

# What Makes Them Dream on?: The Influence of Social and Psychological Assets on Young Musicians' Decision to Stay in the Profession\*

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*One of the eye-catching changes in the Korean labor market over the last decade is the rapid increase in the proportion of young creative workers. It is also widely known that the majority of these workers experience contingent work alongside meagre and sporadic income. However, despite the constant obstacles to continuation of their career, and despite the fact that many do discontinue, the labor market in this sector still grows. This contradictory situation can also be encountered in the music industry, which is the focus of this study. The conventional wisdom attributes the expansion of the labor market to the pervasion of 'hope labor,' and its high churn rates to musicians' immediate financial insecurity. This study challenges these naïve explanations by asking why some people leave their occupation while a significant number of others who make similar earnings stay. We examined different sets of resources which musicians can mobilize to explain the varieties of choices that they make regarding their career. The results suggest that economic factors including immediate earnings do not determine musicians' desire to continue their professional career in music. Rather, they evidence that social networks of musicians and their ability to construct the future affect musicians' career prospect.*

**Keywords:** youth, music industry, career prospect, career interruption, human capital, social networks, dream

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## Introduction

One of the eye-catching changes in the Korean labor market over the last decade is the rapid increase in the proportion of the young creative workers. Like many other creative industries, including media, film, visual and performing arts, and game and application development, the music industry has witnessed a massive influx of young people with full of passion and desire. At the same time, it is widely known that the majority of creative workers in the music industry earn below the minimum wage and face obstacles to continuation of their professional careers. This contradiction intrigued us to ask the following questions: Why do so many young people still enter the industry despite undeniable expectations of financial hardship and an extremely uncertain future? Moreover, what are the critical factors that affect them to cope with such difficulties and continue pursuing a professional career?

As the environment of this sector has been changing entirely and rapidly, answers to these questions are more elusive than ever, and an investigation into these young musicians' visions and perspectives are in need. The digitization of music production and platform-based sourcing and distribution have changed the labor market of the contemporary music industry greatly (Kwon 2017; Kwon et al. 2017). On the one hand, they helped to lower the entry barrier (Bockstedt et al. 2006), while on the other hand, these advances in technology seemingly threaten musicians' careers by replacing artistic skills with automated digital equipment such as digital audio workstation (DAW). This creates a large reservoir of people on the boundary between amateurs and professionals, and decreases the prices of musical creations (Bruns 2006; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

Overall, technological changes have intensified competition in the labor market by allowing more entry but less survival. Contemporary literature regarding the impact of digitalization on workers tends to suggest the deepening precarity of the creative workers (Arditi 2014; Huws 2014). The digital transformation also eroded the organizational bureaucracy that used to govern the production process and human resources. This demise of firms and the emergence of project-based temporary work have transferred a greater share of the risks in the labor market onto individual artists.

In these product and labor market circumstances, where the majority of musicians make very little income, we have observed that their professional career expectancies vary significantly. While immediate financial

circumstances must be critical for surviving as a musician, it does not seem to be the single most important determinant of the musicians' desire to continue in their professional career in music.

In this exploratory study, we aim to better understand the conditions for the survival of the increasingly vulnerable musicians in the changing environment. Using a unique survey data (administered in autumn 2017) targeted at professional musicians who have prior experience in working on at least one commercially released album, we shed light on the critical resources that help musicians to hold a positive prospect for their careers and thus make variance in musicians' visions.

In the following section, we review the existing literature focusing on the precarity of independent contractors and freelancers in the popular music industry and discuss the types of resources which these musicians can rely on to maintain their creative work activities despite their financial vulnerability. Here, we pay attention to three types of resources – economic, social and psychological – which enable us to set forth a series of hypotheses. A review of research method and results of the analysis follow, and the paper concludes with a discussion on the main findings and their implications.

## The precarity of musicians' working life

The last decade has witnessed a rapid growth in the Korean pop (K-Pop) music industry. The global awareness of K-Pop as a part of the Korean Wave has also been increasing at a fast speed, driven by the popularity of the genre in the Asian region. The export volume of K-Pop has increased to more than 400 million USD in 2016, a 16.2% increase from the previous year, and this trend has continued over the past few years (Korea Creative Contents Agency, hereinafter KCCA 2018). The success of K-Pop and the rise of Korean pop musicians as world stars seems to be associated with the increase in young people's entry into the creative labor market (KCCA 2017). Numerous young people dream about becoming a K-pop star and queue up for an endless list of company auditions for years. The dreams they hold, of course, are not based on close observations of the average musician's professional life or well-founded expectations. Only a handful of these young talents manage to become a part of mainstream K-pop, while the vast majority of young musicians work in the periphery, building up their profile and waiting for rare chances to be picked up by one of the production companies.

The K-Pop phenomenon has grown to cover a variety of music genres and at the same time has set new norms and institutions in the industry. Against the global trend of demising corporate organizations, both big and small production companies have mushroomed in the contemporary Korean music industry. Having given birth to K-Pop and led its success, these companies have become a central player in creating and changing norms and practices in the industry. These enterprises do not only orchestrate entire music production chains but also select, train, manage, and brand their contracted musicians in a tightly controlling manner. Changes in employment relations demonstrate an example of norm changes in the industry. Many popular musicians who used to be a freelancer have now entered a unique quasi-employment relationship with a production company. The status of the musicians affiliated with these companies are not that of an employee; instead, they are independent contractors. On paper, musicians are contracted to perform and create music under a work-based arrangement. In reality, however, the nature of the musician's relationship to the production company is that of a captive, and the affiliated musicians are exclusively attached to the company. At the same time, although they are not eligible for labor rights and most of them significantly have lost their autonomy, this relationship allows the musicians to enjoy a certain extent of stability relying on the organizational assets the company can offer as long as the work-based contract lasts.

Meanwhile, despite its tremendous influence, mainstream K-pop does not represent all of the music industry in Korea. There still exist many young people seeking alternative music styles that have a relatively minor presence in Korea and are independent from the mainstream K-pop scene. The growth of such independent musicians may be explained by Korea's transformation toward a post-industrial consumer society. The new generation, consisting of highly-educated and culturally-enriched individuals, form a significant mass who are passionate about engaging in the creative industry both as consumers and creators. Although some of them are under an exclusive contract with a small minor label or a production company, the majority have loose or no connection at all with a formal organization and work independently or collaboratively on a temporal basis. They might be considered project-based freelancers on collaborative work arrangements (Eurofound 2015).<sup>1</sup> Digitization has enabled musicians to work entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Under this work arrangement, freelancers, the self-employed or micro enterprises, cooperate on various projects overcome the limitations of size, deficiency of resources and professional isolation

independently but, in most cases, encouraged project-based, temporal collaboration as it lowers the searching costs for recruiting better talent and facilitates the division of labor in the work processes. Although freelancers and collaborative musicians enjoy relatively more freedom and autonomy than those independent contractors mentioned above, they face greater insecurity in their financial situations with few or no organizational assets to mobilize. According to the survey of artists administered by The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2015, over 80% of the musicians in the popular music industry work under a freelance contract, and 94% of musicians who have side jobs for a living said that it is hard to concentrate on creative activities. Another survey on freelance musicians in the popular music industry conducted by the KCCA in 2015 uncovered that 71% of the respondents earned below 1 million KRW a month, which is more or less equivalent to what people make as minimum wage. Also, 77% of the respondents reported that they had extra sources of income outside their music activities. However, the average income from the side jobs, which are usually not related to creative work, is still below the monthly minimum wage (KCCA 2015). Lee and Keum (2017) also reported that the intra-group income inequality is higher for artists compared to that of the total workforce which reflects the widely known winner-takes-all system in the popular culture industry. They also mention that as a result, the income distribution of artists was considerably skewed to the left, with the mean lower than the median (Lee and Keum 2017).

Today's rapid technological advancement could worsen this situation for the more indigent musicians. The majority of listeners, for example, no longer intend to possess music but prefer to consume it by getting access to a platform on a small monthly fee (i.e., Spotify and Apple Music). On-demand unlimited music streaming services via platforms are now the most popular channel to consume music (Kwon 2017), with some platforms, such as Youtube, providing services free of charge. The reduced costs of ICT and omnipresent smart devices have also facilitated this change in the way music is consumed. Melon music, the largest platform offering music streaming services in Korea has more than 3 million members. In a similar vein, while the sales from music downloads have decreased from 67 million USD in 2011 to 62 million USD in 2014, the streaming service segment has doubled its sales from 59 million USD in 2011 to 107 million in 2014 (PwC 2014).

In this sort of wholesale system, pricing an individual piece of music is

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(Eurofound 2015, p. 8).

becoming increasingly meaningless. The availability of millions of music products has had an effect on listeners' behaviors and tastes as well, making them more momentary and fleeting. It has become challenging for musicians to hold the listeners' attention for a longer time span, especially in the case of relatively lesser known musicians and those who do not have organizational support in marketing and distribution. This system has reduced the gains of creators and performers not only by reducing the product price but also through the unfair distribution of profit (Kwon 2017). According to the current arrangements, the service provider, including platforms, take 40%, production companies and distributors take 44%, and remaining 16% of the sales profit go to copyrighters (10%) and music performers (6%). Combined with the reduced prices, a copyrighter earns only 0.6 KRW, and a performer receives as low as 0.36 KRW for a single piece of music played via a streaming service (Kwon 2017), meaning that musicians earn almost nothing from their creative activities. Also, musicians are not eligible for social income transfers in most cases, mainly because social incomes are tied to employment arrangements which are inapplicable to the musicians.

Consequently, independent musicians who neither hold large-scale fandoms nor have big hits find it very tough to survive. If we define precarity as a precarious existence that lacks in predictability, job security, material welfare, or psychological stability (Standing 2011), then the vast majority of musicians in Korea are in the position of precarity.

## What sorts of assets matter the most?: Do economic, social, and psychological assets affect musicians to endure a tough life?

As discussed above, precarity is the key factor that threatens the industrial as well as individual musicians' sustainability.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the macro changes and the unfair distribution system discussed so far, there are also endogenous factors that amplify the precarity of the music industry. Artistic skills take a painstakingly long time to develop, and many early-career musicians need to continue improving their skills, investing time and money while accepting lower payments, until peer creative workers, and perhaps the audience, recognize their musical skills (Choi and Ahn 2017). Also, there is a great

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the suicides committed by two extremely-impooverished young creative workers caused an uproar in Korean society and increased the social awareness of the precarious conditions of artists. The events triggered the enactment of a legislation for supporting artists' well-being (Choi and Ahn 2017).

extent of uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in artistic labor. It is difficult to measure the value of the skills and the outcomes, and the standardization of both the work processes and their results is almost impossible. These occupational characteristics have been associated with the increasing phenomenon of the so-called “hope labor.” According to Keuhn and Korrigan (2013, p. 9), hope labor is defined as un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure in the hope that future work (or employment) opportunities may follow. The exploitation of hope labor has been prevalent in the creative industry, where the boundary between work and training is particularly murky, playing a significant role in worsening the quality of young musicians’ work and life (Hesmondalff and Baker 2011).

We, by and large, agree that these endogenous mechanisms of creative work reinforce the structural problem of (re-)producing cheap and unstable labor. Yet, despite the high risk of falling into this precarious position, young talents still step into the musicians’ field and a significant number of currently working musicians achieve and mobilize a set of resources to maintain their profession. Relying heavily on the precarity argument does not help much to explain why we still see an overflow of young people entering the creative labor market, where any illusions must have been discarded through their direct or indirect experience with time-consuming but elusive pursuit of success in the industry. Also, if we underline the precarity of young musicians, we do not have a satisfactory explanation of why some people leave their occupation while the significant number of others who make similar earnings stay. Therefore, a further investigation is needed to get a closer understanding of the reality of the creative labor market in the music industry. The appropriate question then is to ask what sorts of resources encourage them to stay and continue their creative activities rather than leave.

Existing literature explains creative workers’ decisions to leave or stay by relying heavily on individual passion and immediate economic insecurity. Many studies which have observed the large number of youths who perform voluntarily (uncompensated) work or endure poor working conditions in the creative industries interpret the phenomenon as being motivated by their passion or the intrinsic pleasure that they could get from the process or outcomes of creative work (Hesmondalff and Baker 2016; Rowlands and Handy 2012; Alvarez and Svejnova 2002; Caves 2000). However, attributing the cause of the retention, or the lack thereof, to individual passion does not provide a satisfactory explanation. To start with, individual passion is not a

sustainable variable that remains constant within an individual. More importantly, passion is a concept too vague to measure, and blinds us to the substantial reality, including the structural and institutional constraints, that affects individual decisions. Others attribute the creative workers' decisions to quit to immediate insecurities in jobs or income (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Of course, the assessment is persuasive given the low income of creative workers, but it is too simple. It is questionable if this financial issue is the single most important reason behind the decision to quit. If this was the case, the legislation to provide special financial support to artists should have had better results in securing artists, instead of being widely criticized for its ineffectiveness in Korea (Choi and Ahn 2017).

Instead of relying solely on these unsatisfactory explanations, we turn to resource-driven reasoning. In other words, we set out to test the creative workers' actual ability to mobilize crucial resources for their long-term survival or success. The types of resources we include in our analysis are economic, social, and psychological resources that can be mobilized at the individual level. Besides individuals' earnings, we consider as economic resources their family's socio-economic status as an important income source as well as human capital. The social resources include organizational affiliations and social networks. We also expect psychological assets to be critical, especially for young creative workers, whose work processes and outcomes are uncertain, and who require a great deal of motivation as well as the ability to cope with this uncertainty. Thus, in this sense, we pay attention to the psychological ability to cope with the current (difficult) situation by constructing the future rather than to a particular state of emotion.

### *Individual economic resources*

First of all, in terms of economic resources, we argue that the economic background in which the individual musician is embedded is essential. Although we focused on the musician's own income base in our earlier discussion, many previous studies have stressed the importance of the transferred income musicians receive from their parents because the earnings from music activities tend to be too low. The family's socio-economic status, i.e., their socio-economic class, influences creative workers' prospect, because it is significantly associated with musical skill formation (Alper and Wassall 2006; McKinlay and Smith 2009; Gosden 2015; Choi and Ahn 2017). As mentioned before, to reach a professional skill level as a musician requires a great deal of investment both in time and money. Musicians have to pay for a

significant amount of formal or informal training which is often costly, and they must endure a long unpaid vocational training period even after entering the profession. Without parental support, the artists need to spend a large portion of their time on a side job to continue their training, which naturally prolongs their skill formation. In fact, researchers have reported many drop-outs among young musicians from lower-class families (Gosden 2015), especially in liberal market economies such as the US and the UK where there are fewer universal or occupation-specific welfare to support underprivileged young musicians. Therefore, it is possible to infer that the economic class of the musician's family would be one of the significant factors that affect young musicians' ability to continue in their musical profession.

**H1:** If the musician has a higher socio-economic family background, he or she is less likely to experience an interruption but more likely to stay in the profession.

Also, related to the skills we just discussed, the level of human capital that individual musicians attained would affect their ability to maintain their profession. Human capital is a stock of productive matter including useful skills and knowledge that is in substantial part of a product achieved by deliberate human investment to perform labor so as to produce economic value (Goldin 2014; Schultz 1961) Human capital has also long been recognized as the primary element of the wage equations (Becker 1994; Mincer 1993). The discussion on the systemic skills criteria or the skills formation processes of creative artists is undocumented in existing literature. It is partly because the skills and knowledge required to conduct creative work are hard to measure. However, this measurability issue is common for knowledge work in general. Other possible reasons include the lack of well-established formal training (in most cases, apprenticeship) processes and professional recognition in the form of occupational credential. The more prestigious a professional occupation is, the harder it becomes for one to get the occupational license to enter the occupational labor market. Although the occupational license does not directly prove the level of knowledge and skills the holder reaches, it at least signals that the person obtains the peer recognition which is hard to get. In the case of the popular music industry, the entry barrier is quite low, and no occupational license is involved in the entry. Although the industry generally lacks the formal recognition system of skills, and the entry does not accompany an expensive boarding pass, it does not mean that the profession does not require an adequate skills set. Many

take responsibility for managing their own training, and music production is also a sort of knowledge work that requires a tough training process.

We consider the comprehensive skill set required for contemporary musicians to be composed of creativity, artistic skills, and digital skills. Being both creative and artistic is fundamental for any musician, as these skills are essential for creating the creative worker's identity and for being recognized as a professional creator. Creativity and artistry include originality, that is, the element that differentiates one artists' ideas and works from those of others, and the ability to come up with new ways of expression or contents, the imagination to combine unrelated contents and materials in a unique way. Because people tend to believe that these abilities cannot be taught but are innate, they often ignore the systemic training process that is necessary to develop these abilities. However, although it is impossible to standardize creativity, and originality is particularly hard to teach, one can become artistic or original once they reach an adequate skill level.

Professional musicians develop artistic skills through endlessly repetitive practices and continued experiences in creating and performing music. Naturally, to reach a professional level, musicians require a long period of training. Formal professional education can supply musicians with the necessary knowledge and techniques, but that is not enough for a musician to become sufficiently skilled enough to build their originality and artistic style. Some musicians undergo the skill formation process through joining apprenticeship or internship in many other collaboration-based professions such as film and TV production (McKinlay and Smith 2009). However, the majority of musicians train themselves by creating an album and busking on the street (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Considering the nature of both skills and skill formation process in the music industry, the conventional way of measuring human capital, i.e. the duration for which an individual took for formal education and vocational training including company offered OJT, would not be relevant to musicians. Musicians' self-assessment might be an alternative to those conventional measures. They know the minimum standard of making and performing music, and their relative position compared to the level which a typical professional musician is supposed to reach. Meanwhile, digital skills, such as digital knowledge and the ability to use digital instruments, have become increasingly necessary for the contemporary pop music industry (Kwon 2017). The extent to which an individual has these three types of skills would differentiate the opportunities they gain for getting involved in professional music work, and the difference in opportunities would influence the quit intention of the individual

musician. In other words, a self-assessment of their skill level and the ability to gain job opportunities would affect their intention to stay in the profession.

H2. The extent of the skills attained by the individual is negatively related to temporary interruption and positively associated with musicians' intention to stay in the profession.

### *Social resources*

One of the immediate social resources sought by a broad population of musicians is the affiliation with an organization which could offer them a whole set of agency services as discussed earlier. Acquiring this asset (i.e. becoming an independent contractor of a production company) is particularly critical in Korea because production companies are as powerful as they set the industry norms these days. Thus, we set forth the following hypothesis.

H3. Musicians who have organizational assets in the form of having affiliation with a production company are more likely to have a favorable view of staying in the industry instead of quitting.

Those who lack organizational support, either voluntarily or involuntarily, would seek an alternative, which is most likely to be informal social networks. In fact, musicians not only invest in human capital but also social capital to build a better career. Social capital refers to the investment in social relations which are believed to be beneficial in the market (Lin 2002, p. 19). Social capital can be an important source to form human capital as it offers the opportunity to get access to valuable resources such as ideas, information, money, and services (Szreter and Woolcock 2004). However, unlike human capital, it does not belong to or reside in any one individual, which means it is more social than individual (Coleman, 1988; Goldin and Katz 1999: 684). Actors are affected by social relationships and, at the same time, exploit the relationships as a resource which assists the actor to assume a better position in the market (Dakhli and Clercq 2004; Schwartz 2018).

From the artists' perspective, particularly freelancers who do not have an affiliation to a production company, being a part of a closed social network enables them to have a better chance at securing jobs as the social network offers mutual collaboration, reciprocity, and trust. The larger the volume of

the closed network is, the bigger the chances for collaboration are because there is a greater number of collaborators to offer trust-based reciprocity. In this context, artists who have a bigger collaborative network are more likely to have a positive prospect for their artistic career.

Meanwhile, an open network, which is related to Granovetter's strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1983), could offer more significant opportunities to get a job because of the diversity and scope of its information sources. Especially in the creative industry, artists benefit from having more contacts with influential artists in terms of involvement in new projects and work opportunities. Influential people in the creative industry are located in the structural hole which works as a bridge for the information sources of the entire artist network and helps their acquaintances to gain useful information which is not usually available in the closed network (Burt 1992). In this respect, we also regard formal art education as social capital in that it offers students chances to build social relationships, e.g., a professional network of teachers and peers (Towse 2006).

H4. When musicians have a bigger collaborative social network and know more influential artists, they are less likely to make a temporary interruption and more likely to intend to stay in the profession.

### *Psychological resources*

We consider mental abilities to be critical for creative workers who face much uncertainty in employment and income and thereby require motivation and coping abilities. Passion and intrinsic pleasure, as mentioned above, are essential psychological assets for artists but are too arbitrary to conceptualize and difficult to measure. Thus, instead of leaning on to those emotive states, we focus on the psychological ability to maintain emotive states, cope with situational difficulties, and dream.

In this regard, the concept of dream capital, the psychological ability to construct the future, suggested by Kim et al. (2017) is useful as it enables us to think further about the mechanism behind the ability to dream. Dream capital consists of four sub-constructs that represent an individual's ability to cope with immediate difficulties by envisaging their future, which are: the ability to construct the future through imagination (imagination), the ability to hold confidence about the future (optimism), the emotional ability to believe in achieving one's dream (hope), and the ability to recover from a difficult or frustrating situation (resilience). Young musicians under

precarious conditions who have this mental ability are expected to be able to endure their financial difficulties and career uncertainty and to continue pursuing their careers. These psychological abilities seem to be innate and thus individual characteristics, but it is worth emphasizing that they are also socially constructed and reproduced. The abilities are already embedded in the social processes where they have been inherited, educated, distributed and accumulated in specific social spaces including one's family, community, social network, and the country. In this context, the ability to dream the future is an outcome of socio-cultural inequality. Because the ability is associated with the individual capacity to govern their dream as well as resilience (Kim et al. 2017), the existing inequality of the ability can be amplified in the difficult times when many who lack the ability are more likely to give up what they pursue in frustration.

**H5.** Musicians who have more psychological assets represented by the ability to construct their future are less likely to intend to quit the profession despite their financial difficulties.

## Methods

### *Data*

Our analysis is based on a sample of young musicians who live in Seoul. The data was collected online by the Institute of Social Development and Policy Research at Seoul National University for two months between late October and early December in 2017.<sup>3</sup> As it is virtually impossible to identify the musicians in a region due to their high mobility in the labor market and lack of fixed organizational affiliations, we contacted several national musicians' associations with a good number of members. Two associations, namely, the Musicians Union and the Federation of Korean Music Performers, agreed to send an email with the link to the web survey to the members of their association with experience in working on at least one professional album project. Once the musician agreed to participate in the survey, he or she was led to the webpage with the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire included items on the musicians' experiences of creative work, organizational

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<sup>3</sup> The survey research was funded by the Korea Labor Institute, and the further details of the key findings can be found in Kwon et al. 2017.

affiliations, working network, skills formation, their perception of digitalization and the changes in the creative industries triggered by the technological advances, working conditions, life satisfaction, and the perception and needs of welfare policies specifically designed for artists. Although the original data consisted of 483 cases, we only used the samples from respondents who were in their twenties and thirties. The number of valid observations in the final data set is thus 325. The descriptive statistics are given in Table 1 below.

### *Measures*

As many previous studies suggest, the financial hardship faced by the majority of musicians has threatened their creative activities as well as their quality of life. In a similar context, low income is reported to be the primary cause that discourages musicians from pursuing their professional careers. According to the 2015 survey by the Ministry of Culture mentioned above, 15.9% of the respondents reported that their career as an artist had been interrupted and many attributed the career interruption to insufficient income (66.3% of those who were interrupted). Although we share this view, our inquiry examines the career decisions of musicians further by investigating a wider range of variables that influence such decisions. Although musicians take time off from creative work mainly due to financial issues among other reasons, this does not necessarily mean that they intend to discontinue their professional career definitely and completely as a musician. On the other hand, some musicians who have managed to survive and build a career despite the hardship may not intend to continue pursuing the path in the long-run.

Thus, we employed a constructive dependent variable that combines the following two questions. One is whether or not they experienced a temporal interruption of their music activities because of low income (“Have you ever made a significant pause of artistic activities due to low income?”), and the other is whether the musicians intend to leave the job permanently due to the financial difficulties (“Due to the difficulties of making a living, do you think you will quit your musician’s career in the near future and pursue a different path?”). This constructive dependent variable divides the respondents into one of the following four categories. The first category indicates those who have experience taking time off from creative work already and currently have the intention to quit, and 37.1% of the valid 325 respondents fall under this category. The second category identifies those who have taken time off

from creative work but do not have any intention to leave the career (10.1%). The third category represents the musicians who have not had any experience of taking time off yet but currently intend to leave the career (22.1%). The last category is composed of those with a strong will who have neither taken time off nor have any intention to discontinue their path as a professional musician (29.3%).

Then, what are the factors that can explain the different choices that the respondents make? Of course, the variable that we primarily considered is the financial status measured by the level of earnings. Because of future uncertainties and the low level of income, the majority of musicians make up for the basic living costs by having a side job, mostly a part-time job called “alba” in Korea which is usually unrelated to their creative activities. In our sample, the median annual income from their music activities that the respondents made was found to be 700,000 KRW, while about 8% of respondents received no income for their music activities in the previous year, and cumulatively 10% of respondents earned less than 100,000 KRW a year from their creative work. Instead of using the income from musical activities as a variable, which looks at only one source of income, we measured their total earnings from various sources including their side jobs. Although it is not ideal, musicians take it for granted to have “alba” to maintain their careers unless it severely interferes with their music activities. Therefore, we used the musicians’ total earnings as a variable (logged total earnings to normalize the distribution) and controlled the hours that the musician spent on non-music activities for extra income.

Three different sets of independent variables were set to explain the varieties of choices that musicians make regarding their career. The key independent variables were the skill-sets in music activities, the networks in which the musicians are engaged or invested, and the general psychological ability to dream, which were labeled as human capital, social capital and the ability to construct the future, respectively. We also considered the family background regarding socio-economic status and the types of organizational affiliation independent variables. The family’s socio-economic status is a categorical variable measured by the musician’s self-report of their family position from the top to the bottom of the 9 graded socio-economic ladder, which we ultimately adapted to three simpler categories: upper, middle and lower. To measure organizational asset, we divide the respondents into one of the following three categories according to their affiliation: “a production company or equivalent agencies,” “project team,” and “no affiliation.”

The variable “human capital” consisted of the three elements of skills,

namely, artistic skills, creativity, and digital skills. We relied on self-assessment questions to measure artistic skills and creativity by asking, for example, “On artistic skills, supposing that 5 is the average level that a typical professional musician is required to have, what score do you think you would get at the moment using a scale from 1, very little, to 10, very high?” A question in the same style was asked to measure creativity. Digital skills were also measured based on the respondents’ self-assessment of their ability to use DAW programs by asking where s/he was on a scale of 0 (no ability to use it at all) to 10 (extremely skillful) regarding their ability to handle one of the following most frequently used digital programs: Cubase, Nuendo, Protocol, TakeWalk, Ableton Live.

Next, we measured social capital using two items, one to measure the collaborators’ network and the other to measure influential contacts. Specifically, we asked, “How many people do you think you can collaborate with at any time?” and “How many people do you know who is influential in the popular music industry?” Because of its skewed distribution to the right, we logged the variable, and the average number of people that the respondents knew was about 9.

The variable measuring the musicians’ ability to construct the future was based on Kim et al. (2017)’s concept of dream capital and the elements to measure the concept in their innovative, recently-published paper. To measure the four sub-constructs of dream capital (imagination, optimism, hope, and resilience), we borrowed the questionnaire items<sup>4</sup> based on a scale from 1 to 7 developed by Kim et al. (2017) and averaged the scores of the questions. For the integrative variable of ability to construct the future, we averaged the values gained for the four sub-variables.

In our multivariate model, we controlled a set of variables composed of personal and job (or work-related) characteristics that would naturally have significant influences on the respondents’ perceptions and behaviors. As personal characteristics, we controlled gender, age, and marital status. Gender and marital status are coded as a dichotomous variable, with male and unmarried serving as the base. Our sample selected only young musicians in their twenties and thirties, so we controlled age as a continuous variable ranging from 20 to 39. Regarding job characteristics, we controlled the respondent’s specialty (composer, vocalist, instrument player, producer), length of career in the pop-music industry (in years), the number of publicly

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<sup>4</sup> We selected 3 key questions out of 6-7 questions that are relevant to our unique sample focusing on young professional musicians.

released albums(logged), the attainment of formal music education, and the number of hours a week to spent on non-music activities for extra income(logged). The official music education is a dichotomous categorical variable coded as one if they received a degree in music at either junior or higher education.

### *Results*

Young musicians in Seoul are struggling. Only 6% of the respondents in our sample answered that they depend on music activities for their livelihood. The vast majority of the respondents (75%) said that their primary source of income is their economic activities outside music work. While a small number of people stated that government support was a key income source (1.5%), 7% of the respondents indicated that the support from their parents is primary. The remaining portion of the respondents depended on loans (6%) and savings (2%). The gap between average income (4 million KRW) and the median income of the respondents (500,000 KRW) is extensive. While half of the respondents who took part in a released album cannot survive solely on the earnings from music activities, upper 15% earned more than five million KRW and contributed to increasing the mean value. Poverty often accompanies an extreme level of inequality, and in this context, financial difficulties caused about half of the respondents (48.6%) to take time off from their professional music activities. Also, 60% of respondents had the intention to exit from the profession because of the same reasons. Interestingly though, it was found that financial difficulty did not directly lead to the musicians' interruption from creative work or their quit intention. Although musicians responded that the time that they spent on extra non-music work for income imposes a significant constraint on their creative work, our results showed that the correlation between total income (as well as income from professional music activities) and the interruption of musical activities is low.

These observations lead us to surmise that financial difficulties that young professional musicians face may not be a primary reason for them to make a decision to quit. As Table 1 demonstrates, our dependent variable for the experience of interruption due to financial situations and the intention to leave the profession showed that 37.5% of respondents have both experienced interruption and have the intention to quit, which indicates the flexibility of this labor market. However, up to 40% of the young professionals have a strong will or the ability to pursue their careers, and, despite experiencing

**TABLE 1**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

Variable		Values		Frequency	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Dependent variable: Combination of temporal interruption and quit intention	Type	Interruption	Quit intention				
	1(base)	Yes	Yes	122(37.54)			
	2	Yes	No	36(11.08)			
	3	No	Yes	73(22.46)			
	4	No	No	94(28.92)			
Independent variables	Total income(logged)				15.94	1.96	
	Human capital	Artistic skills (1 ~ 10)			6.91	2.01	
		Creativity (1 ~ 10)			7.18	1.94	
		Digital skills (0 ~ 10)			4.86	3.03	
	Social capital(logged)				2.24	0.96	
	Ability to construct the future	Imagination (1 ~ 7)			5.29	1.39	
		Hope (1 ~ 7)			4.42	1.36	
		Optimism (1 ~ 7)			4.61	1.33	
		Resilience (1 ~ 7)			4.96	1.28	
		Aggregated (1~7)			4.76	1.12	
	Gender	Male			212(65.23)		
		Female			113(34.77)		
	Age	20~39			30.06	4.87	
	Marital status	Non-married			273(84.92)	-	0.37
		Married			49(15.02)		
Attainment of official music education	No			104(32.00)	-	0.47	
	Yes			221(68.00)			
Control variable	Professional career	Number of albums(log)			1.79	1.16	
	Types of affiliated org.	Production company (base)			135(41.54)		
None			129(39.69)		0.75		
Project team			61(18.77)				
Specialties	Composer			104(32.00)			
	Vocalist			84(25.85)			
	Instrument player			98(30.15)		1.05	
	Producer			39(12.00)			
Hours of no-music work (logged)				2.90	0.93		

temporary interruptions, 11% of respondents did not have any intention to quit the career path.

We examined the factors that may explain the varieties. Regarding the parental socio-economic background, we used three categories, upper, middle, and lower and each consists of 13.23%, 63.69%, and 23.08% of respondents, respectively. This shows that the majority of musicians are from a middle-class family. Most respondents showed a high level of confidence regarding their human capital. Regarding artistic skills and creativity, only 10% and 6.5% of respondents thought that they are below average (point 5) with average scores as high as 6.91 and 7.18, respectively. For digital skills, 45.5% of musicians felt less confident. They reported that their skill levels are lower than what average musicians are supposed to have. The average score is indeed 4.86, which is below 5, the middle of the scale. On organizational affiliation, 40% of respondents did not have any affiliation at all, while about 42% and 18% of musicians were affiliated with a production company (or an agency) and a project team, respectively. On social capital, similar to income distribution, the gap between those who know a few and who know a lot is quite wide. On average, though, the respondents maintained a close collaborative network with nine musicians who they could work with at any time (S.D. 30.4), and about seven influential musicians they know on average (S.D. 15.81). Concerning the ability to construct the future, which was one of the unique resources which we thought to be critical for creative workers as well as the youth, the respondents exhibited a reasonable level for all sub-constructs, with hope, optimism, resilience scoring higher than 4 on the 1-7 scale and a higher score for imagination (5.29).

As for control variables, 65% of respondents were male with an average age of 30.06. Although we covered people in their twenties and thirties, only 15% were married. A relatively high percentage of the respondents received formal music education and took part in about ten albums on average (median 5). About 17% of respondents have experience participating in producing an album which ranked within the top 100th on the popular music chart. Although professional musicians often have a variety of specialties, a third of our respondents were composers, and the rest of them were composed of vocalists (25.9%), session musicians playing various instruments (30%), and producers (12%). Regarding working hours for non-music economic activities, the respondents spent 25.4 hours a week on average in the last three months. A quarter of the respondents worked full time, which means that they spend more than 40 hours a week on non-music economic activities.

The results of our multivariate analysis are presented in Table 2. We used a multinomial logistic regression to estimate the relationship between the musicians' career intention and the degree or level of their resources. This method involves simultaneously estimating the binary logits for all possible comparisons among outcome categories:  $\log(P(\text{degree} = \text{Type 2})/P(\text{degree} = \text{Type 1}))$ ,  $\log(P(\text{degree} = \text{Type 3})/P(\text{degree} = \text{Type 1}))$ , and  $\log(P(\text{degree} = \text{Type 4})/P(\text{degree} = \text{Type 1}))$ . We chose to employ this method because our dependent variable has multiple categories (Long 1997) and our focus is on the choice of one category over others in terms of the musicians' ability and their intention to continue their profession. In other words, we used the multinomial logistic regression to estimate a discrete choice (Long 1997). In our model, Type 1 is the base category in which musicians have both the experience of taking time off in their career and the intention to leave the profession due to the deficiency of income. Comparing this base category with the Type 2 category of musicians who have experienced a temporary interruption but have no intention to quit their musical profession, first, relatively older musicians were more likely to fall under Type 2 than Type 1. That is, the older s/he gets, the greater the chances they have to belong to Type 2 than to Type 1. As we cannot assume any causal relationship between the two variables, we surmise that the longer the musicians survive the profession, they have already somehow passed the screening period, and have either greater ability to maintain their music career or a stronger attachment to the profession, other things being equal. Meanwhile, people who received formal music education as well as those who spent more time on non-music economic activities were less likely to fall under Type 2 compared to Type 1. The relative probability of being Type 2 over Type 1 became 56% lower when increasing one-unit in the logged hours to spend non-music economic activities, other things being equal. However, once we controlled this time variable associated with the ability to focus on their music, income itself did not have any statistically significant influence on the musicians' belonging to Type 2 over Type 1. Not only for these two groups, but also in the case of other group comparisons, the influence of income was not statistically significant. This indicates that direct income is not the primary reason for the discontinuation of the musicians' career.

Unlike previous studies emphasizing family's economic class as an indicator of kinship financial support for musicians (Gosden 2015), it turns out that the family's socio-economic status does not show any statistically significant influence both on musician's experience of taking time off and their intention to quit in our sample. Thus, we reject *Hypothesis 1*, which

presumed that a musician's higher socio-economic status would decrease the probability of interruption in the musicians' careers and increase the probability of having the intention to stay in the profession, *ceteris paribus*. Korean young professional musicians seem to be independent from their families, which was also implied by the fact that a relatively smaller fraction of respondents depended primarily on parental income transfer in our sample (7%).

Now let us turn to the effect of human capital on musicians' probability of being one type over the other. Rather surprisingly, human capital measured by the three types of skills did not have any statistically significant effect on either the experience of interruption or their intention to stay in the profession. One exception was that the respondents with a higher level of self-assessed creativity were more likely to be Type 3 over Type 1, implying that although a higher level of creativity may lead to the more continuous opportunities to participate in music projects, it does not notably increase the relative probability of having the intention to stay in the profession. As mentioned earlier, young professional musicians, by and large, have a high level of confidence regarding their creativity and artistic skills, and thus, chances are that the variance is too small to create a significant difference regarding their experience of interruption or quit intention. Another interesting observation is that while musicians showed lower levels of confidence with the novel but increasingly important skills with digital instruments or computer programs, these digital skills did not yet seem to yield any significant differences in creators' interruption experience or expectations regarding their career. From these results, our second hypothesis on human capital, which is "*The extent of skills which individual attained is negatively related to temporary interruption and positively associated with musician's intention to stay in the profession*" was not statistically supported.

It is notable, however, that the social capital the respondents hold and their ability to construct the future appeared to significantly affect both the musicians' career experience and their career prospects. First, before discussing the influence of social capital, let us have a look at the effect of organizational affiliation on musicians' career. The results showed that the musicians who work as a project team have a significantly lower probability of belonging to Type 4 over Type 1, compared to those who are affiliated with a production company. In other words, freelancers who work as a group but lack the stability and security of music activities, in relation to those who have organizational affiliation, are less likely to belong to Type 4. However, an organizational affiliation does not hold any significant influence in the other

**TABLE 2**  
**THE RESULTS OF THE MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC ANALYSIS**

	Type2/Type1	Type3/Type1	Type4/Type1
Gender(Female=1)	0.53 (0.48)	0.22 (0.36)	0.45 (0.35)
Age	0.14* (0.06)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Marital Status(married=1)	-0.87 (0.67)	-1.02+ (0.54)	-0.38 (0.48)
Attainment of formal music educational (Yes=1)	-0.98* (0.50)	0.19 (0.41)	-0.43 (0.38)
Number of albums	-0.30 (0.24)	0.28+ (0.17)	-0.17 (0.17)
Occupational type(reference=Composer)			
Vocalist	-0.70 (0.57)	-0.60 (0.47)	-0.78+ (0.44)
Session Player	-0.26 (0.64)	0.44 (0.45)	0.38 (0.44)
Producer	0.54 (0.73)	0.36 (0.58)	0.60 (0.55)
Organization(reference=Organization)			
No organization	0.29 (0.49)	-0.03 (0.38)	-0.22 (0.36)
Project team	-0.58 (0.66)	-0.56 (0.45)	-0.91* (0.45)
Weekly hours for non-artistic economic activity (log)	-0.79*** (0.23)	-0.341+ (0.20)	-0.68*** (0.19)
Family's socio-economic status (reference=lower)			
Middle	.03 (.56)	-.20 (.38)	.18 (.39)
Upper	.60 (.73)	.01 (.60)	.43 (.57)
Total income(log)	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.14 (0.08)	0.00 (0.11)

TABLE 2  
(CONTINUED)

	Type2/Type1	Type3/Type1	Type4/Type1
Artistic skill	-0.01 (0.14)	0.10 (0.11)	0.15 (0.11)
Creativity	-0.03 (0.14)	-0.32** (0.11)	-0.15 (0.11)
Digital skill	-0.10 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)
Social capital(log)	0.54* (0.26)	0.30 (0.20)	0.45* (0.19)
Ability to construct the future	0.89*** (0.22)	0.41* (0.16)	0.86*** (0.17)
Constant	-5.141+ (2.67)	1.06 (2.04)	-2.06 (2.18)
N		325	
LR chi2		126.1***	
pseudo R-sq		0.149	

+ p<0.1, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

cases. Thus the results only partly support our Hypothesis 3, that is, *Musicians who have organizational assets in the form of having an affiliation with a production company are more likely to have a favorable view of staying in the industry instead of quitting.*

Let us move on to the effects of the social capital. The relative probability of belonging to Type 2 over Type 1 rose to 74% with a one-unit increase in logged social capital. The comparison between Type 4 category and the base category showed a similar outcome: a one-unit increase in logged social capital yielded a 58% higher relative probability of belonging to Type 4 over the base category. In other words, regarding their professional career, musicians benefited from both knowing more people who are capable of providing work opportunities and valuable information, as well as having a larger network of collaborators, which could be a source of emotional support and actual opportunities to participate in projects. One interesting finding is that having more social capital did not have any statistically significant influence on the relative probability of falling under Type 3 compared to the base category. The implication here is that when a person

has the intention to quit the profession, social capital does not make any difference between the groups with and without interruption experience. The findings, by and large, support our hypothesis 4 that a higher level of social capital would increase the relative probability of musicians' belonging to the group with the intention to stay in the profession.

Finally, the musicians' individual ability to construct their future appeared to have a strong influence on their career experience and expectations. A one-unit increase in this ability increased the relative probability of being Type 2 than Type 1 by 145%. This outcome implies that, although musicians are interrupted their music activities because of financial hardship, if they hold a higher level of mental capacity to construct the future by activating their ability to be imaginative, hopeful, optimistic, and resilient toward their future, they are less likely to have the intention to quit. In the same vein, a one-unit increase in this ability shows the higher relative probability of belonging to Type 3 over Type 1 by 50%, indicating that, despite being skeptical about their chances for a better future, this ability affects the musicians' capacity to be undeterred by financial difficulties and to continue their musical activities without taking time off. The ability also increases the relative probability of being Type 4 compared to being Type 1 by 135%. These results tell us that the ability to construct the future affects the intention to stay in the profession more greatly than the previous experience of interruption in their career. Thus, our hypothesis 5, "*the musicians who have more psychological assets represented by the ability to construct their future are less likely to intend to quit the profession regardless of their financial difficulties,*" is supported.

Figure 1 also confirms the notable results related to social capital and the musicians' psychological ability to construct the future. The two graphs demonstrate the probability of type affiliation in relation to the increase of social capital (left) and the increase of the ability to construct the future (right) when other variables being held at their mean values. The graphical representations confirm that the musicians with a lower level of social capital and ability to construct the future are more likely to belong to Type 1 involving both interruptions in the music career and the intention to quit. In contrast, musicians who have more social and psychological resources are more likely to belong to Type 4 with no interruptions and the firm intention to stay in the profession.

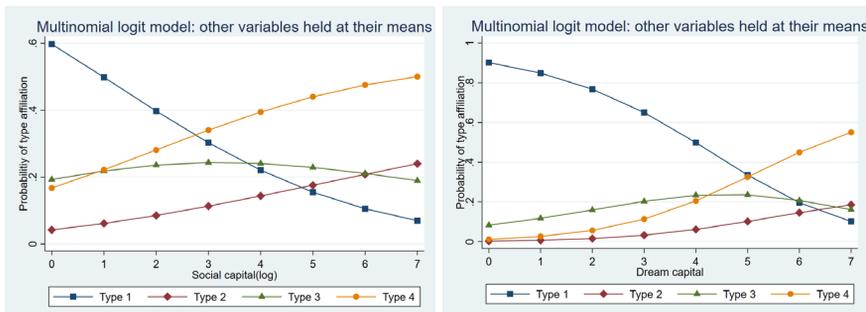


FIG. 1.—The probability of type affiliation by social capital and the ability to construct the future

## Conclusion

This exploratory study was motivated by the puzzling phenomenon observed in the contemporary labor market of musicians. Despite the widely known fact that most musicians experience impoverished conditions, the music labor market still enjoys a massive influx of young people. It might not be that puzzling if the labor market could naturally adjust itself to accommodate this entry-level influx, according to the logics of demand and supply. However, what intrigued us more was that the market did not seem to be attuned to economic rationales. In other words, the patterns of professional musicians' mobility did not appear to be determined primarily by what they earn, nor their immediate performance. The majority of musicians (75% of the respondents in our sample) earn very little, do not think that their income from music activities guarantees sustainable life at all, and thus have to spend a significant amount of time for non-music economic activities to earn enough money for basic living expenses. No one would disagree that financial hardships are the primary reason that disrupts musicians in pursuing their professional careers in this situation. However, what captured our attention was the significant variance among precarious musicians regarding their career experience and prospects, which did not seem to be solely dependent on economic reasons.

This study was an exploration to uncover the alternatives that explain the various patterns in the musicians' career decisions. Based on previous literature, we came up with some potential candidates for independent variables, including the family socio-economic background, human capital,

social capital, and the psychological ability to be resilient and to construct the future. Because we limited our sample to the youth in their twenties and thirties who still had the chance to change their career path and who could still invest in their human capital, we also considered their intention to quit or stay in the profession in the future, instead of merely looking at previous experience of discontinuation, or interruptions in their career.

Our findings are not only theoretically thought-provoking, but they also support, in part, the findings of previous studies on creative industries, which emphasize the role of social networks (Schwartz 2018; Lingo and Tepper 2013). Interestingly, both the family's economic background and human capital, represented by a set of skills acquired through significant investment of time and money, did not make a significant difference regarding the musicians' experience of interruption in their careers or intention to stay in the profession. Of course, professional musicians are required to have an appropriate level of human capital; but once they feel that they have reached a certain level of skills and artistry, differences in these musical abilities seldom discouraged musicians. Moreover, like Kuehn and Korrigan (2013, p. 9) suggested, many professional musicians may seem to carry out hope labor, un- or under-compensated work in the hope that future employment opportunities and flourishing economic returns may follow. However, the results of our analysis suggest that professional musicians do not blindly perform hope labor. Rather they are more reflective of their situation, relying on the amount of social and psychological resources that they can utilize to cope with the difficult reality and to anticipate a better future. Those resources would offer them continuous supply of work opportunities, information, feedback, moral support, and mental composure. At the forefront of innovation, artistic workers are under constant pressure to manage ambiguity and sustain a creative identity (Lingo and Tepper 2013). However, bureaucratic structures, which used to train and socialize novice members, are starting to vanish away. This leaves individual musicians vulnerable, particularly new aspirants, and they must find other ways to manage rejection and failure, constantly expected and experienced in this very uncertain labor market (Skaggs 2018). One strategy is to draw on collective resources within the professional community (Barley and Kunda 2004). Our results are in line with the current literature, and show that maintenance of a good number of collaborators and acquaintance with influential people, who could bring new projects and opportunities, exert a significant positive effect on the musicians' professional prospects, even in the case where they have already experienced career disruptions because of

financial matters.

These outcomes imply that temporary or occasional monetary support for the needy, while better than nothing, is not the most effective way to build sustainability in the musicians' careers. The unique nature of creative workers, including the high motivation behind the creative process and outcomes, strong self-identity, and emphasis on intrinsic pleasure and satisfaction, calls for a different type of support. For instance, it could be more beneficial to create an environment where ideas and information are openly available, and where artists feel that they are connected and supported by a professional community on the basis of mutual trust. Such an environment will not only help them nurture artistic skills and creativity, but also allow them to foster their psychological capabilities, so that they can be more resilient and continue envisioning their future. Although we confined our analysis to a particular type of professionals, namely musicians, our findings could have further implications for other creative professions. The current working and training environment in creative industries does not offer trust-based support for the youth, but, quite on the contrary, often frustrate them by pervasive exploitation of "hope labor." The demise of conventional organizations and the rapid growth of project-based work arrangements, the integration of products and labor into the hyper-connected society, and the digitalization of work and sourcing and thus the fragmentation of labor, are all trends of today that are not in favor of creative workers in general. Individual workers are burdened with a greater risk than ever, and we need to protect and support these workers by developing new forms of labor and welfare system. In other words, the changes we witness in the contemporary product and labor markets in the booming creative industries call for dynamic institutional experiments involving the society as a whole.

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