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ARTISTS' EXPERIENCES OF IDENTITY COMMODIFICATION: AUTONOMY, CREATIVE CONTROL AND 360-DEALS IN THE MALAYSIAN MUSIC INDUSTRY

[1]Alis Suraya Shaharim, [2]Shamsul Amri Abdul Manap
[1, 2]School of Creative Industry Management and Performing Arts
Universiti Utara Malaysia

[1]Corresponding author : alis.suraya@uum.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

The growing use of 360-deals in the music industry has expanded record labels' involvement in artists' professional activities, creating potential tensions between commercial objectives and creative freedom. This study examines Malaysian recording artists' experiences of 360-deal arrangements through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on autonomy, competence, relatedness, creative control, and professional identity. Using a qualitative approach, the study reanalyzes interview data collected in 2023 from a purposive subset of eight participants, comprising five recording artists and three label representatives. The data were examined through a theory-informed thematic approach guided by the three basic psychological needs identified by SDT. The findings reveal varied experiences of creative control and artist–label relationships. Some artists described restrictions in music direction, approval processes, and image development, while others experienced greater creative freedom or were more receptive to label input. The findings also highlight the importance of industry knowledge and professional experience in artists' career development, as well as tensions between commercially directed images and artists' preferred identities. These experiences illustrate how 360-deal arrangements may support or constrain artists' psychological needs and shape their experiences of creative work. By extending discussions of 360-deals beyond contractual and economic dimensions, this study contributes an experiential perspective on identity commodification and creative labour in the Malaysian music industry. The findings highlight the importance of balancing commercial objectives with artists' creative participation, professional development, and identities.

Keywords: 360-Deal, Artist Autonomy, Music Industry, Self-Determination Theory, Sustainable Culture

INTRODUCTION

The structural evolution of the global music industry has contributed to the development of the "360-deal" or multi-rights contract, in which record-label relationships may extend beyond recorded music to include areas such as touring, merchandising, endorsements, and publishing (Kjus, 2022; Marshall, 2012). The emergence of digital distribution and the decline of traditional recorded-music revenues have encouraged record companies to explore broader sources of revenue and alternative arrangements for managing the risks associated with artist development (Karubian, 2009; Harrison, 2021). As a result, contemporary artist–label relationships may involve a wider range of rights, obligations, and commercial interests than conventional recording agreements.

The developments have also raised questions about artists' experiences within such relationships. While multi-rights arrangements can provide artists with financial resources, professional support, marketing infrastructure, and access to industry networks, they may also introduce commercial expectations across various aspects of an artist's professional activities (Kjus, 2022; Harrison, 2021). The presence of commercial interests in creative decision-making and the public image management consequently impacts creative control, professional identity, and artist autonomy. When an artist's image, persona, and public are commercialized, artistic identity becomes a managed asset within the music business.

These issues are particularly relevant to creative labour, where professional work is closely connected to artists' skills, ideas, identities, and relationships. Research on musicians' professional experiences has highlighted the importance of relationships and working conditions to their experiences of work and well-being (Musgrave, 2023). Research applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has further demonstrated the relevance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to the well-being of professional musicians (Perrier et al., 2025). However, existing research on 360-deals has largely focused on their contractual and economic dimensions, while research on professional music work and well-being has generally examined broader working experiences. Less is known about how these dimensions intersect within multi-rights artist–label relationships, particularly from the perspective of artists in the Malaysian music industry.

The Malaysian music industry provides an important context for examining these issues. Digitalization has transformed the production, distribution, promotion, and consumption of music in Malaysia, while also contributing to changes in the professional and commercial environment in which artists operate (Abdul Rahman, 2025; Kamaruddin & Hashim, 2024). Research has also highlighted the professional challenges experienced by Malaysian musicians within a changing music industry (Muhid, 2022). However, limited attention has been given to how Malaysian artists experience the negotiation of creative control, professional identity, and psychological needs within multi-rights artist–label relationships.

This study therefore examines the lived experiences of Malaysian recording artists involved in 360-deal arrangements through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. Specifically, the study examines how artists experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness within their artist–label relationships, and how these experiences intersect with creative control and professional identity. The study further considers the potential implications of these experiences for artists' psychological well-being and the sustainability of professional creative work. Based on this focus, the study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine Malaysian recording artists' experiences of autonomy and competence within 360-deal arrangements, particularly in relation to creative decision-making, professional development, and career capabilities.

2. To explore how artists experience relatedness within artist–label relationships, particularly in relation to professional interactions, identity, and creative work.

3. To examine how autonomy, competence, and relatedness intersect with artists' experiences of creative control and professional identity within 360-deal arrangements and consider the potential implications for psychological well-being and sustainable creative work.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Digital Disruption and the Rise of Multi-Rights Contracts

The structural transformation of the music industry over the past two decades has altered the traditional relationship between record labels and artists. The emergence of digital distribution, peer-to-peer file sharing and the subsequent decline of physical record-music sales disrupted the traditional revenue model and encouraged record labels to reconsider how value could be generated from music and artists (Burkart & McCourt, 2006; Marshall, 2012). One outcome of this transformation was the emergence of the 360-deal, also referred to as multi-rights deal, through which labels could participate in revenue streams beyond the exploitation of sound recordings.

Marshall (2012) describes the 360-deal as a contractual arrangement through which record labels receive a share of income generated from areas beyond recorded music, including touring, merchandising, publishing and other artist activities. The emergence of such arrangements reflects the changing economics of the music industry, in which recorded music became less reliable as the primary source of revenue. Rather than limiting their commercial interests to recordings, labels increasingly sought broader participation in the economic activities associated with artists. Basofin (2010) similarly describes the expansion of contractual rights as a response to the changing financial structure of the recording industry, particularly the need for companies to manage the risks associated with investment in artists.

However, the literature also cautions against treating the 360-deal as a single, standardized contractual model. Marshall (2012) notes that the specific rights included in 360 arrangements can vary, while Kjus (2022) demonstrates that artist–label contracts have continued to change in response to developments in digitalization and streaming. In his analysis of contracts from the 2000s to the 2010s, Kjus (2022) argues that contract negotiations constitute an important site for the exchange of creative and economic resources. He further demonstrates that contracts allocate different combinations of risks, rewards, rights and obligations between artists and companies. From this perspective, the 360-deal is better understood as part of the broader evolution of contractual practices rather than as one fixed contractual form.

This development is significant because the expansion of contractual interests can bring both opportunities and constraints. Vasquez (2014) characterizes this tension through the notion of the 360-deal as the modern artist's "frienemy", reflecting the simultaneous benefits and constraints that such arrangements may create for artists. On one hand, broader commercial involvement may provide artists with financial investment, marketing support and access to resources that can facilitate career development. On the other hand, a wider contractual relationship may also bring greater commercial expectations into areas of an artist's professional and creative life. The literature therefore suggests

that the implications of multi-rights arrangements cannot be understood solely through their revenue-sharing mechanisms; attention also needs to be given to how artists experience the broader professional relationship created by these arrangements (Harrison, 2021; Kjus, 2022; Marshall, 2012).

The Malaysian Music Industry in the Digital Era

The transformation of the global music industry provides an important context for understanding developments within Malaysia. The Malaysian music industry has similarly undergone significant changes as a result of digitalization, with music companies adapting their business practices to a changing technological and market environment (Abdul Rahman, 2025; Ibrahim, 2024; Kamaruddin & Hashim, 2024). Earlier developments in Malaysia's independent music scene also illustrate how technological changes enabled musicians to bypass traditional industry structures through self-production, digital distribution, and self-promotion (Saffian et al., 2016). More recent research highlights the continuing influence of digital platforms and technologies on music production, distribution, promotion, and audience engagement in Malaysia (Kamaruddin & Hashim, 2024).

These changes have also affected the broader professional conditions surrounding music-making. Muhid (2022), for example, examined the career experiences of Malaysian popular musicians and highlighted challenges associated with sustaining a music career within a changing and increasingly complex industry. In addition, issues surrounding copyright, contractual arrangements, and royalty collection remain important aspects of the local music sector, particularly in relation to how creative work is managed and monetized (Aziz & Abd Wahab, 2022). Taken together, these studies indicate that digitalization has not only transformed how music is produced and circulated but has also contributed to changing the commercial and professional environment in which Malaysian artists operate.

Within this changing environment, multi-rights arrangements need to be understood as part of the broader transformation of the music business. As record labels and music companies seek to adapt to changing revenue structures and the economic uncertainties of artist development, their commercial relationships with artists may extend beyond recorded music to encompass multiple areas of an artist's professional activities (Marshall, 2012; Kjus, 2022; Harrison, 2021). However, while existing literature provides discussion of these developments within the broader music industry, less is known about how artists in the Malaysian context experience the implications of such relationships for their creative work, identity and psychological well-being.

Artist Autonomy, Identity and Creative Labour

The expansion of commercial relationships within the contemporary music industry has implications for how artists experience their creative work and professional identities. While multi-rights arrangements can provide financial and professional support, the involvement of commercial partners across different aspects of an artist's career may also raise questions about the extent of creative control retained by the artist. Kjus (2022) demonstrates that contemporary 360-deals involve negotiations over the allocation of risks, rewards, rights, and obligations, suggesting that such arrangements cannot be understood simply as uniform models of either benefit or control.

These considerations are particularly relevant to artist autonomy, especially where commercial expectations intersect with creative decision-making. In contemporary music industries, artists increasingly participate in the construction and management of a public-facing identity that extends beyond the production of recorded music. Commercial expectations may therefore intersect with how artists understand and express their creative identities, raising questions about how creative decisions and personal expression are negotiated within artist–label relationships (Stah & Meier, 2012; Marshall, 2012).

Where an artist's image, persona, and public identity become part of the commercial relationship, artistic identity may also become a form of value that is managed and shaped within the music business.

The issue is closely connected to the concept of creative labour, in which the product of work is closely connected to the worker's skills, ideas, emotions, and sense of self. Stahl and Meier (2012) highlight the distinctive relationship between the music industry and the creative labour of artists, while Musgrave (2023) demonstrates that musicians' professional relationships can become closely intertwined with their personal and emotional experiences of work. These perspectives suggest that the management of artists cannot be understood solely in terms of financial or contractual arrangements, because professional relationships may also shape how musicians experience their creative work and professional identities.

The intersection of commercial expectations, creative labour, identity and creative control therefore provides an important basis for examining artist autonomy. While existing studies have examined the economic structure of 360-deals and the changing nature of creative labour, less attention has been given to how artists themselves experience the negotiation of creative control and identity within these multi-rights relationships. This provides an important point of departure for considering the psychological dimensions of such experiences through Self-Determination Theory.

Professional Music Work and Well-being

The relationship between creative work and well-being has received increasing attention in research on professional musicians. While music is often associated with positive psychological and social outcomes, working as a professional musician involves particular occupational conditions that may shape musicians' experiences of well-being. Musgrave (2023) distinguishes the benefits of engaging with music from the underlying working conditions, highlighting the importance of the conditions under which professional music work takes place. Professional musicians may encounter financial uncertainty, career pressures, performance demands, and the need to maintain professional relationships while continually developing their creative output.

The relational dimension of creative work is particularly relevant to the present study. Musgrave (2023) found that musicians' professional relationships can play an important role in their careers and well-being, with economic and professional relationships sometimes overlapping with more personal dimensions of social interaction. Such overlaps can create tensions when expectations surrounding professional and interpersonal relationships are not aligned. This suggests that musicians' experiences of work are shaped not only by the creative tasks they perform or the income they receive, but also by the relationships through which their creative careers are organized.

Research using Self-Determination Theory provides further insight into the relationship between professional music work and well-being. Perrier et al. (2025), for example, examined the well-being of professional female musicians through the lens of SDT, focusing on the satisfaction and frustration of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Their findings indicate that these psychological needs were closely connected to the participants' experiences of well-being. However, their study examined professional musicians' broader experience rather than the specific contractual relationship between artists and record labels.

Taken together, these studies indicate that professional music work involves more than the production and commercialization of music. It is also a form of creative labour embedded within professional relationships and psychological experiences. However, less is known about how these experiences are shaped specifically by multi-rights artist–label relationships, particularly within the Malaysian music industry.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in the Creative Industries

To examine the psychological dimensions of artists' experiences within multi-rights arrangements, this study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), originally developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). SDT is a broad framework for understanding human motivation and psychological well-being. The theory proposes that individuals have three basic psychological needs; autonomy, competence and relatedness, and that the satisfaction or frustration of these needs influences motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Autonomy refers to the experience of having choice and a sense of psychological freedom in one's actions. Within the context of creative work, autonomy is relevant to an artist's ability to experience a sense of ownership over creative decisions, artistic expression, and aspects of their professional identity. Competence refers to the need to feel effective and capable of achieving desired outcomes, which may relate to an artist's creative skills, professional knowledge, and ability to contribute meaningfully to decisions concerning their work. Relatedness refers to the need to experience meaningful connection, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging in relationships with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the music industry, such relationships may include interactions between artists, record labels, managers, producers, collaborators, and other industry professionals.

SDT also distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity for separable outcomes or in response to external expectations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This distinction is particularly relevant to creative work, where artistic activities may be simultaneously personally meaningful and commercially organized. An artist may therefore create music because of personal interest and creative expression while also responding to financial rewards, professional recognition, audience expectations, or commercial objectives.

Importantly, SDT does not suggest that external rewards or commercial considerations are inherently harmful to motivation. Rather, the theory emphasizes the conditions under which external demands may support or undermine psychological needs and autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the context of multi-rights arrangements, this distinction is particularly important because such relationships may provide artists with financial resources, professional opportunities, and career support while also introducing commercial expectations into their creative work. The psychological implications of these arrangements may therefore depend on how artists experience and perceive these expectations within their professional relationships.

The application of SDT to professional musicians is supported by recent research. Perrier et al. (2025), for example, examined the well-being of professional female musicians through the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Their study demonstrates the relevance of SDT for understanding musicians' experiences of well-being and the conditions surrounding their professional work. Similarly, research on creative labour highlights how professional relationships can become closely connected to musicians' emotional and personal experiences of work (Musgrave, 2023).

Within the present study, SDT therefore provides a framework for examining how artists experience their relationships with record labels in relation to autonomy, competence, relatedness, creative control, identity, and psychological well-being. Rather than assuming that multi-rights arrangements necessarily undermine artists' psychological needs, the framework allows the study to examine how these needs are Within the present study, SDT therefore provides a framework for examining how artists experience their relationships with record labels in relation to autonomy, competence, relatedness, creative control, identity, and psychological well-being. Rather than assuming that multi-rights arrangements necessarily

undermine artists' psychological needs, the framework allows the study to examine how these needs are experienced within the specific commercial and relational conditions of artist–label relationships.

Cultural Sustainability and Artist Well-being

The relationship between artists' experiences and their ability to sustain creative careers also raises broader questions about the sustainability of work within the creative industries. Cultural sustainability involves not only the continuation of cultural production, but also consideration of the conditions under which creative work can be sustained over time. From this perspective, the experiences and well-being of artists represent an important consideration alongside the financial and organizational dimensions of the creative industries.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides one perspective for considering these conditions. The satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is associated with more positive motivational and well-being outcomes, while frustration of these needs may have negative implications for motivation and functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research involving professional musicians similarly suggests that the conditions of creative work and professional relationships can be relevant to musicians' well-being (Musgrave, 2023; Perrier et al., 2025).

This perspective is relevant to multi-rights arrangements because the same professional relationship may provide artists with resources and opportunities while also introducing commercial expectations into their creative work. The implications of such arrangements may therefore depend on how artists experience the balance between commercial expectations, creative control, professional relationships, and personal identity. In the Malaysian context, these considerations are particularly relevant as the music industry continues to adapt to digitalization and changing commercial practices (Abdul Rahman, 2025; Kamaruddin & Hashim, 2024). Examining artists' experiences can therefore provide insight into conditions that may support or constrain the sustainability of professional creative work. Such implications, however, should be understood as contextual and potential implications of the participants' experiences rather than evidence of industry-wide effects.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that several important dimensions of contemporary music work have been examined. Research on 360-deals has documented the changing economic structure of record–label relationships and the allocation of risks, rewards, rights, and obligations beyond conventional recorded-music arrangements (Marshall, 2012; Stahl & Meier, 2012; Kjus, 2022). Research on the Malaysian music industry has highlighted the effects of digitalization and changing industry practices, as well as the professional experiences and challenges faced by local musicians (Abdul Rahman, 2025; Kamaruddin & Hashim, 2024; Muhid, 2022). Research on creative labour has further demonstrated that professional music work is closely connected to musicians' relationships and personal experiences (Musgrave, 2023), while research applying SDT has demonstrated the relevance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to musicians' well-being (Perrier et al., 2025).

Taken together, these bodies of scholarship provide important but largely separate perspectives on contemporary music work. Research on 360-deals has primarily examined contractual and economic relationships; Malaysian music research has examined digitalization and industry development; creative labour research has highlighted the relational and experiential dimensions of professional music work; and SDT research has provided a framework for understanding artists' psychological needs and well-being. What remains less understood is how these dimensions intersect within multi-rights artist–label relationships, particularly from the perspective of artists themselves. Existing literature provides limited insight into how artists experience the simultaneous negotiation of

commercial expectations, creative decision-making, professional relationships, and identity within such arrangements in the Malaysian context.

The gap is significant because multi-rights relationships can involve multiple dimensions of an artist's professional life. Consequently, the experience of these arrangements cannot be understood solely through their contractual or economic structure. Attention is also required to how artists experience the professional relationships through which their creative work is managed, including their experiences of creative decision-making, recognition of their competence, and meaningful professional relationships.

The present study addresses this gap by examining artists' lived experiences of 360-deals in the Malaysian music industry through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. The study examines how artists experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness within their artist–label relationships and how these experiences intersect with creative control and professional identity, with potential implications for psychological well-being. In doing so, the study contributes a contextual and experiential perspective to scholarship on multi-rights arrangements and creative labour, while extending the application of SDT to artist–label relationships within the Malaysian music industry.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2013) to examine Malaysian recording artists' experiences of 360-deal arrangements, with particular attention to creative control, professional identity, and artist–label relationships. The article draws on interview data originally collected in 2023 for a broader Master's study investigating artists' perspectives on 360-deals in the Malaysian music industry and record labels' responses to technological developments.

While the original study was framed using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the present article revisits the existing interview data through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Developed by Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017), SDT focuses on three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Applying this framework enables the existing interview accounts to be examined from a different theoretical perspective, particularly in relation to artists' experiences of creative decision-making, professional development, and relationships with record labels. Accordingly, this article represents a theory-informed reanalysis of existing interview data rather than a new round of data collection.

Sampling and Data Collection

The primary data for this study were collected in 2023. The original research employed purposive sampling to recruit participants with relevant experience of 360-deal arrangements in the Malaysian music industry. The original study involved ten participants. For the present article, a subset of eight participants was selected for analysis, comprising five recording artists and three label representatives. The selection reflected the present article's focus on artists' experiences of 360-deal arrangements, particularly in relation to creative control, professional identity and artist–label relationship.

The recording artists constitute the primary group for examining experiences of creative control, professional identity, and artist–label relationships. Interviews with label representatives provide additional perspectives on label practices, commercial considerations, and the management of artists' careers. These accounts offer contextual insight into the organizational dimensions of artist–label relationships but are not treated as independent verification of the artists' subjective experiences.

Data were collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, with questions adapted to the participants' respective roles and experiences. The interviews explored artists' experiences of 360-deal arrangements and the perspectives of label representatives on industry practices and artist management. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online and audio-recorded using Voice Memos or Google Meet, depending on the interview format. The recordings were transcribed and, where necessary, translated by the researcher for analysis. Participants provided consent to participate in the original study. Participants were assigned anonymized identifiers in the presentation of the findings.

The primary data were collected in 2023. Accordingly, sources published after the data-collection period, such as Abdul Rahman (2025), are used only to provide subsequent contextualization of developments in the Malaysian music industry and are not treated as evidence of conditions observed during the interviews.

Data Analysis Procedure

The interview data were re-examined using a theory-informed thematic approach. The analysis involved revisiting the interview transcripts and identifying accounts relevant to the research focus on creative control, professional identity, and artist–label relationships. Thematic analysis provides a flexible approach for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following familiarization with the transcripts, relevant sections of the interview data were examined and organized into preliminary codes. These codes were then reviewed in relation to the research objectives and grouped into broader themes concerning artists' experiences of creative decision-making, professional development, and image direction. The analysis subsequently drew on SDT to interpret these themes through the dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Autonomy was considered in relation to artists' experiences of choice, creative decision-making, and involvement in decisions affecting their work. Competence was examined through participants' accounts of professional knowledge, experience, and perceived capabilities in navigating the music industry. Relatedness informed the analysis of artist–label relationships, particularly how participants described interpersonal dynamics and the relationship between artists' preferred identities and commercial image direction.

As SDT was applied retrospectively, following the original data collection, the three psychological needs served as interpretive dimensions for examining the existing interview accounts rather than as categories that had structured the original interviews. The analysis therefore focused on how participants' accounts could be understood through the SDT framework while retaining attention to the context in which their experiences were described.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledges that the present analysis involves revisiting interview data collected for an earlier study framed by a different theoretical perspective. The original research was informed by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, whereas this article applies SDT to examine the same data in relation to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This theoretical shift shaped the selection, interpretation, and organization of the interview material presented in the article. Reflexivity was therefore important in recognizing how the current analytical framework informed the interpretation of participants' accounts. The findings are presented as a theory-informed interpretation of the interview data rather than as an exhaustive account of every aspect of the original interviews.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Autonomy vs. Corporate Gatekeeping in Music Direction

Music direction emerged as an important area in which artists experienced differences in creative control within their 360-deal relationships. Several participants described situations in which record labels exercised greater control over music selection, production, and conceptual direction, particularly during the early stages of their careers.

For Artist 1a, her debut single was largely determined by Label X. She expressed dissatisfaction with the song because it did not reflect how she wished to be portrayed, while the A&R representative maintained that the direction was based on a projected five-year commercial vision. Although the song achieved commercial success, the artist's dissatisfaction with the release highlights a tension between the label's commercial priorities and her preferred creative direction.

Similarly, Artist 2b explained that the band's first three singles were entirely produced by the label, with the members primarily responsible for recording vocals and appearing in the accompanying music videos. From the participant's perspective, this limited their involvement in the creative process and their role as musicians and creators. These accounts illustrate how creative decision-making may be concentrated within the label, particularly during the early stages of an artist's career.

The label representatives' accounts provide additional context for understanding these experiences. Label Rep 1b explained that the process of signing an artist involved an initial assessment by the A&R department, followed by an evaluation by management of the artist's commercial potential, including their potential to attract brand-related opportunities. Label Rep 1a similarly described situations in which the label was uncertain about an artist's marketability and might initially offer a single deal involving one or two songs within a specified period. These accounts indicate that decisions concerning artist development and contractual arrangements were strongly driven by commercial potential assessments.

Label Rep 1b also explained that the scope of label involvement differed across contractual arrangements. Under a 360-deal, the label's involvement could extend beyond marketing and promotion to include the development of concepts and music direction. This broader involvement provides context for the artists' accounts of creative gatekeeping, as the label's role could extend into decisions directly affecting their creative output.

A contrasting perspective emerged from Artist 2c's experience. Label Rep 2a acknowledged the organisation's limited familiarity with the artist's market, explaining:

> *"Because dia punya market is different kan... Tamil. So, we all still figure out macam mana nak.. nak masuk ke dalam market tu, because kitorang takde guidance" ["Because the market is different, it's... Tamil. So we all are still trying to figure out how to... get into the market, because we do not have guidance"].*

This account highlights how the label's limited familiarity with a particular market may have influenced its approach to artist development and market positioning. However, the representative's account does not establish whether this limitation directly affected Artist 2c's creative control.

At the same time, Artist 1a described having greater control over subsequent releases, explaining:

> *"Music direction... uh.. itu terpulang kepada saya lah... kecuali first single lah. First single sebab saya takde experience buat lagu kan, so dorang.. dorang yang pilih lagu." ["Music direction... uh.. that is up to me... except for my first single, which they chose themselves because I had no experience."]*

Her account suggests that she understood the initial restriction partly in relation to her limited experience at the time. However, the account also indicates that the extent of creative control could change over the course of an artist–label relationship. Artist 2b described similar constraints in the creative process, particularly in relation to delays caused by approval procedures:

> *"Kitorang banyak tertangguh sebab, benda-benda kreatif ni la. Banyak yang gate-keeping. Dorang susah bagi approval. Lepas tu dah tunggu, ada pulak amend. Amend ada bagi, tunggu lagi.. Dekat situ la banyak tertangguh." ["There were many delays, due to creative issues. There's too much gate-keeping. They are so hard in giving approval. After the wait, there are still things to amend. Once amended, we still have to wait... So that is why a lot of things are postponed."]*

He further associated creative freedom with commercial recognition, stating:

> *"Nak tunggu famous, baru dapat 100% suka hati apa kita nak" ["Perhaps we have to wait until we're actually famous, only then we would be able to get 100% of what we want"].*

These accounts suggest that artists' experiences of autonomy were shaped by the distribution of creative decision-making authority, the approval processes involved, and commercial considerations surrounding their work. While Artist 1a described gaining greater control over subsequent releases, Artist 2b perceived commercial recognition as a condition for obtaining greater creative freedom. From the perspective of SDT, these experiences illustrate how autonomy may be influenced by the extent to which artists can exercise choice and participate meaningfully in decisions concerning their creative work (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The label representatives' accounts further contextualize the commercial considerations and organizational responsibilities involved in these decisions. Collectively, the findings highlight a tension between the label's involvement in managing commercial opportunities and artists' experiences of creative control.

Competence and Professional Development

Participants' accounts highlighted the importance of professional learning and experience in shaping how they evaluated their capabilities and future careers in the music industry. Their accounts suggest that developing as an artist involved not only musical practice, but also acquiring knowledge of industry operations, management, copyright, and the practical requirements of pursuing an independent career.

Artist 1a expressed an ambition to pursue an independent career and potentially establish her own label. However, she recognised the importance of gaining further knowledge and experience of the music industry before doing so. She described this ambition as "satu penantian nak buat label sendiri" ["the long-awaited dream of establishing my own label"]. She also stated:

> *"Saya tak rasa saya forever dengan Label X lah. Mungkin saya akan bergerak secara independent. Mungkin saya nak buat label sendiri kan.." ["I do not think that I will stay with Label X forever. Maybe I will work independently, or perhaps establish my own label."]*

Her account suggests that professional independence was a longer-term ambition. Her continued involvement with the label indicates that this ambition did not necessarily require an immediate departure from the existing arrangement.

Artist 2a similarly acknowledged that she still needed industry knowledge and support, particularly in relation to copyright and the practical challenges of working independently. She explained that while she felt capable of managing certain aspects of her career herself, handling the wider demands of the music industry remained difficult without a label. This account illustrates how an artist may perceive different levels of capability across different professional tasks: confidence in personal management does not necessarily translate into confidence in handling copyright, financing, and other industry-related responsibilities independently.

Artist 2b also reflected on the knowledge he had gained over several years as a recording artist and considered the possibility of signing only a publishing deal in the future. His account suggests that accumulated experience informed how he evaluated his future career arrangements and the support he might require from a record label. However, considering a different contractual arrangement should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that he was ready to manage every aspect of his career independently.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), these accounts are relevant to competence because they illustrate how artists evaluate their capabilities in relation to the demands of their professional roles (Ryan & Deci, 2017). They also suggest that professional competence in the music industry extends beyond musical ability to include knowledge of industry practices and the practical skills required to sustain a career. However, recognizing the need for further knowledge or external support does not necessarily indicate a lack of competence. Rather, the participants' accounts illustrate how artists assess both their existing capabilities and the areas in which further knowledge, experience, or resources may be needed to pursue their professional goals.

Relatedness, Identity and Image Direction

Participants also described tensions surrounding image direction and the extent to which the identities they wished to express were reflected in the commercial positioning developed by their labels. These experiences are relevant to the SDT dimensions of relatedness, particularly where artists' accounts suggest differences in how their preferred identities and the labels' commercial expectations were understood and accommodated within the professional relationship.

Artist 2a provides an illustrative example. Prior to signing, she wanted her debut image to reflect an identity she described as "aggressive" and associated with international pop artists such as Beyoncé. However, by her second single, she described being positioned by the label through a "cheeky and cute" persona associated with commercially successful and viral songs. This positioning was also reflected in the account of Label Rep 2a:

> *"Dia masih muda, so kita portraitkan dia as a... remaja yang menyanyi" ["She is still young, so we portray her as a singing teen"].*

Artist 2a expressed her discomfort with this image:

> *"Actually to be honest, saya tak nak bawak image cheeky tu sebenarnya, sebab dekat Label X, saya dah buat semua benda tu. So, jadi.. sekarang ni, macam saya kata, risiko dia dekat saya sekarang lah, because I have to be.. not myself." ["Actually to be honest, I never wanted to bring that cheeky image, because back then in Label X, I had done all that. So, then... until now, like I said earlier, the risk is with me, because I have to be... someone that is not myself."]*

Her account illustrates how commercial image strategies may come into tension with an artist's preferred identity. Notably, the release nevertheless achieved commercial recognition despite her discomfort with the image associated with it. This illustrates that commercial success does not necessarily correspond to an artist's experience of creative or identity alignment. A different experience was described by Artist 1a, whose public image was associated with wearing a particular style of hijab and eyeglasses. During a video shoot, her decision to temporarily remove her glasses on the advice of a makeup artist was questioned by the A&R representative. She accepted the label's feedback:

> *"Bagi saya.. dorang ada good points, jadi saya kena ikut" / "for me, they do have good points, so I would have to obey."*

In contrast to Artist 2a's experience, Artist 1a's account suggests a more accommodating approach to image direction, in which she considered the label's feedback reasonable. The contrasting experiences suggest that identity and image management within 360-deals may function both as a source of commercial value and as an area of negotiation between artists and labels. Where an artist's image, persona, and public identity become part of the commercial relationship, artistic identity may therefore become a form of value that is managed and shaped within the music business. However, the participants' experiences indicate that the implications of this process depend on how such decisions are negotiated and whether artists perceive the resulting image as consistent with their own identities.

The three themes demonstrate how participants experienced different dimensions of autonomy, competence and relatedness within their artist–label relationships. Table 1 summarizes the relationship between the major themes, subthemes, and the corresponding SDT dimensions.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes and Self-Determination Theory Dimensions Identified in the Findings

Major Theme	**Sub-theme**	**SDT Dimension**	**Key Finding**
Autonomy and corporate gatekeeping in music direction	Label-directed music production	Autonomy	Some artists experienced limited involvement in music direction and creative decision-making.
	Approval processes and perceived restrictions on creative freedom	Autonomy	Approval procedures and commercial considerations shaped artists' experiences of creative control.
	Changes in creative control over time	Autonomy	Artist 1a described gaining greater control over subsequent releases, while Artist 2b perceived

			commercial recognition as a condition for greater creative freedom.
Competence and professional development	Learning industry practices and professional knowledge	Competence	Artists identified industry knowledge and experience as important to navigating their careers.
	Evaluating readiness for independent work	Competence	Artists reflected on their capabilities and the further knowledge or support they might need to pursue independent careers.
Relatedness, identity and image direction	Tensions between preferred identity and commercial image	Relatedness	Tensions emerged where commercial image direction did not align with artists' preferred identities.
	Responses to label input on image direction	Relatedness	Artists differed in how they responded to label input on image direction.

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CREATIVE WORK

The findings provide insight into how artists experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness within 360-deal relationships. Across these three dimensions, participants described different experiences of creative control, recognition of expertise, and alignment between their professional relationships and personal identities. These findings extend existing discussions of 360-deals, which have primarily examined the contractual and economic dimensions of expanded artist–label relationships (Marshall, 2012; Stahl & Meier, 2012; Kjus, 2022), by illustrating how such arrangements may also be experienced at the level of everyday creative work and professional relationships.

Autonomy and Creative Control

The findings concerning autonomy are consistent with previous research highlighting the expanded involvement of record labels in artists' professional activities under 360-deal arrangements. However, the participant accounts also indicate that this involvement does not necessarily result in a uniform level of creative control. Artist 1a and Artist 2b described substantial label involvement in music direction during the earlier stages of their careers, while Artist 1b described a more collaborative approach. In Artist 2c's case, the label representative acknowledged limited familiarity with her market, providing additional context for understanding differences in label involvement across the participants' experiences. These contrasting experiences indicate that the practical experience of autonomy may depend not only on the contractual breadth of the relationship, but also on the artist's experience, the label's expertise, and the way creative decisions are negotiated.

From an SDT perspective, these experiences can be understood in terms of autonomy satisfaction and frustration. Where artists have limited opportunities to participate in decisions concerning their creative work, their experience of autonomy may be constrained. Conversely, collaborative decision-making may provide greater opportunity for artists to experience choice and psychological freedom within the professional relationship.

Competence and Professional Development

The findings also highlight the importance of professional learning and industry knowledge in how artists evaluate their capabilities and future career options. Artist 1a expressed an ambition to establish her own label or pursue an independent career, while recognizing the importance of gaining further knowledge and experience of the music industry. Similarly, Artist 2a acknowledged that although she felt capable of managing certain aspects of her career herself, she continued to require support in areas such as copyright and the practical demands of working independently. Artist 2b also reflected on the knowledge he had gained through several years as a recording artist and considered the possibility of pursuing a publishing-only arrangement in the future.

These accounts extend the discussion of competence beyond musical ability to include artists' understanding of industry practices and their perceived readiness to manage different aspects of their professional careers. From an SDT perspective, competence concerns individuals' experiences of effectiveness and their ability to navigate the demands of their activities (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The participants' accounts suggest that professional development involves recognizing existing capabilities alongside areas where further knowledge, experience, or support may be needed. However, these reflections do not establish that the artists had achieved full independence or that their competence had objectively increased. Rather, they illustrate how artists assessed their capabilities and considered their future professional development within the resources and support available to them.

Relatedness, Identity and Identity Commodification

The findings concerning image direction further demonstrate how commercial relationships may intersect with artists' professional identities. Artist 2a's experience of being positioned through an image that she described as inconsistent with herself illustrates the tension that may arise when an artist's identity becomes part of the commercial value of the artist–label relationship. This finding is particularly relevant to the concept of identity commodification. Within a multi-rights arrangement, an artist's commercial value may extend beyond musical output to include image, persona, and public identity. When these elements become subject to commercial direction, identity itself may become part of the processes through which creative labour is organized and monetized.

However, the contrasting experience of Artist 1a demonstrates that commercial image management is not necessarily experienced as inherently negative. Her willingness to accept the A&R representative's feedback because she considered the suggestions to have "good points" illustrates a more negotiated relationship between artist preference and commercial direction. The findings therefore suggest that the issue is not simply whether an artist's identity is commercially managed, but how that management is experienced and negotiated. Where artists perceive the label's input as reasonable and compatible with their preferences, commercial direction may be more readily accommodated within their creative identity. Conversely, a perceived mismatch between the promoted image and an artist's preferred identity may create tension within the artist–label relationship.

Potential Implications for Psychological Well-being

Taken together, the findings support the relevance of SDT for understanding artists' experiences within multi-rights relationships. Participants described experiences that may support or frustrate autonomy, competence, and relatedness, dimensions that SDT associates with motivation and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, the present study does not directly measure psychological well-being. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as demonstrating burnout, clinical distress, identity crisis, or other psychological outcomes. Instead, the participants' accounts indicate experiences

that have potential implications for psychological well-being, particularly where creative control, recognition of expertise, and identity alignment are concerned.

This distinction is important in interpreting the findings. The commercial success associated with some of the participants' work demonstrates that commercial outcomes and artists' experiences are not necessarily directly opposed. Artist 1a's debut achieved commercial success despite her dissatisfaction with the creative direction, while Artist 2a's commercially successful song also involved an image that she experienced as inconsistent with her preferred identity. These cases illustrate that commercial success does not necessarily indicate that an artist experienced the creative process as autonomous or psychologically satisfying. A commercially successful outcome may therefore coexist with a more constrained or ambivalent experience of the creative process through which that outcome was achieved.

Implications for Sustainable Creative Work

From the perspective of sustainable creative work, the findings suggest that the long-term viability of artist–label relationships involve more than financial and commercial outcomes. The sustainability of professional creative work may also depend on whether artists are able to maintain meaningful involvement in creative decision-making, have their expertise recognized, and experience sufficient alignment between their professional identity and the commercial direction of their careers. This does not mean that commercial direction or label involvement is inherently unsustainable. Rather, the findings indicate that the manner in which commercial direction is exercised may be significant.

Collaborative decision-making, recognition of artist expertise, and negotiation around identity may provide conditions that better support artists' psychological needs while still allowing commercial objectives to be pursued. These implications should, however, be understood within the contextual boundaries of the present qualitative study and should not be generalized to the Malaysian music industry as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Malaysian recording artists' experiences of 360-deal arrangements through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness and their intersection with creative control and professional identity. The findings reveal varied experiences across artist–label relationships, particularly in relation to creative decision-making, professional development, and the management of artists' images and identities. While some participants described constraints arising from label involvement and commercial expectations, others experienced greater creative freedom or were more receptive to label input. These differences highlight the varied ways in which artists navigate the professional and commercial conditions of 360-deal arrangements.

The findings extend existing scholarship on 360-deals beyond their contractual and economic dimensions by examining how these arrangements are experienced in everyday creative work and professional relationships. The analysis illustrates how autonomy may be shaped by artists' involvement in creative decisions, while competence involves not only musical ability but also the industry knowledge and experience required to navigate a professional career. Relatedness provides a further perspective for understanding how artists experience the relationship between their preferred identities and the commercial image developed with their labels. In this context, identity commodification becomes relevant when an artist's image, personal, and public identity are incorporated into commercial decision-making. The findings therefore offer an experiential perspective that complements existing research on the economic and organizational dimensions of multi-rights arrangements (Marshall, 2012; Kjus, 2022), while also resonating with research on career sustainability in the Malaysian creative industries,

including Muhid's (2022) discussion of disrupted career stability within the Malaysian music and television industries.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that record labels and artist-management teams could adopt more collaborative approaches to artist management by involving artists meaningfully in music direction, image development, and other decisions affecting their professional identities.

Clearer processes for creative consultation, recognition of artists' expertise, and opportunities to negotiate image and creative direction may help balance commercial objectives with artists' creative preferences. For artists, greater awareness of contractual rights, decision-making processes, and the scope of commercial arrangements may support more informed participation in artist–label relationships. Such approaches do not require the removal of commercial considerations but highlight the importance of how commercial decisions are made and negotiated.

The findings also have implications for understanding sustainable creative work. Commercial success and creative satisfaction do not necessarily coincide, and an artist's commercial visibility does not in itself indicate that the artist has experienced the creative process as autonomous or consistent with their preferred identity. The findings suggest that the sustainability of professional creative work may depend partly on whether artists can participate meaningfully in creative decisions, develop the knowledge needed to navigate their careers, and negotiate commercial expectations in ways that remain compatible with their professional identities. However, as psychological well-being was not directly measured in this study, these findings should be understood as highlighting potential implications for artists' psychological needs rather than demonstrating specific psychological outcomes.

Finally, the findings should be interpreted within the methodological limitations of the study. The research involved a small purposive sample of eight participants, comprising five recording artists and three label representatives, and was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of their accounts rather than statistically representative evidence of the Malaysian music industry. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all Malaysian recording artists or 360-deal arrangements. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches and examine a wider range of artist–label relationships to explore how creative control, professional identity, industry knowledge, and psychological needs evolve across different stages of artists' careers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by all authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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