

## The lucrative art of losing an identity

From a stressful day at work, video games always cheer me up. On the other side, my cousin (and I will refer to him as Kev from now on) is in his room, headsets covering his ears, laptop on the bed with two or three tabs of audio mixing software open. I always knew his musical leanings were a thing to keep him awake at night, but thought of it as a phase that he might eventually grow out of. He is good at it, and he has had opportunities to work with some renowned music producers which he continuously declined to focus on his college studies, not in vain however since he kept in contact with some and occasionally sells his beats to them.

He cherishes every moment spent producing and replaying his mixes but believes that deep engagement in the music industry could potentially be a distraction for him. I listen to some of the beats Kev has produced and think he is quite talented, yet topics about fame and celebrity have never been that interesting to him. He sells some of his content without copyrights and does not feel the need to validate his passion by monetizing it.

His reality revolves around shaping his livelihood from a systemic point of view. He sees dependence on one type of economy as a liability and has never considered the 'one or the other' approach. This is the main reason behind not fully engaging in the pursuit of monetizing his music skills. But what if he did? What would the consequences be on his identity, his love of music, and most importantly, his emotional and material satisfaction? What rules to follow?

### *1. The passion and the pay*

Would Kev keep the same enthusiastic approach towards his music making if he decides to fully make it a sole profit-generating activity, and how impactful would the pressure to meet market demands affect his performance?

In his case, there is an apparent and perpetual financial gap between 'what he loves', and 'what he gets paid for' but when those concepts collide, two outcomes are possible with different impacts. The juxtaposition of 'loving what we get paid for' and 'getting paid for what we love' raises an interesting discussion on what a sound business model should build upon: the passion or/and the financial benefits. There is hardly a one-size-fits-all conclusion to this talk, and neither should it be one way or the other.

Yet if the focus shifts towards monetizing individuality, there is a need to understand the level of vulnerability of associating our own happiness and gratification with the paycheck. From a stressful day at college, Kev takes refuge in producing a particular beat. Would the refuge still be as soothing if the beats were responsible for being able to pay for college?

## 2. Identity perception

The '*I want to be a doctor when I grow up*' statement proves that even at a young age, we tend to narrate the idea of who we want to be when we grow up from an occupational perspective. There is a sense of identity in finding the right career for us, and the expectation of personal fulfillment when choosing our next career path. Our career then constitutes the most part of our identity, but what happens when our perception of what we knew as an accepted career mode, our reality, is gradually changing? Perception then becomes a key factor to forming a new identity.

In their paper '*A model of entrepreneur economy*', Audretsch et al explained how stability, continuity, and homogeneity are the basis of managed economy where stability and predictability are key factors for mass production. This has shaped our perception of what a real job looks like, an unfortunate perception that leaves little room for creative individuals willing to monetize their unique interests. "When a change in perception takes place, the facts do not change. The meaning does" Drucker, 1985. He considered the '*Change in perception*' as one of the sources of innovative ideas in an entrepreneurial economy.

In this same book he describes the 7 sources of innovative opportunity<sup>1</sup>, and uses the term *incongruous economic realities* to describe the difference between reality as it actually is and reality as it is assumed to be. For most part of our economic era, I suspect we did not take it as a phase rather as a description of what an economic system should look like; set of rules that formed an *identity* that everyone needed to survive during that economic system, a magic formula to success.

## 3. The choice of the creator

Kev has chosen to stay anonymous and deal exclusively with a group of people to which he sells his beats. Alternatively he could pursue fame and eventually become a renowned music producer. The approach he would use in each situation depicts the distinction between two business models in this type of economy built around individual content: the passion economy and the creator economy models. Both models invites to think about the implications and strategies to reach the audience.

---

<sup>1</sup> In his book "*Innovation and Entrepreneurship*"

Since he has close contact with the people he deals with, they can reach out to him directly, with a possibility to participate in some of his production sessions. He has become aware of their taste in music and (since his direct customers do not necessarily publish the music themselves) the music genre of the artist who will be the end target. He then customizes his beats to satisfy the need of a particular customer. This leaves room for premiums, as he charges according to the efforts and quality of the end product. What makes him unique is not only the quality of beats he produces, it is also a combination of his work and personality that can be observed by those close to him.

If I think of an alternative situation where he has decided to go wide, there is potential of fame and an even bigger number of customers. In this situation he could be competing with others in the music industry and could see him shift towards satisfying a bigger community at the expense of authenticity. It could then mean less customization and increased quantity of his content, inability to tie bonds with each one of his customers, and less room for premiums as mass production is preferred to uniqueness.

While the focus of both embraces creating a community, the passion economy business model takes a step further by focusing on building a specific niche and limit the growth of the customer, while creating special connection with and within the community. Showcasing the skills to reach targeted audience does not necessarily promote uniqueness, yet customizing the services based on who we are builds a strong relationship with the audience. However, it is not exclusively one way or the other, as he can have special clients who pay premiums and have less customized content for the rest. The balance between the benefits and disadvantages of each model rests on his shoulders if he decides to combine both models.

#### 4. *New rules against traditional rules*

Would the rules to follow be different for him if Kev earned his life through his passion from when he is part of the labor market? Which factors will require changing?

- a. He can either be part of the network or *create his network*, and the latter represents the fundamentals of the passion economy in which the basics of the former are applied to self. The thinking shifts from being given a value to setting his value.
- b. Competition against *customization* are also important in setting new rules to follow in the passion economy, and once he has set his own values he will no longer be in competition with anybody. His personality and individuality shall determine how he satisfies his

audience, and the talk would be 'customized service' rather than 'best service'.

Instead of keeping tracks of the latest software technologies and brand new hardware to improve his production, he would then focus on keeping track of the shift in trends within his community.

- c. Individuality does not necessarily mean loneliness. According to Kev the concept of self-initiated community does not reflect exclusiveness, thus his flexibility to collaborate with other creators within the industry to satisfy the various needs of his community.

## 5. *External influence*

I still witness the same enthusiasm and determination in Kev's music endeavors whether he expects a paycheck or not. He does it for himself; his satisfaction seems to come from within which, in turn, generates more sparks.

The concept of 'Self' for Kev seems to be easily achieved when there are less external influences affecting it. This is if some factors such as financial gains or external approval (hard to say if the pursuit of celebrity status is part of one or both factors) do not influence it. The precepts of the current economic systems prioritize egalitarian and/or competitive behaviors over individuality, which makes it even harder for willing individuals to embrace self-monetization.

## 6. *Final thought*

To quote Peter Drucker:

*<Like one's strengths, how one performs is individual. It is personality. Whether personality be "nature" or "nurture," it surely is formed long before the person goes to work. And how a person performs is a "given," just as what a person is good at or not good at is a "given.">*

Individuality provides the ability to explore what one is good at and ability to leverage that uniqueness to satisfy the needs of the community. However, it is equally important to know one's limit and focus on where to make the great impact. Just like taking a look at past essays gives an idea of what format to follow, our identity has long based on sameness as a guarantee of success. On the other hand left-handed people were often seen as non-conforming to acceptable writing norms. The passion economy challenges our identity and will indeed face resistance. But there is hope for those willing to lose the common identity, and forge their own.

## Reference:

- Audretsch, David & Thurik, Roy. (2004). *A model of the entrepreneurial economy*. International Journal of Entrepreneurship Education. 4.
- Drucker, Peter F. *Management challenges for the 21st century*. Harper Business. 1999. 161-170
- Drucker, Peter F. *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. 1985
- Davidson, Adam. *The Passion Economy: The new rules for thriving in the 21st century*. New York. 2020