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Professional Identity Transition of Vocational Graduates: Adaptive Strategies of Session Musicians in Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

Session musicians occupy a unique position as mobile and flexible professionals who must be able to adapt to diverse musical situations while facing unstable economic and social pressures. The transition from formal education to an industry that demands multidimensional competencies often becomes a highly challenging phase, where the artistic idealism of graduates meets a competitive and unpredictable reality. This study aims to understand the transition of graduates from the Vocational Program in Music Performance toward a career as session musicians in Jakarta's music industry. The main focus of this research is to reveal the challenges faced by the graduates and the adaptive strategies they develop to sustain their careers. This research employs a qualitative case study approach within the framework of grounded theory. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and both participatory and non-participatory observations involving fourteen informants, consisting of music college graduates, community musicians, producers, and music directors. Data analysis was conducted through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify thematic categories. The results show that formal education provides a technical foundation but does not fully prepare graduates to face the fluid and uncertain realities of the industry. Conversely, adaptive strategies such as cross-genre musical flexibility, non-formal learning through mentoring and observation, personal branding, reputation management, networking, and technological adaptation emerge as key competencies determining career success. These findings affirm that the resilience of session musicians is shaped not only by technical skills but also by social, symbolic, and cultural capital developed beyond formal education. Theoretically, this study expands the discussion on musicians' professional identity and the precarity of creative labor in Indonesia. Practically, it implies the need to strengthen the vocational music curriculum to emphasize not only musical skills but also professional networking, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy to better prepare graduates for the competitive music industry.

Keywords: session musicians; vocational education; adaptive strategies; Jakarta music industry; professional identity

ABSTRAK

Transisi Identitas Profesional Lulusan Vokasi: Strategi Adaptif Musisi Sesi di Jakarta. Musisi sesi menempati posisi unik sebagai profesional yang *mobile* dan fleksibel, yang harus mampu beradaptasi dengan berbagai situasi musikal sambil menghadapi tekanan ekonomi dan sosial yang tidak stabil. Transisi dari pendidikan formal ke industri yang menuntut kompetensi multidimensional sering kali menjadi

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fase yang sangat menantang, di mana idealisme artistik para lulusan bertemu dengan realitas yang kompetitif dan tidak terduga. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memahami transisi lulusan Program Studi D4 Penyajian Musik ISI Yogyakarta menuju karier sebagai musisi sesi di industri musik Jakarta. Fokus utama kajian ini adalah mengungkap tantangan yang dihadapi para lulusan serta strategi adaptif yang mereka kembangkan untuk mempertahankan kariernya. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif dalam kerangka *grounded theory*. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam serta observasi partisipatif dan nonpartisipatif terhadap empat belas informan, yang terdiri dari lulusan perguruan tinggi musik, musisi komunitas, produser, dan direktur musik. Analisis data dilakukan melalui proses *open coding*, *axial coding*, dan *selective coding* untuk mengidentifikasi kategori tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan formal memberikan dasar teknis, tetapi belum sepenuhnya mempersiapkan lulusan menghadapi realitas industri yang cair dan penuh ketidakpastian. Sebaliknya, strategi adaptif seperti fleksibilitas lintas-genre, pembelajaran nonformal melalui mentoring dan observasi, *personal branding*, manajemen reputasi, jaringan profesional, serta adaptasi teknologi muncul sebagai kompetensi kunci yang menentukan keberhasilan karier. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa ketahanan musisi sesi dibentuk tidak hanya oleh keterampilan teknis, tetapi juga oleh modal sosial, simbolik, dan kultural yang dikembangkan di luar pendidikan formal. Secara teoretis, kajian ini memperluas diskusi mengenai identitas profesional musisi dan kondisi kerja kreatif yang rentan di Indonesia. Secara praktis, hasilnya menunjukkan perlunya penguatan kurikulum vokasi musik agar tidak hanya menekankan keterampilan musikal, tetapi juga jejaring profesional, kewirausahaan, dan literasi digital untuk mempersiapkan lulusan menghadapi industri musik yang kompetitif

Kata kunci: musisi sesi; pendidikan vokasi; strategi adaptif; industri musik Jakarta; identitas profesional

1. Introduction

Music vocational education in Indonesia faces serious challenges in ensuring the *link and match* between graduates' competencies and the ever-changing demands of the industry (Nudin, 2017; Lase, 2019; Putranto et al., 2024). This concern aligns with findings by Susatya et al. (2022) who mapped the professional competencies of arts and culture teachers in Indonesian vocational schools and emphasized the importance of integrating technical expertise with adaptive and professional skills to ensure graduates' readiness for creative industries.

At the level of instructional practice, vocational music education in Indonesia still tends to emphasize technical mastery and instrumental proficiency as primary indicators of competence. Akbar, (2020)demonstrates that even within applied music training, learning processes are often centered on repetitive technical exercises and standardized practice models, with limited attention to contextual performance demands, professional adaptability, and industry-based working situations. This condition suggests that while technical competence is cultivated intensively, broader professional readiness remains underdeveloped.

These challenges are clearly reflected in the music industry, which is characterized by project-based work, competitiveness, and high uncertainty. In this context, creative workers, including musicians, are often depicted as being in a *precarious* condition; fragile, temporary, and without guarantees of career

sustainability (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Menger, 2017). To survive and grow, vocational graduates are required to master not only technical skills but also social, managerial, and adaptive competencies. The shift of the creative industry toward flexible and digital work further intensifies the urgency of *link and match*. Recent studies show that digital platformization has reshaped the structure of the global music ecosystem, where platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, and TikTok redefine value creation and professional collaboration among creative workers (Geurts & Cepa, 2023).

Hamdani et al., (2020) emphasizes that vocational education must adapt to the Industrial Revolution 4.0, which demands creativity, collaboration, and technological literacy. The OECD (2019) report also highlights the importance of adaptive skills, cross-disciplinary communication, and lifelong learning as essential assets for vocational graduates. Thus, the gap between graduates' competencies and labor market demands not only hinders individual careers but also weakens higher education's contribution to strengthening the national creative industry.

The Vocational Program in Music Performance is one of the vocational programs designed to prepare graduates to be ready for work in the music industry. However, initial observations indicate that students and graduates often lack a sufficient understanding of the competencies required for a career as a session musician. Many graduates pursue career paths through *trial and error* or rely on luck to access music projects. This situation reveals a gap between the vision of vocational education, which emphasizes practical skills, and the reality of the music industry, which demands adaptive capacity, social networking, and managerial knowledge.

Jakarta, as the center of Indonesia's music industry (Darlene, 2024; Wahid, 2021), provides a concrete picture of this dynamic. Session musicians work within a fluid ecosystem where reputation, personal credibility, and social connections serve as the main capital (Coulson, 2012; Herbst & Albrecht, 2018; Hanorsian et al., 2025). Sutopo, et. al (2017) describe the city as a creative field structured by informal networks and systems of reputation that shape access to musical work. In urban artistic contexts, professional practices are often organized through social negotiation, relational trust, and adaptive strategies rather than formal institutional mechanisms (Saidika et al., 2025). Within this framework, the career trajectories of session musicians cannot be explained solely through technical skills, but must also be understood through their capacity to mobilize social, cultural, and symbolic capital in navigating the musical field (Bourdieu, 1993).

Previous studies have shown the importance of adaptive capacity in musicians' careers. Coulson (2012) asserts that musicians in the United Kingdom survive through diverse musical experiences, both formal and informal education, and adaptive ability. Everts et al., (2022) add that young musicians today are required not only to be creative practitioners but also to act as managers and entrepreneurs, with a growing emphasis on entrepreneurial values. These findings are consistent with Bennett, (2016) and Beeching, (2006), who point out that the *employability* of modern musicians no longer relies solely on artistic skills but also on the ability to build networks and manage careers strategically.

In the Indonesian context, Sutopo et al., (2017) show that young musicians are highly dependent on strategic social capital to build their careers amid uncertain competition. Hanorsian et al., (2025), also emphasize that professional networks are crucial for musicians in Jakarta, although their study remains limited to individual cases. Meanwhile, Djuanto & Suyasa, (2024) adds a cultural perspective, stating that the position of musicians is determined not only by the market but also by the dynamics of socio-cultural identity.

Although various studies have discussed employment issues in the creative and music industries (Coulson, 2012; Comunian et al., 2015; Ballico & Foran, 2024), most of these studies focus on Western contexts with relatively established industrial infrastructures and strong institutional support. There remains a lack of research that explores how graduates of music vocational education in developing countries navigate career transitions within unstructured, informal, and socially network-based ecosystems

such as those in Indonesia. Supporting this, Akil et al., (2024) highlight that Indonesia's digital music industry is undergoing a mediatized transformation, creating both new opportunities and structural inequalities as digital adoption accelerates faster than institutional adaptation. This research gap raises important questions about how social capital, musical flexibility, and adaptive strategies are formed in contexts with minimal job security and high economic risks. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by highlighting the experiences and adaptive strategies of session musicians in Jakarta as a representation of the dynamics of creative labor in the Global South.

2. Literature Review

The discourse on musicians' professional identity and adaptive strategies has been widely discussed in various contexts. Ibarra, (1999) emphasizes that professional identity is not a static entity but is formed through a continuous process of experimentation, exploration, and negotiation. In the context of musicians, Coulson (2012) shows that the life of session musicians is filled with uncertainty, making collaboration, flexibility, and entrepreneurial orientation the main requirements for survival. Within the broader framework of the creative industries, Comunian et al., (2015) highlight the gap between higher education graduates' competencies and the needs of the creative labor market, which evolve faster than the educational system. Other studies focus on the often-overlooked position of session musicians. Herbst & Albrecht, (2018) describe them as key actors in the recording industry who rarely receive public recognition. Ballico & Foran, (2024) assert that adaptive strategies are a crucial element in dealing with career instability. The relationship between vocational education and musicians' employabilit*y* has also been widely discussed. Bridgstock (2011) emphasizes that communication skills, teamwork, and self-management are fundamental in the creative industry. Banks & Hesmondhalgh (2009) add that creative work is generally characterized by precarity, making adaptive skills and the ability to manage uncertainty highly vital. Meanwhile, Menger (2017) stresses that flexibility and mobility are distinctive features of creative labor, requiring musicians to be prepared for temporary and unpredictable projects.

However, most of these studies remain rooted in Western contexts with relatively stronger institutional support. In non-Western regions, musicians' working conditions are often more fragile and informal. Karlsen, (2011) highlights that the experiences of musicians outside the West are strongly influenced by specific socio-cultural dynamics. Budiman & Kusno, (2024); Sosrowijaya, (2023) add that music in Indonesia is closely intertwined with the construction of cultural identity, so the position of musicians is determined not only by the market but also by socio-cultural relations.

Studies in Indonesia have begun to explore the relationship between vocational education, the labor market, and musicians' careers. Putranto et al., (2024) using *Sakernas* data, show that vocational education can reduce skill mismatches, although it does not automatically guarantee decent income. Hanorsian et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of professional networks as social capital for Jakarta-based musicians, while (Djuanto & Y. S. Suyasa, 2024) highlight the roles of psychological resilience, intrinsic motivation, and social support in sustaining the careers of performing musicians. Sutopo et al. (2017) reveal that despite uncertainty, young Indonesian musicians continue to maintain creative aspirations, although their study focuses more on aspirational dimensions rather than practical skills.

Thus, there remains a gap in the literature concerning how music vocational graduates, particularly session musicians, navigate the transition from education to a project-based, competitive, and uncertain work environment. To bridge this gap, this study employs the competency framework of (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), which emphasizes skills, knowledge, motives, and values, alongside Bourdieu's (1993) theory of capital, habitus, and field, which explains how professional identity is formed through the accumulation of social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The integration of these two frameworks enables a more comprehensive analysis of the formation of session musicians' professional identity in Jakarta.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach within the framework of grounded theory to explore the subjective experiences of session musicians (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Alzaanin, 2020; Risfandini & Mustika, 2023). Grounded theory was chosen because it allows for the inductive interpretation of data to examine how competencies and habitus are formed through musicians' lived experiences until theoretical saturation is reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Purposive sampling was applied to select participants based on their involvement in diverse professional music projects and the variety of their educational and career backgrounds. A total of fourteen informants participated in the study, comprising six graduates of the Vocational Program in Music Performance, five graduates from other higher education institutions, one non-formal (community-based) musician, one producer, and one music director. All participants were between 25 and 37 years old and had at least two years of professional experience as session musicians, with the most experienced having up to fourteen years of experience. Their work included studio recording, live performances, national and international tours, as well as cross-genre and cross-media collaborations. Although some participants originated from Yogyakarta, Surakarta, and Bandung, all currently reside and work in Jakarta as the center of the national music industry.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and both participatory and non-participatory observations conducted in various entertainment venues, including recording studios, cafés, restaurants, hotels, and music communities. To ensure validity, data triangulation was conducted across participants, observations, and documents, alongside member checking through confirmation of interview interpretations with participants.

Data analysis followed the stages of open, axial, and selective coding as outlined in grounded theory procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to identify recurring practices, experiences, and strategies related to session musicians' professional work. Initial coding employed in vivo expressions derived from participants' own accounts, without imposing predefined theoretical categories. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader empirical themes reflecting patterns of practice such as flexibility, reliance on professional networks, and reputation management. At a later stage, the emergent themes were examined relationally to explore tensions between relatively stable educational dispositions and the fluctuating conditions of project-based musical labour. Theoretical concepts from Bourdieu and Spencer & Spencer were then introduced as sensitizing concepts to interpret these patterns rather than as rigid classificatory frameworks.

4. Results

The findings indicate that graduates of the Vocational Music Performance Program experience a non-linear transition when entering Jakarta's music industry. Rather than following a clearly structured career pathway, their professional trajectories unfold within informal, fluid, and highly flexible settings. This transition phase is marked by uncertainty, trial and error, and recurring self-doubt, revealing that entry into the field is not governed by standardized criteria. While technical skills acquired through formal education function as an initial form of cultural capital, they are insufficient on their own to secure stable positions. Instead, recognition within the field is more strongly mediated by reputation and social recommendations, indicating a misalignment between educational credentials and the dominant logic of the music industry.

In contrast to professions organized through managerial systems—characterized by formal contracts, task divisions, performance evaluations, and structured promotion—the working system of session musicians in Indonesia operates within a largely informal ecosystem. This informality does not merely

signal flexibility but reflects a structural condition in which uncertainty and risk are normalized and largely borne by individual musicians. Collaboration, role allocation, and payment arrangements are commonly negotiated verbally, without written agreements or institutional safeguards.

> *"I once joined a project that didn't have a clear rundown. Rehearsals were random, and the fee was only paid two months later. But that's normal, if you're not used to it, it can really stress you out."* (Interview, YD)

The absence of formal structure simultaneously produces flexible yet tangible power relations within musical projects. Although there are no explicit job descriptions, strong social expectations compel musicians to comply with the artistic directions of senior musicians or producers. Without formal evaluation mechanisms, reputation becomes the primary currency through which future opportunities are distributed. Consequently, musicians who fail to navigate these unwritten norms risk exclusion or being labeled as "not knowing their place," regardless of their technical proficiency. This illustrates how symbolic power operates subtly through peer recognition and informal hierarchies.

Musicians are therefore exposed to persistent precarity due to the lack of permanent contracts, strong unions, or effective legal protection. Their reliance on informal agreements places them in structurally weaker positions relative to producers, labels, or agencies that possess greater economic, social, and symbolic capital. The unequal distribution of capital within the field limits musicians' bargaining power and reinforces asymmetrical labor relations.

> *"There's no written job description, but we all know that the seniors are the ones who usually set the musical direction. So, if we have a different opinion, we need to be smart about positioning ourselves. Otherwise, we'll be labeled as difficult to work with."* (Interview, EV)

Within this hierarchical yet informal work environment, positions and roles are shaped through accumulated experience and reputational standing rather than formal designation. Navigating this order requires adaptive capacities that extend beyond musical competence, encompassing social awareness, emotional regulation, and strategic self-positioning. "Knowing one's place" thus emerges as a crucial form of social competence, revealing how habitus is continually adjusted in response to the relational dynamics of the field.

Similarly, recruitment into Jakarta's session music scene does not follow systematic, open, or institutionalized procedures typical of formal industries. Access to work is predominantly governed by informal recruitment practices based on social networks, reputational credibility, and long-term interpersonal familiarity. In this project-based labor environment, professional entry is less a matter of meeting administrative qualifications than of being recognized and endorsed by trusted insiders.

> *"Most of the time it's through recommendations. Maybe one or two come from portfolios… but mostly it's word of mouth."* (Interview, TO)

The recommendation system functions as the most influential recruitment mechanism, whereby a musician's name circulates through networks of trust connecting musicians, producers, and music directors. This finding extends the perspective of competency-based models by demonstrating that musical skills alone are insufficient; they must be accompanied by the ability to mobilize social and symbolic capital in order to be converted into concrete employment opportunities.

In the professional life of session musicians, social relationships are not merely personal but are essential for sustaining a career in the music industry. Rather than functioning as optional interpersonal ties, these relationships operate as structural resources that mediate access to work, information, and professional continuity. Interactions among musicians are built through long and often informal processes, characterized by their intense collective presence during rehearsals, recordings, and performances. Through repeated co-presence, these interactions generate resilient informal networks that function as the primary infrastructure for circulating job opportunities, emotional support, and ongoing musical and social learning (Sutopo et al., 2017).

Social relationships within session musician communities often begin in small spaces of interaction, such as waiting rooms, casual conversations during breaks, discussions between song rehearsals, and relaxed meals after performances. These seemingly peripheral spaces operate as informal social laboratories where trust, familiarity, and professional judgment are continuously produced. As highlighted in field observations with DM, the transit room emerges as a distinctive feature of the musicians' ecosystem, not merely as a functional waiting area but as a strategic social space for strengthening solidarity, exchanging reputational information, and regulating emotional readiness prior to performances (Observation, DM).

Such small spaces of interaction, which may appear trivial, are in fact closely related to musical performance. They function as arenas where musicians implicitly evaluate one another's work ethos, emotional disposition, and relational compatibility. Within this framework, musicians pay close attention to nonverbal attitudes such as interpersonal sensitivity, humility, and communicative flexibility. These qualities become tacit criteria in future project selection, revealing that informal communication plays a central role in the social selection mechanisms of the session musicians' working ecosystem.

> *"Yeah, interaction is really important. It doesn't have to be formal. Like, even backstage, we can see who can keep the mood up, who's humble, who's easy to talk to. Those things also become considerations for the next collaboration."* (Interview, YB)

In professional contexts, moments outside actual performance hours often become informally decisive for building personal relationships. These relaxed interactions allow industry actors to assess not only musical ability but also an individual's capacity to maintain interpersonal harmony under pressure. Frequently, relationships formed through such encounters translate into future work opportunities, network expansion, and reinforced community cohesion, demonstrating that social proximity operates as a gateway to professional mobility.

> *"Usually, when we're waiting for recording sessions, we just sit around and chat. From there, we start to know what kind of person someone is, whether we get along or not. Sometimes I even get other gigs from those chats."* (Interview, YB)

Social relationships among musicians thus reveal a complex and ongoing process of negotiation rather than spontaneous camaraderie (Coulson, 2012; Herbst & Albrecht, 2018). Access to professional circles is not automatic but contingent upon one's ability to demonstrate social adaptability alongside musical competence. Informant RF described how entry into a particular "circle" requires sustained social engagement and the willingness to participate in extended informal interactions.

> *"The hardest challenge is blending in… to get into the circle, you have to hang out. Sometimes until one or two in the morning, just to know who's easy to talk to."* (Interview, RF)

In many cases, social interaction constitutes the initial gatekeeping mechanism that determines inclusion within specific professional communities. This highlights how social capital precedes and conditions the recognition of musical capital. This dynamic was echoed by informant TO, who emphasized that within Jakarta's music ecosystem, communication skills and conversational fluency are critical for maintaining relational continuity and anticipating future collaborations.

> *"…We learn how to approach new people and build connections. That's what I've been learning here. In Yogyakarta, it's more like—if you want to get to know someone, fine; if not, that's fine too. But here in Jakarta, when I'm introduced to someone new, I start thinking about how to make the conversation flow and connect for future collaborations."* (Interview, TO)

Nevertheless, these social relationships remain selective and are more strongly consolidated within circles formed through repeated shared work experiences. Outside these circles, musicians are required to continuously reaffirm both their technical reliability and social alignment to gain acceptance. Observations of RO, who operates simultaneously as a musician and music director, illustrate that social relations within

session work are not purely horizontal but also involve leadership dynamics. By fostering an atmosphere of openness and equality during recording sessions, RO demonstrates how symbolic authority can be exercised through relational competence rather than formal hierarchy (Observation, RO).

In summary, social relationships among session musicians in Jakarta constitute a critical dimension of context-based non-musical competence. They function not only as supportive interpersonal ties but as mechanisms that sustain professionalism, regulate access to work, and buffer psychological strain within an uncertain labor environment. These relationships are fluid yet consequential, grounded in empathy, adaptability, and social sensitivity, revealing how habitus is continually reshaped through everyday interactions within the musical field (Coulson, 2012; Hanorsian et al., 2025).

The next major challenge faced by session musicians is psychological. Many graduates reported experiencing insecurity and diminished self-confidence upon entering Jakarta's music industry. Rather than reflecting individual weakness, these feelings emerge from their positioning within a highly competitive field structured by constant comparison and informal evaluation. Feelings of uncertainty often arise as they measure themselves against more experienced musicians, particularly in high-profile projects where expectations are elevated and mistakes are highly visible. Informant FN explicitly described a persistent "fear of making mistakes" and anxiety about being compared to more established musicians, revealing how psychological pressure is socially produced through reputational hierarchies within the field.

> *"The psychological pressure is heavy, especially the first time you're called for a big project. Sometimes you feel unprepared, afraid of making mistakes, or being compared to other, more skilled musicians."* (Interview, FN)

This experience illustrates the emotional dimension of professional transition as a relational process rather than an individual shortcoming. Upon entering the demanding arena of the music industry, technical proficiency alone does not automatically translate into confidence or emotional security. The feeling of being 'unprepared' stems not solely from gaps in skill, but from a mismatch between the habitus cultivated in relatively supportive academic settings and the industry's logic, which prioritizes speed, precision, and flawless execution under pressure. In this sense, anxiety functions as an indicator of structural adjustment rather than personal inadequacy.

In adapting to this professional environment, the experience of informant RZ highlights psychological dimensions that are often overlooked in discussions of musical competence. RZ described how mental pressure intensifies in high-stakes situations that demand simultaneous technical accuracy and emotional regulation. As performance demands increase, anxiety becomes a recurring response to heightened visibility and evaluative scrutiny, particularly during rehearsals for major projects. RZ admitted to nearly experiencing stress in such situations. To cope, she chose to calm herself before continuing rehearsals, even asking her peers to leave the room so she could refocus completely.

> *"I almost got really stressed once. I always take some time to heal first. There was also a time when I kept making mistakes, so I asked everyone to step out for a bit so I could practice alone."* (Interview, RZ)

This behavior represents an active strategy of emotional self-management rather than avoidance or incapacity. The act of seeking solitude and "healing" reflects an effort to regain control over one's emotional state in an environment that offers little institutional support for psychological well-being. Such practices indicate that emotional regulation itself becomes a form of non-musical competence necessary for sustaining participation in the field. The pressure experienced is thus not merely linked to technical errors, but to the internalization of industry expectations that equate professionalism with perfection and uninterrupted performance.

At a structural level, this psychological strain arises from the collision between an academic habitus oriented toward learning and gradual improvement and an industrial habitus that demands immediate

readiness and consistent excellence. When graduates encounter situations in which their accumulated cultural capital is insufficiently recognized or inadequately rewarded, feelings of inferiority and alienation may surface. This moment of dissonance marks a critical phase in which musicians are compelled to recalibrate their dispositions, attitudes, and coping strategies. Consequently, professional transition entails not only skill adaptation but also the construction of a reconfigured habitus more closely aligned with the competitive and evaluative logic of Jakarta's music industry (Bourdieu, 1993).

Another major challenge faced by graduates is economic instability. Jakarta's music industry operates predominantly through project-based arrangements, resulting in a structural condition in which income uncertainty is normalized rather than exceptional. In the early stages of their careers, many graduates reported difficulty meeting basic living expenses due to the irregularity of job offers. This instability compels musicians to continuously navigate between artistic aspirations and economic survival, often forcing them to accept non-musical work or low-paid projects within the field.

> *"Aside from finances, relationships are also important. Those two, money and relationships are the most crucial things."* (Interview, YS)

Informant YS's statement underscores the interdependence between economic capital and social capital in sustaining a career as a session musician. Financial vulnerability is not solely a matter of insufficient wages but is closely tied to the uneven distribution of networks and access to opportunities. Under these conditions, economic survival becomes contingent upon one's capacity to mobilize social relationships, reinforcing the relational nature of professional sustainability (Menger, 2017; Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009).

In addition to unstable income, payment systems within the industry are frequently non-transparent or delayed. The prevalence of verbal agreements and the absence of enforceable contracts expose musicians to prolonged payment delays and, in some cases, complete non-payment. The lack of strong advocacy institutions or effective musicians' unions further exacerbates their weak bargaining position relative to event organizers, producers, and other actors who control economic capital.

> *"It happens a lot, even to me personally. You finish a job, but payment is delayed. Sometimes it takes three months, or they don't pay at all. And most of the time, it's only verbal, no contract. So we can't really demand anything."* (Interview, DM)

These practices illustrate how economic risk is systematically shifted onto individual musicians within an informal labor regime. Without formal mechanisms for accountability, musicians are compelled to absorb financial losses and uncertainty as part of the "normal" cost of participation in the field. This normalization of precarity reflects broader structural inequalities embedded within creative labor markets.

Many graduates experience extreme fluctuations in monthly income, largely determined by the volume of projects and the strength of their social networks. Periods of high demand may temporarily generate financial stability, yet these peaks are often followed by sharp declines during slow seasons or broader economic disruptions. Such volatility generates not only financial strain but also psychological pressure, particularly for early-career musicians who lack reputational visibility or robust networks. In response, many are forced to seek alternative livelihoods both within and beyond the music industry.

> *"Honestly, in the beginning, you can't rely on gigs alone. Sometimes I play at cafés, sometimes I teach, sometimes I help people in the studio. It's all mixed up, the point is just to survive."* (Interview, EV)
>
> *"Back then, during the early days, I worked any job I could find anything that would help me make a living."* (Interview, RZ)

These adaptive strategies highlight that professionalization in the music industry is not a linear progression but an ongoing process of negotiation between artistic commitment and economic necessity. Rather than signifying a lack of professionalism, such diversification of income sources represents a pragmatic response to structural instability. In this context, endurance, flexibility, and the ability to persist

amid uncertainty emerge as critical dimensions of professional competence. Economic instability thus not only shapes material conditions but also influences musicians' self-perceptions of success, sustainability, and long-term career viability within a competitive and precarious musical field.

In response to these conditions, graduates develop adaptive strategies that encompass musical, social, personal branding, and digital/technological dimensions. These strategies are not merely individual choices but represent practical responses to structural uncertainty within Jakarta's project-based music industry. Musical flexibility emerges as the first and most prominent strategy, characterized by the readiness to shift between genres and to improvise. For vocational music graduates, this flexibility functions as a form of employability capital, enabling them to remain relevant across diverse project demands. Informant RF explained how cross-genre proficiency becomes a crucial asset that allows him to adapt quickly in live performance contexts:

> *"Oh, this is how the groove works in blues. This is how it feels in R&B. This is what makes jazz swing. From there, we build our foundation, so we can easily move around. For example, when I was playing with Mas DM at Yohow—a reggae gig—I could still catch the beat and the feel even though the night before we were playing jazz at Paviliun. So, even after switching genres, the feel was still there."* (Interview, RF)

RF's account demonstrates that musical flexibility operates not only at the technical level but also as an embodied sensitivity to stylistic conventions and performance contexts. The ability to internalize and switch between different musical "feels" indicates a form of tacit knowledge that is developed through repeated exposure to varied performance situations. Similarly, informant YB emphasized the rising artistic expectations placed on session musicians, particularly regarding stylistic depth and authenticity:

> *"You have to be able to play different styles, yes. But now, I think… artists expect so much more. It's no longer enough to say, 'Oh, I can play swing.' They want to see how deeply you play swing. Or when you say, 'I can play chops,' they'll look at how deep your chops are."* (Interview, YB)

YB's statement reflects a shift in professional standards, where musical versatility alone is insufficient without interpretive depth. Musical flexibility, therefore, is redefined not as surface-level genre switching but as the capacity to perform stylistic authenticity under evaluative pressure. This awareness signals a reflective orientation toward professional norms, in which musicians assess not only *what* they can play but *how convincingly* they inhabit a given musical language.

A similar form of adaptability was observed in informant DM's experience, where he was required to perform twenty songs without sheet music, several of which he had never played before. Rather than displaying anxiety, DM relied on rapid listening, responsiveness to cues, and improvisational filling to meet performance demands. This episode illustrates how musical flexibility is enacted in real time as situational intelligence, combining listening skills, trust in collective dynamics, and composure under pressure (Observation, DM).

Beyond musical flexibility, non-formal learning emerges as a central adaptive strategy among graduates. Formal education provides an initial foundation, yet proves insufficient for navigating the fluid and informal nature of professional music work. Consequently, many musicians rely on mentorship from senior players, observation in live contexts, and experiential learning as primary sources of professional knowledge. Informant RD explicitly highlighted the role of senior musicians in transmitting tacit knowledge unavailable in formal curricula:

> *"At first, I often joined gigs with senior musicians. I learned a lot of small things that weren't taught in school, like how to communicate on stage, how to read the situation. Seniors often give direct tips."* (Interview, RD)

This form of learning emphasizes situated knowledge, acquired through participation rather than instruction. Informant YB further explained how observational learning becomes an intentional strategy for skill development:

"I often watch other players perform, see how they fill in, how they manage their sound. From there, I try to imitate them, and over time I start to really understand." (Interview, YB)

These accounts indicate that non-formal learning functions as a bridge between institutional training and industry expectations. Through continuous observation, imitation, and interaction, musicians gradually internalize both musical and social competencies necessary for survival in the field. Learning, in this sense, becomes an ongoing process embedded within work itself rather than a stage completed prior to professional entry.

Thus, non-formal learning can be understood as a strategic response to the mismatch between academic preparation and the demands of an informal, project-based industry. Working alongside artists or producers with high expectations creates a learning environment that simultaneously sharpens musical proficiency and professional discipline. The pressure to perform "deeply" rather than merely "correctly" compels musicians to expand their listening practices, stylistic references, and embodied understanding of music.

Therefore, musical flexibility should be understood not only as technical adaptability but as an orientation toward continuous learning and openness to shifting professional standards. Field observations further illustrate how this flexibility is enacted through spontaneous musical communication. During a jam session, informant RD was observed giving cues through body gestures—such as head nods and finger signals—to indicate sectional changes. This highlights that successful session musicianship relies heavily on non-verbal communication and rapid collective responsiveness. In minimally rehearsed and open-ended performance settings, musical responsiveness and interpersonal sensitivity become inseparable competencies (Observation, RD).

Another key strategy used by graduates to navigate their careers is the cultivation of personal branding and social reputation. Within Jakarta's informal and network-driven music industry, professionalism is evaluated less through formal credentials and more through reputational signals accumulated in everyday work interactions. As informant IR stated:

"What makes people trust you is attitude. Making a few mistakes while playing is still acceptable, but if you have a bad attitude, people won't want to work with you again." (Interview, IR)

This statement highlights that technical imperfection is often tolerated in project-based musical labor, whereas negative attitudes can immediately disrupt future opportunities. This reflects a work culture in which employability is contingent upon perceived reliability, adaptability, and social comportment rather than flawless execution. In such a system, reputation circulates rapidly through informal communication channels, making personal conduct a high-stakes professional asset. As informant EV explained:

"In this industry, what one person says can spread to many others. If someone says you're nice to work with, that becomes an asset. If not, you're done." (Interview, EV)

In this context, personal reputation operates as a form of strategic social capital that substitutes for formal evaluation and recruitment mechanisms (Coulson, 2012; Hanorsian., et al, 2025).Trust functions as a currency, enabling musicians to access projects without auditions, contracts, or institutional mediation. When a musician's name becomes associated with reliability and positive collaboration, their professional mobility increases; conversely, reputational damage can lead to exclusion from entire networks. Informant YB reflected on this realization after entering the professional field:

"I only realized how important connections were after graduation. Back in college, I thought playing well was enough. But out there, people invite musicians they trust, not just those who play well." (Interview, YB)

YB's reflection reveals a misalignment between academic habitus and industry logic. While formal education emphasizes musical mastery, the professional field privileges trust, familiarity, and interpersonal continuity. As a result, technical skill becomes a necessary but insufficient condition for career sustainability.

Musicians who fail to convert their musical capital into social credibility may remain marginal despite high competence.

Within this framework, the ability to cultivate and maintain professional relationships becomes inseparable from long-term career strategy. Personal branding emerges as a conscious practice through which musicians manage how they are perceived, remembered, and recommended. As the music industry increasingly integrates digital infrastructures, these practices extend beyond face-to-face interactions into online spaces (Ballico & Foran, 2024). Informant RZ emphasized this shift:

> *"These days, social media is your portfolio. People check that faster than any traditional CV."* (Interview, RZ)

This statement underscores that digital platforms now function as symbolic showcases of competence, activity, and legitimacy. Social media profiles allow musicians to display not only their technical skills but also their professional associations, work frequency, and artistic identity. In some cases, digital visibility directly generates employment opportunities, as informant RD described:

> *"I once got a gig because someone saw my video on TikTok, even though we'd never met before."* (Interview, RD)

Here, digital exposure partially replaces physical proximity as a gateway to professional recognition. However, this does not eliminate the role of social trust; instead, it reshapes how trust is initially formed. Informant YS further explained:

> *"Instagram or social media is like a CV now. People can look at your page and see—oh, this is who they are, who they've played with, what they can do."* (Interview, YS)

Beyond reputation, technological adaptation has become another crucial adaptive strategy for graduates. Social media operates simultaneously as a promotional tool, a portfolio archive, and a marker of professional existence (Ballico & Foran, 2024; Hanorsian., et al, 2025). Traditional CVs are rarely used; instead, musicians are evaluated through digital traces—videos, recordings, collaborations, and online engagement. Digital presence thus becomes a form of symbolic capital that signals activity and relevance within the field.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in how musicians manage visibility and legitimacy. Professional recognition, once dependent primarily on live performance and word-of-mouth, is now increasingly mediated through digital representation. However, this does not imply a total rupture with older systems. As Oliver and Lalchev (2022) argue, the contemporary music industry operates within a hybrid model in which online and offline systems converge rather than replace one another. Informant RF illustrated this hybrid logic:

> *"Content is a must now. Every performance record it and post it. People need to see you're active. If you don't post, they might think you're not working, even if you're performing all the time. So yeah, we have to keep updating."* (Interview, RF)

In this hybrid landscape, digital capital and social capital reinforce each other. Offline credibility enhances online representation, while digital visibility amplifies reputational circulation within physical networks. Session musicians can no longer rely solely on being present in rehearsal rooms or stages; they must also maintain an ongoing narrative of productivity in digital space.

In addition to self-presentation, technological proficiency has become integral to daily professional practice. Jakarta's music industry increasingly relies on remote collaboration, digital distribution, and home recording. Informant TO described this shift:

> *"I used to think being a musician just meant playing. But now, we have to know how to record ourselves at least understand DAWs. Sometimes the job is just recording guitar tracks at home and sending them in. If you don't know the technical side, you can't do the work."* (Interview, TO)

TO's experience reveals a redefinition of musicianship itself, from live performer to multi-skilled, technologically literate professional. Digital competence becomes a prerequisite for participation, particularly in remote and asynchronous production settings. This finding aligns with Fernando & Yohannis (2024), who identify digital fluency and platform-based collaboration as key employability factors for contemporary session musicians.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that session musicians undergo a transformation of professional competence, extending beyond musical execution to include reputation management, digital self-representation, and technological literacy. Career sustainability in Jakarta's music industry thus depends on the ability to strategically mobilize musical, social, and digital capital within a highly flexible and competitive ecosystem.

5. Discussions

The findings of this study indicate that the transition of vocational music graduates into the Jakarta music industry occurs in a non-linear manner, filled with uncertainty, and marked by a gap between formal skills and industry demands. Within the framework of Spencer & Spencer (1993) competency model, this situation reflects a distinction between *threshold skills* the basic technical abilities acquired through formal education and *differentiating competencies* the abilities that truly distinguish musicians who can sustain and advance their careers in the industry. While skills such as reading notation, understanding harmony, and performing with precision are important foundations, they are insufficient to guarantee professional success. In reality, the most decisive competencies are musical flexibility, improvisational ability, reputation management, and the strength of social networks (Bennett, 2016; Ballico & Foran, 2024; Hanorsian et al,, 2025).

The professional music arena has its own *rules of the game*, a set of unwritten norms that regulate expectations, reputation, and mechanisms of access to projects (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993). In the context of Jakarta's music industry, these unwritten rules determine how musicians position themselves, build social relations, and gain professional legitimacy. In other words, a musician's success is not solely determined by musical skills, but also by their ability to interpret and adapt to the social logic that governs the field.

This phenomenon can be further understood through Bourdieu, (1993) theoretical triad of capital, habitus, and field. The Jakarta music industry functions as a competitive and project-based field in which a musician's position depends on their ability to accumulate and convert various forms of capital. Cultural capital in the form of musical skills must be complemented by social capital—networks, reputation, and interpersonal credibility—and symbolic capital related to professional recognition and communal trust. The habitus of vocational graduates, shaped within a structured educational system, is tested when confronted with the distinct logic of the field, where work value is defined more by adaptability and trust-building than by technical performance alone.

The adaptive strategies developed by the graduates ranging from non-formal learning and personal branding to the use of digital technologies, can be interpreted as a process of *habitus reconstruction* aimed at remaining relevant in a dynamic industrial ecosystem. In this context, field experience serves as a space of "re-learning," compelling musicians to internalize new values such as flexibility, collaboration, and self-management. Consistent with Coulson, (2012) view, musicianship today requires a combination of musical expertise, social capacity, and entrepreneurial spirit. Everts et al, (2022) further argue that contemporary musicians perform dual roles as artists and *portfolio workers* who must manage their careers autonomously and flexibly.

In the Indonesian context, the findings of Hanorsian et al, (2025) reinforce this study's results by emphasizing that professional networking is a key determinant of career sustainability among Jakarta

musicians. Ballico & Foran (2024) also highlight that adaptive strategies are essential for musicians facing economic precarity and fluctuating project opportunities in the creative sector. Thus, the ability to build and maintain social networks emerges as one of the most influential *differentiating competencies* shaping the career trajectories of session musicians.

The gap between vocational education and industry needs is also clearly evident in this research. As Putranto et al, (2024) point out, vocational education in Indonesia still suffers from a weak *link and match* with the realities of the creative industries. In the case of session musicians, this mismatch requires graduates to engage in continuous learning through non-formal avenues such as mentoring, field observation, and hands-on work experience. This finding aligns with Sutopo et al, (2017), who show that young Indonesian musicians sustain their careers by "keeping hope alive" through creativity and social solidarity amid the uncertainties of informal work structures.

Conceptually, integrating Spencer & Spencer, (1993) competency theory with Bourdieu's (1993) framework of capital, habitus, and field allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how professional identity among session musicians is formed. Individual competencies such as musical flexibility and reputation management can be understood as concrete manifestations of capital conversion processes within a social field. In other words, *differentiating competencies* not only reflect personal capacities but also function as social strategies for gaining positional and symbolic recognition within the professional music arena.

The music industry, in this sense, serves as a field where artistic idealism and economic realities constantly negotiate with each other (Scott, 2012; Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009). The adaptive processes undertaken by session musicians are not merely survival strategies but also reflective processes in constructing a professional identity. This reflects what Pradhita (2022) describes as the process of job crafting, in which musicians reconstruct their work identity and psychological resilience to maintain meaning and stability within precarious creative careers. This identity is continuously shaped through social practice, work experience, and peer recognition. Therefore, the career transition of vocational music graduates can be understood as a multilayered journey—from technical skill to social competence, from cultural capital to symbolic capital, and from academic habitus to a professional habitus that is autonomous and reflexive.

The findings of this study reveal that the transitional experiences of Indonesian vocational music graduates differ from the dominant narratives found in global literature. Most existing studies on freelance musicians and creative workers (Coulson, 2012; Comunian et al., 2015; Ballico & Foran, 2024) emerge

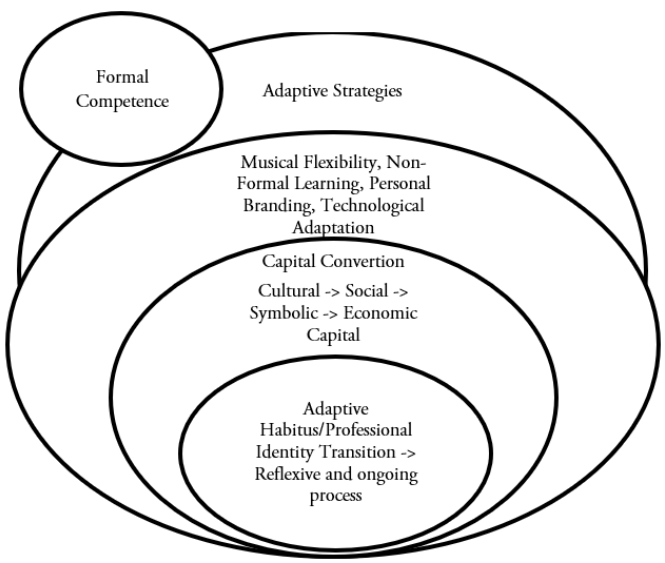

Figure 1: Adaptive strategies as capital conversion mechanisms in the non-linear transition of session musicians' professional identity

from Western contexts where the professional infrastructure is relatively stable and institutional support is strong. By contrast, this research demonstrates that in Indonesia, the success of session musicians depends not only on individual career self-management but also on their ability to navigate informal social structures, symbolic hierarchies, and trust-based networks. This highlights a global research gap in studies of creative labor: existing theories do not fully capture the fluid, precarious, and community-based realities of creative work in the Global South.

Furthermore, this study questions the extent to which Bourdieu's concept of habitus is able to explain individuals' processes of adjustment to the logic of a field that is dynamic and not always linear.

The data reveal that the tension between the relatively stable educational habitus and the fluctuating field of the music industry generates a distinctive form of *adaptive habitus*: a configuration of dispositions formed reflexively and situationally to navigate the uncertainties of creative labor. Thus, habitus does not merely function as a reproductive structure but also as a transformative mechanism enabling the mobilization of social, symbolic, and cultural capital within a fluid working environment.

Likewise, while the model proposed by Spencer & Spencer (1993) emphasizes individual capacities such as skills and traits, this study demonstrates that within the context of session musicians' work, professional success is strongly influenced by collective capacities to convert various forms of capital into work resources that are recognized within the musical field. This approach not only expands discussions of professionalism and competence in the field of music but also contributes to the enrichment of theoretical discourse on how creative workers in the Global South construct professional identities under conditions of structural instability.

The summary of these findings is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts adaptive strategies as capital conversion mechanisms linking educational competencies and professional practices. It shows that identity transition does not occur linearly but rather through a series of reflective adjustments to an unstable, network-based work context. Four adaptive strategies—encompassing skill adaptation, social adaptation, personal branding, and technological adaptation—serve as the primary mechanisms bridging the gap between academic identity and the emerging professional identity. Through these strategies, session musicians not only survive in a fluctuating industry environment but also cultivate a new form of professionalism that is more collaborative, digital, and contextually aligned with the local music ecosystem.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that the transition of graduates from the Vocational Program in Music Performance into careers as session musicians in Jakarta unfolds in a non-linear and uncertain manner. They face a significant gap between the formal skills acquired in higher education and the practical competencies demanded by the industry, within a project-based, competitive, and socially networked work ecosystem. The early stages of their careers are often characterized by experiences of trial and error, feelings of insecurity, and a sense of exclusion from established professional networks.

However, in confronting these challenges, session musicians navigate their transitions by developing adaptive strategies. These strategies encompass musical flexibility, non-formal learning, personal branding, social reputation management, professional networking, and digital technology adaptation. Such adaptive strategies not only enable them to survive but also serve as the foundation for constructing a credible professional identity within Jakarta's music industry arena.

Theoretically, this study suggests the need to broaden the discussion on musician competence by emphasizing adaptive, social, and symbolic dimensions that go beyond technical proficiency. The study provides evidence from the Indonesian context that career success in music is largely determined by musicians' ability to manage and negotiate various forms of capital within a fluid field.

Practically, the findings highlight the importance of aligning vocational music curricula with the realities of the creative industries. Vocational education should not be limited to developing technical mastery, but must also create opportunities for students to practice musical flexibility, build networks, learn personal branding strategies, and utilize digital technology as a portfolio platform. In doing so, graduates will not only be prepared as skilled performers but also as adaptive individuals capable of navigating the uncertainties of the creative industry. This study contributes to the global discourse on creative labor by extending the understanding of *professional identity transition* beyond Western contexts. It demonstrates how session musicians in the Global South negotiate professional transformation through adaptive strategies that integrate musical, social, and digital competencies within hybrid and informal work systems.

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