment landscape, even though not entirely in music. That is how the contemporary pop musicians’ career strategy is derived which is based on the reflection of the musicians experience. In other words, the strategy proposed is a risk management strategy for the musicians in surviving their music careers. The musicians experience might portray something that is not good in the first place, but it exemplifies something tremendous from the perspective of cultural production, which is extra mileage for such musicians. Bear in mind that not *all* types of musicians are lucky enough to be associated with a cultural phenomenon. The *AF* musicians are not just located in the *AF* hybrid production – a powerful popular culture mechanism that optimises its available resources and becomes a remarkable cultural production mechanism. In fact, they are the frontline workers who complete and run such a hybrid system that ultimately contribute to the *AF* phenomenon. This means that the economics of opportunity offered by *AF* to its prospects is very valuable *if* the musicians know how to manipulate it. It is hoped that they are always aware that they are *in* the popular culture where there is a substantial need to have a sense of populism, which is arguably the key to success in the entertainment industry.

2. Limitations

This thesis explored the career experience of *AF* stars – from their first encounter with the *AF* hybrid production as an amateur until they have been released into the music industry and are in

the professional 'league' in the industry. The employed autoethnographic method, supported with interviews with selected participants, is capable of illuminating the industry's reality that has apparently contributed to the knowledge of popular music especially in the Malaysian realm. Nonetheless, this study is limited by the degree to which participants were selected, as they were from different *AF* seasons. But the rationale for just focusing on the selected individuals instead of selecting certain *AF* seasons is because the selected individuals are actually the ones that are situated in the *AF* phenomenon as a reality show and, in fact, they are the ones that literally helped to establish the *AF* phenomenon. In addition, the *AF* phenomenon does not just last for a season, thus indicating that the *AF* participants chosen for the interviews (regardless of seasons) are a rich data source for this research.

When researching the individuals' personal experience, it is crucial to bear this context in mind while providing analysis: that this research is also limited by the nature of qualitative research itself, particularly the dilemma of most social scientists encountered in ensuring the transparency of the stories told by the interviewees. This means that there may be yet deeper layers of the individuals' stories that were not entirely revealed in this research. Although I may know them personally and they are happy to have participated in the interviews, it does not mean that they were willing to share everything that might show their vulnerabilities as musicians and ordinary people. That said, I have invested the best possible effort in ensuring transparency by utilising my industry position and my relationship with the selected respondents. I have taken any necessary measures to ensure the best level of transparency that I could obtain.

Finally, there was a limited period of time for the fieldwork of this research. I was only allowed by my PhD funder to return to my home country for one month to conduct the fieldwork as

that was the agreement for the sponsored PhD students who studied abroad. That said, two months seems to be a practical amount of time to be in the field in order to complete this research. Moreover, there was no fund allocated for the fieldwork, which was truly a challenge for me as an international student to manage the financial aspect of the fieldwork. Also, it was quite challenging to arrange the interview schedule as I was dealing with public figures with a rather busy schedule. Given such circumstances, the preparation before entering the field proved to be key. I would say that my industrial position has several advantages for completing fieldwork on a tighter schedule. These advantages include initial contacts, a sense of intimacy or similarity that the interviewees can relate to, and the interviewees were free to express their feelings while not being 'guarded' by their managers. In the end, the fieldwork ran smoothly and I gathered a substantial amount of data, even though it was conducted in a relatively compressed timeframe.

3. Future research prospects and areas

The precarity of working in the music industry has been widely discussed in the academic context and the case of *AF* musicians is one of the case studies that illuminate the given concern. This means that, from the *AF* musicians' career experiences, it is clear that the Malaysian music industry has its harmful nature to musicians that distracts from and pressures them in achieving what they seek in the creative field. Having mentioned this, it would be interesting to know more about the mental health and well-being of the individuals. Understanding the pressure points for this would illuminate the psychological impact on the music labourers in an industry that seems to be a battlefield rather than an arena for expressing creativity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participant consent form (Mawi)

Participant consent form
Version 2 | 28th May 2018



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project: Career Trajectory of Malaysian Popular Music Reality TV Stars:
A Case of *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*

Researcher(s): Syamsul Hirdi Muhid

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the participant information sheet dated 28th May 2018 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw before the interview starts without giving any reason, without my rights being affected.
3. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will have an option of anonymity and I agree with the level of confidentiality and opt to be not to be anonymised in this research.
4. I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the University of Liverpool. I understand that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the research project.
6. I agree that the data will be retained in secure storage digitally on the University of Liverpool M Drive for use in future academic research until the researcher completed his PhD.
7. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.
8. I understand that I can request access to the data collected. Any changes (if applicable) should be made before the data will be processed and submitted to the University of Liverpool.
9. I agree to take part in the above study.

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ASUAWI BIN ANI
Participant name

24/7/2018
Date

[Signature]
Signature

Syamsul Muhid
Name of person taking consent

24/7/2018
Date

[Signature]
Signature

Syamsul Muhid
Researcher

24/7/2018
Date

[Signature]
Signature

Appendix 2. Participant consent form (Hazama)

Participant consent form
Version 2 | 28th May 2018



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project: Career Trajectory of Malaysian Popular Music Reality TV Stars:
A Case of *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*

Researcher(s): Syamsul Hirdi Muhid

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the participant information sheet dated 28th May 2018 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw before the interview starts without giving any reason, without my rights being affected.
3. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will have an option of anonymity and I agree with the level of confidentiality and opt to be / not to be anonymised in this research.
4. I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the University of Liverpool. I understand that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the research project.
6. I agree that the data will be retained in secure storage digitally on the University of Liverpool M Drive for use in future academic research until the researcher completed his PhD.
7. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.
8. I understand that I can request access to the data collected. Any changes (if applicable) should be made before the data will be processed and submitted to the University of Liverpool.
9. I agree to take part in the above study.

HAZAMA SHAWAB AZMI 19/7/18
Participant name Date


Signature

Syamsul Muhid 19.7.18
Name of person taking consent Date


Signature

Syamsul Muhid 19.7.18
Researcher Date


Signature

Appendix 3. Participant consent form (Amylea)

Participant consent form
Version 2 | 28th May 2018



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project: Career Trajectory of Malaysian Popular Music Reality TV Stars:
A Case of *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*

Researcher(s): Syamsul Hirdi Muhid

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the participant information sheet dated 28th May 2018 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw before the interview starts without giving any reason, without my rights being affected.
3. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will have an option of anonymity and I agree with the level of confidentiality and opt to be / not to be anonymised in this research.
4. I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the University of Liverpool. I understand that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the research project.
6. I agree that the data will be retained in secure storage digitally on the University of Liverpool M Drive for use in future academic research until the researcher completed his PhD.
7. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.
8. I understand that I can request access to the data collected. Any changes (if applicable) should be made before the data will be processed and submitted to the University of Liverpool.
9. I agree to take part in the above study.



AMYLEA BT AZIZAN
Participant name

11/7/2018
Date

[Signature]
Signature

Syamsul Muhid
Name of person taking consent

11/7/2018
Date

[Signature]
Signature

Syamsul Muhid
Researcher

11/7/2018
Date

[Signature]
Signature

Appendix 4. Participant consent form (Bob)

Participant consent form
Version 2 | 28th May 2018



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project: **Career Trajectory of Malaysian Popular Music Reality TV Stars:
A Case of *Akademi Fantasia (AF)***

Researcher(s): Syamsul Hirdi Muhid

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the participant information sheet dated **28th May 2018** for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw before the interview starts without giving any reason, without my rights being affected.
3. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will have an option of anonymity and I agree with the level of confidentiality and opt to be / not to be anonymised in this research.
4. I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the University of Liverpool. I understand that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the research project.
6. I agree that the data will be retained in secure storage digitally on the University of Liverpool M Drive for use in future academic research until the researcher completed his PhD.
7. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.
8. I understand that I can request access to the data collected. Any changes (if applicable) should be made before the data will be processed and submitted to the University of Liverpool.
9. I agree to take part in the above study.

<u>YUSRIZAN USOP</u>	<u>11.7.18</u>	<u></u>
Participant name	Date	Signature
<u>SYAMSUL MUHID</u>	<u>11.7.18</u>	<u></u>
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
<u>SYAMSUL MUHID</u>	<u>11.7.18</u>	<u></u>
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 5. Participant consent form (Farhan)

Participant consent form
Version 2 | 28th May 2018



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project: **Career Trajectory of Malaysian Popular Music Reality TV Stars:
A Case of *Akademi Fantasia* (AF)**

Researcher(s): **Syamsul Hirdi Muhid**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the participant information sheet dated **28th May 2018** for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw before the interview starts without giving any reason, without my rights being affected.
3. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will have an option of anonymity and I agree with the level of confidentiality and opt **to be** not to be anonymised in this research.
4. I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the University of Liverpool. I understand that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
5. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the research project.
6. I agree that the data will be retained in secure storage digitally on the University of Liverpool M Drive for use in future academic research until the researcher completed his PhD.
7. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.
8. I understand that I can request access to the data collected. Any changes (if applicable) should be made before the data will be processed and submitted to the University of Liverpool.
9. I agree to take part in the above study.

Nur Farhan Binti Azman
Participant name

10/07/18
Date

Signature

Syamsul Muhid
Name of person taking consent

10/7/18
Date

Signature

Syamsul Muhid
Researcher

10/7/18
Date

Signature