

## Article

# (Re)Considering Online Organizations: Communicating and Organizing via New Technology for High Reliability

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**Abstract:** Tom MacDonald's success in the music industry can provide valuable insights for leaders and founders, particularly in the context of high-reliability organization (HRO) theory—MacDonald's approach to music challenges conventional wisdom and societal norms, promoting open communication and adaptability. HROs should prioritize open channels, invest in training, and support continuous learning. Clear communication is crucial for employees to understand the organization's roles, responsibilities, and goals, facilitating collaboration and problem-solving. It also helps manage change and prevents crises. Investing in communication skills and practices is essential for driving organizational success and resilience in today's fast-paced business environment.

**Keywords:** high-reliability organizations; case study; online organizing; music industry

## 1. New Technology and the Music Industry

Modern technologies have significantly disrupted traditional business models and organizational practices in the music industry's evolving landscape. This transition is clear with autonomous artists who use these technologies to augment their dependability, scope, and operational control. This study explores the phenomenon of organizing via modern technology for high reliability, explicitly focusing on Canadian independent music artist Tom MacDonald as a positive deviance case study. MacDonald's approach emphasizes the intersection between digital communication strategies and artistic independence, offering valuable insights into how modern technologies might improve reliability and success in the independent music industry [1].

High reliability in organizational theory typically refers to operations in environments like air traffic control or nuclear power stations, where the cost of failure is exceptionally high [2–4]. Recent studies have started to apply these principles to various industries, including music, where the deliberate use of technology can also reduce vulnerabilities and improve reliability [5]. This study argues that independent artists, such as MacDonald, can use digital resources for marketing and distribution as essential elements of a high-reliability organizing strategy spanning creation, promotion, and audience engagement [6]. MacDonald's technical expertise and procedures include using social media platforms, streaming services, and direct-to-consumer sales methods. These tools function in multiple ways to ensure success. In addition to simply distributing music, they aid in direct engagement with fans, allow for targeted marketing techniques, and offer comprehensive data analytics for strategic planning. Communication scholars have noted the significant impact of digital networks in generating fresh opportunities for commercial, cultural, and community creation [7,8], thus allowing for social and knowledge exchange [8]. MacDonald uses these social networks to maintain authority over his career and artistic designs and preempt adverse reports of him and his artistic creations, both hallmarks of high-reliability organizing [2,5].



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Furthermore, MacDonald's use of technology exemplifies broader trends in the digital ecosystem and generates value through engagement and the establishment of communities rather than through conventional physical or digital products [9]. This success story shows a shift in how artists can organize their careers in highly unpredictable environments and industries, even if they are not traditional physically risky environments, which high reliability scholars tend to study [2]. MacDonald increases the dependability of his artistic and financial endeavors by setting up direct connections with fans via his website, email, X (Twitter), and candid interviews on his YouTube channel. This allows him to successfully navigate the music industry's unpredictable nature with significant independence and achievement [10].

This study is one of the first to examine HRO principles in a non-HRO setting [2]. Traditional HRO studies focus on organizations such as police, fire, and military. Applying such principles in a non-HRO can show the transferability of these concepts to a more relaxed and innovative space, the music industry [11]. This study contributes to a more robust understanding of high-reliability organizing by detailing how MacDonald's use of technology circumvents traditional industry barriers and creates a resilient model [11]. This case study contributes to the discourse on digital media strategies and their impact on independent artistic careers. It provides significant insights for both communication researchers and professionals in the music industry.

The music industry has experienced significant changes because of the emergence of innovative technology. Streaming, social media, and direct-to-fan platforms have fundamentally changed how musicians produce, distribute, and generate revenue from their work [10]. Technology has altered musicians' and listeners' dynamics. Scholars argue artists can now engage directly with their fans by creating personalized content on social media platforms [10]. This understanding helps highlight how digital platforms allow musicians to circumvent conventional intermediaries or gatekeepers, granting them unparalleled independence in cultivating and fostering connections with their fans. Other scholars have described how YouTube has emerged as a participatory culture hub where artists can grow their careers by directly engaging with their audiences [12].

Streaming music services such as Spotify, SoundCloud, and Apple Music have significantly impacted the music industry by enabling immediate and worldwide access to music [13]. These platforms have revolutionized how artists and consumers perceive music, prioritizing individual songs and curated playlists rather than complete albums [14]. Scholars have analyzed how data analytics of these streaming platforms influence artists' decision-making, noting how the granular insights shape release strategies, marketing, and creative processes [15]. However, researchers have raised concerns about the economic ramifications of streaming for musicians [16]. They have highlighted that although exposure has expanded, the royalty payments frequently fail to meet expectations due to complex licensing and revenue-sharing frameworks, allowing artists who work independently and outside of the traditional music system to be fairly compensated for the work they put in [7].

Direct-to-fan platforms such as Bandcamp and Patreon have also appeared as significant disruptors [17]. These platforms enable musicians to keep more control over their income sources by providing options for direct sales, subscriptions, and unique content to their most devoted followers. This model requires artists to invest heavily in marketing and community management, turning them into small business entrepreneurs responsible for branding and promotion [17]. The transition here signifies the growing alignment of artistic talent and business acumen in the digital era, where artists are now expected to show creative and entrepreneurial abilities [18].

Social media has also contributed heavily to the transformation of advertising [9]. Scholars emphasize the importance of convergence culture, wherein musicians integrate multiple platforms to create cohesive narratives that engage their audiences deeply [9]. This approach has given rise to the "persona" economy, where artists must carefully curate their public identities to sustain engagement across social media channels [19]. Therefore, artists

must remain constantly watchful and adaptable, consistently finding new ways to tell stories and engage with their audience [20], hallmarks of high-reliability organizing [21].

The increasing dependence on technology has prompted issues around intellectual property and fair remuneration. It highlights the difficulties musicians face in safeguarding their rights while online distributing music, often necessitating detailed agreements [22]. The shifting technological landscape requires new regulatory frameworks for protecting artists' creative rights while promoting innovation [22,23]. MacDonald's independent strategy provides a roadmap other artists can follow when organizing online and independently by following the principles of high-reliability organizations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The principles of high-reliability organizations (HROs) have conventionally been linked to industries with high levels of risk, such as aviation and healthcare, where the utmost priority is to minimize errors [3,21,24]. In recent years, scholars have applied HRO principles to more dynamic and uncertain environments, including the music industry, due to the rising volatility introduced by digital disruption [11,25]. The music industry has seen significant technical improvements and market shifts, challenging established models. New methods are needed to ensure reliability and success [2,10]. Artists and managers can better navigate this landscape by adopting the HRO principles of preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise [2,4].

There are five core principles of HRO theorizing [4,5]. The first is a preoccupation with failure, and it describes how HROs are constantly vigilant and take initiative in finding potential shortcomings or errors before they occur [5]. These organizations foster a culture where members are encouraged to report near misses, mistakes, and concerns without fear of reprisal [4]. This is essential in the music industry, where trends change rapidly. Artists who monitor shifts in audience preferences through streaming analytics can anticipate changes and adapt their content to retain relevance [12].

Sensitivity to operations allows for a nuanced understanding of the production and distribution process, ensuring prompt releases and consistent quality. By regularly monitoring audience reactions on social media, musicians can promptly modify their techniques to avert unfavorable consequences [9]. Musicians must also be reluctant to simplify in the modern age. By having their music available on multiple platforms, they can control unexpected outages on one platform and still distribute music.

Commitment to resilience is crucial for independent artists adapting to unexpected consumer behavior and market condition changes. The resilience principle enables artists to recover quickly from disruptions, such as sudden platform algorithm changes or content suppression [7]. Engaging directly with fans and having various sources of revenue, such as crowdfunding, item sales, and streaming, serve as safeguards, ensuring financial stability even when the market experiences changes [6]. This is especially crucial as artists transition from relying on major label companies for help to learning how to distribute music independently. The artists and their teams can glean practical insights from complex data across numerous platforms by resisting the need to simplify interpretations. HROs recognize the complexity of their environment and avoid oversimplifying situations [5] by encouraging diverse perspectives and striving to understand the nuances of each situation rather than relying on simplistic explanations. Redundancy measures are encouraged so artists and their organizations can continue functioning if one outlet fails. For example, artists can better understand their audience and craft targeted promotional campaigns by analyzing social media interactions alongside streaming metrics.

Finally, deference to expertise encourages seeking out experts or becoming experts to make critical decisions quickly. In the music industry, this might involve deferring to technical experts for high-quality production or relying on data analysts to interpret trends [26]. Through prioritizing specialized knowledge, artists can concentrate on their areas of expertise, guaranteeing efficient and dependable results throughout their careers.

HRO theory provides a framework for organizations to enhance reliability and safety by fostering a culture of mindfulness, resilience, and continuous improvement. Adopting principles of HRO theory can help organizations better navigate changing environments while minimizing the likelihood of significant crises.

### 3. Focusing on the Case Study

Tom MacDonald is a Canadian rapper, songwriter, and music producer known for his thought-provoking lyrics, controversial themes, and independent approach to music. Born on 21 September 1988 in Vancouver, British Columbia, MacDonald has gained a significant following for his unique style and willingness to address sensitive and often taboo subjects in his music. MacDonald's early life experiences, including struggles with addiction, homelessness, and mental health issues, heavily influenced his music and lyrical content. He often draws from his firsthand experiences to tackle topics such as substance abuse, depression, societal issues, and the music industry itself. One of MacDonald's defining characteristics is his refusal to conform to mainstream trends or adhere to traditional industry standards. He has built his career independently, producing and releasing his music without the support of a major record label. This approach allows MacDonald to maintain creative control over his work and connect directly with his fan base through social media and online platforms [27].

MacDonald gained widespread attention for his singles and music videos, which often go viral due to their controversial and provocative nature. He tackles contentious issues head-on, sparking debate and discussion among listeners. His famous songs include "White Boy", "Fake Woke", "Dear Slim", and "No Lives Matter". Despite criticism from some for his outspoken views and aggressive style, MacDonald has garnered praise for his honesty, authenticity, and willingness to address critical social and political issues in his music. However, others question whether he truly holds these views or uses them as a niche to make money [27]. He has cultivated a dedicated fan base who appreciates his raw and unfiltered approach to storytelling. Furthermore, MacDonald is a visual artist and has directed many of his music videos. He continues releasing music independently, connecting with fans worldwide through live performances and online presence.

This project examines how MacDonald uses HRO principles to remain relevant in an industry that does not want to see independent artists succeed because artists would not need a record label. Many of MacDonald's lyrics are controversial, making some wish to silence his voice. However, he remains relevant years after efforts to erase him have begun, and he continues to receive millions of views on YouTube and downloads on Apple Music and Spotify [27]. Therefore, examining how he has put HRO principles into practice is warranted, as it is a case of positive deviance. We pose the following research questions to guide this study.

RQ1: In what ways does Tom MacDonald adhere to the principles of high-reliability organizing?

RQ2: How does Tom Macdonald's use of high-reliability organizing principles help him stay relevant in the modern music world?

RQ3: How does Tom MacDonald's independent and online organizing challenge the traditional methods of the music industry?

### 4. Materials and Methods

The lead researcher's university internal review board (IRB) determined IRB approval was unnecessary for this study as there was no interaction with human subjects. Furthermore, all the analyzed data are publicly available, and links to the primary documents are provided throughout this piece. Most of MacDonald's songs are freely available on YouTube. However, some songs only appear on the physical and digital copies of music he sells on his organizational website, Hang Over Gang.

The lyrics of his top fifteen songs, as ranked by Apple Music and presented in Table 1 below, were downloaded and analyzed to find trends in how HRO principles are incorpo-

rated into his artistic process. The researchers used a positive deviance case study approach to analyze the lyrics of these songs [28].

**Table 1.** Apple Music ranks as of 5 August 2024.

Rank	Title	Length	Collaborator	Date
1	You Missed [29]	2:07		14 July 2024
2	American Flags [30]	3:44	Adam Calhoun	28 July 2023
3	Whiteboyz [31]	3:13	Adam Calhoun	4 February 2022
4	People so Stupid [32]	3:08		21 April 2020
5	Whiteboy [33]	4:48		19 February 2018
6	Fake Woke [34]	4:12		19 January 2021
7	FACTS [35]	3:21	Ben Shapiro	26 January 2024
8	Snowflakes [36]	3:49		4 June 2021
9	Bad News [37]	4:15	Mad Child; Nova Rockefeller	31 January 2020
10	Clown World [38]	3:42		26 February 2021
11	Me Vs. You [39]	3:54		14 June 2024
12	The System [40]	3:22		6 May 2022
13	Everybody Hates Me [41]	3:28		9 November 2018
14	No Lives Matter [42]	3:26		6 November 2020
15	New World Order [43]	3:26	Adam Calhoun	21 January 2022

The positive deviance case study method is a qualitative research approach used to understand and analyze behaviors, practices, or strategies that lead to exceptional or successful organizational outcomes [28,44]. The method is rooted in positive deviance, which refers to behaviors or practices that deviate from the norm but result in positive outcomes. Researchers must first find individuals, groups, or organizations within a context that have achieved exceptional results despite facing analogous challenges or constraints. These individuals or groups are known as positive deviants. Researchers gather data through various methods such as interviews, observations, document analysis, and surveys to understand positive deviants' behaviors, practices, or strategies contributing to their success. This may involve capturing explicit and implicit knowledge and contextual factors influencing outcomes [45]. Tom MacDonald has shown resilience to challenges and has performed successfully according to many industry metrics. Table 2 estimates his income from his top fifteen songs on YouTube and Spotify. The total revenue of \$8,604,990.98 presented is an estimate based on online calculators [46,47]. This number does not include his other songs, Apple Music earnings, direct sales, and concert revenue. This estimate shows that MacDonald has been successful in the music industry and that a positive deviance case study is warranted.

As another evidence base [48], public interviews of Tom MacDonald, freely available online, the lead researcher downloaded and transcribed for analysis (see Table 3). Interviews ranged from 4 min to over 90 min. These interviews may be considered superior to interviews with a researcher, as the responses are candid, and the subject may not consider these questions to be interpreted in an alternative manner. The downside of this approach is the inability to ask follow-up questions to dig deeper into the respondent's answers.



**Table 2.** YouTube and Spotify plays and estimated earnings as of 5-Aug-2024.

Title	Views	YouTube			Spotify	
		Likes	Comments	Est. Earnings	Listens	Est. Earnings
You Missed	5,656,265	423,000	42,151	\$113,125.30	3,219,631	\$11,333.10
American Flags	18,793,618	475,000	84,600	\$375,872.36	12,851,071	\$45,235.77
Whiteboyz	16,932,793	315,000	27,017	\$338,655.86	29,711,917	\$104,585.95
People so Stupid	39,643,438	773,000	70,617	\$792,868.76	45,250,214	\$159,280.75
Whiteboy	26,002,521	513,000	53,551	\$520,050.42	33,353,299	\$117,403.61
Fake Woke	40,359,345	983,000	95,956	\$807,186.90	41,229,337	\$145,127.27
FACTS	20,022,989	756,000	145,618	\$400,459.78	9,055,583	\$31,875.65
Snowflakes	27,823,521	800,000	108,699	\$556,470.42	25,042,691	\$88,150.27
Bad News	47,409,995	415,000	22,002	\$948,199.90	28,828,876	\$101,477.64
Clown World	22,679,001	540,000	51,768	\$453,580.02	28,445,923	\$100,129.65
Me Vs. You	6,280,797	258,000	36,783	\$125,615.94	1,662,367	\$5851.53
The System	26,014,124	598,000	44,751	\$520,282.48	29,297,397	\$103,126.84
Everybody Hates Me	32,006,870	472,000	38,928	\$640,137.40	39,046,209	\$137,442.66
No Lives Matter	28,759,463	698,000	47,292	\$575,189.26	25,473,271	\$89,665.91
New World Order	7,373,015	352,000	31,378	\$147,460.30	13,962,863	\$49,149.28
Totals:	365,757,755	8,371,000	901,111	\$7,315,155.10	366,430,649	\$1,289,835.88

**Table 3.** Top interviews of Tom MacDonald posted online as of 5-Aug-2024.

Interviewer	Time	Organization	Date	Views	Likes	Comments
Ben Shapiro [49]	9:34	Daily Wire	3 May 2023	2,486,753	120,000	13,003
Jenn Pellegrino [50]	6:21	Newsmax	19 October 2022	219,160	10,000	1005
Tom MacDonald [51]	5:18	Most Googled Questions	22 January 2023	1,218,851	63,000	8763
Glenn Beck [52]	11:05	Blaze	22 September 2020	82,177	4600	531
Blaire White [53]	58:07	The Blaire White Project	27 June 2022	162,706	12,000	1339
Megyn Kelly [54]	11:20	The Megyn Kelly Show	29 April 2022	59,426	3700	452
Martha MacCallum [55]	4:30	Fox News	3 February 2021	1,020,665	36,000	5538
Piers Morgan [56]	15:58	Piers Morgan Uncensored	1 February 2024	401,690	12,000	10,227
Alberta Zemyra [57]	43:03	94.5 The Buzz	2 February 2023	20,692	1300	214
Roseanne Barr [58]	1:34:19	The Roseanne Barr Podcast	8 February 2024	270,175	21,000	4015
Lara Trump [59]	25:33	The Right View	24 August 2023	261,017	20,000	2245

As the final base of evidence, the researchers visited Tom MacDonald's official organizational website, Hang Over Gang (see Figure 1). This website held little textual data but did have merchandise depicting many of MacDonald's most famous songs or bars. The collected data were analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and critical insights regarding the strategies and approaches used by positive deviants [28,44]. Researchers seek to understand the underlying principles and mechanisms driving his success and how these can be applied or adapted in other contexts.

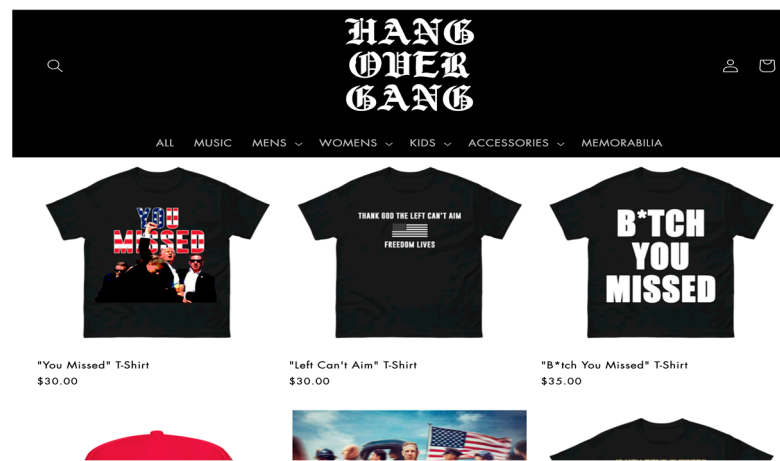


Figure 1. Hangovergangofficial.com: Official website of Tom MacDonald [60].

The researchers utilized NVivo v.14.1 and Atlas.ti v.24.1.1 software packages to analyze the collected data qualitatively. The researchers began by coding lyrics through an open coding process. They then engaged in a pragmatic iterative approach, where researchers alternate between data and theory to group codes into more extensive codes and eventually into themes [61]. The themes were then grouped around which research question they best answered, please see Table 4 for more details. As an additional means of objectivity, the lead researcher used Atlas.ti to perform intentional AI coding [62]. The researcher first provided the research questions and parameters in Atlas.ti and then guided the open AI process by providing theoretical guidelines. These codes were then compared to user-generated codes, which were similar, thus boosting intercoder reliability. Recently, researchers have “found that these models perform comparably to human coders, with only minor differences in Mean Squared Error (MSE) values” ([63], p. 61). The themes and codes were examined again for redundancy and simplicity [61].

Table 4. Themes, codes, and statistics from primary sources.

Theme	Count	Top Subcodes	Words
Adherence to HRO Principles	375	Operations, Expertise, Resilience	11,668
Challenging Traditional Organizing	225	Independent, Bypassing Gatekeepers	6564
Relevance to Music Industry	210	Informed Decisions, Proactive Stance	6372

Based on the analysis, researchers synthesized their findings into actionable recommendations or strategies to be disseminated and applied within the broader community or organization. These recommendations are tailored in this article to address specific questions about communication, policy, practice, and behaviors contributing to success. The positive deviance case study method emphasizes iterative learning and continuous improvement [28,64]. Therefore, the researchers revisited their findings to assess effectiveness, refine recommendations, and integrate the findings with theory. This approach offers a valuable opportunity for identifying and learning from outliers who have achieved exceptional results within a given context. This study of the strategies and practices of Tom MacDonald allowed researchers to uncover communicative and behavioral patterns that can inform future research and inspire change [28,45].

### 5. Results

The researchers would like first to state that we neither condone nor condemn Tom MacDonald’s lyrical bars. We support freedom of expression and MacDonald’s right to speak his truth. Tom MacDonald is known for controversial and provocative music, often

addressing sensitive topics in his songs. Some examples of these lyrics are provided below as a foundation for the research questions' results.

**Police.** Tom MacDonald tends to support all police; however, he does have some references to police brutality and claims to have been beaten by police in the past.

We won't always agree, no  
I don't hate all police, no  
I don't think that the system's racist  
I just think the system hates people. ([38], lines 15–18)

**Racism.** MacDonald pushes against the idea of racial separation and advances the idea that race is a social construct used by elites to divide lower classes and make them fight with each other.

I hear 'em preaching at a protest that hatred's the problem  
But hating straight men, white folks, and Christians is common  
Coca Cola telling people they should be less white  
They preaching tolerance but if you disagree, they fight  
There's a race war here, elections based on fear  
Black lives only matter once every four years  
Soldiers died for this country and every one of us benefits  
Give welfare to the bums and forget about the veterans  
Black folks and white folks divided by the news  
But we're all the same, we are red, white, and blue. ([36], lines 15–24)

MacDonald's beliefs about race receive mixed reviews from people of all backgrounds on YouTube and Twitter.

**Suicide.** Many of MacDonald's songs also discuss how he has wrestled with anxiety, depression, drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicidal ideation. These discussions are often very open and frank and may seem to trivialize the problems.

Don't cry your eyes out, I'm not dead  
I turned that gun aimed at my head  
Momma, please don't be upset  
Tryna live my life with no regrets ([37], lines 10–14)

MacDonald often criticizes other rappers and hip-hop artists, claiming they are supporting pharmaceutical companies by glorifying the use of prescription drugs. At the same time, MacDonald claims pharmaceutical companies and doctors are working together to keep people medicated and controlled.

Controversial issues of sexism, racism, police brutality, homophobia, and more that appear in MacDonald's songs would ruin and have ruined many artists. MacDonald's song "Cancelled" summarizes why he has been able to remain relevant.

I can't be canceled, there's no way that you can stop me  
I'm fully independent, there's no label who can drop me  
Y'all been starting rumors, let me help you with some  
"I'm a racist, I'm a sexist, I'm in love with Donald Trump"  
Y'all can't cancel me, my life is scandal-free  
There ain't no sponsors taking losses 'cause the brand is me  
My hands are clean, my family and my fans agree  
Y'all can't cancel me for facts because you're mad and weak  
Go ahead and tell the world I'm ugly and racist



I braid my hair, and I don't care about cultural appropriation ([34], lines 1–10)

This study found MacDonald's independent music ventures are rooted in high-reliability organizational (HRO) principles. RQ1 asked in what ways MacDonald illustrates these principles, and we detail those findings below.

Preoccupation with failure is one of the core principles of HROs and is illustrated in multiple ways by MacDonald. First, being set up as an independent artist allows him to produce what he wants with no ramifications from the label or sponsors.

Well I think the key to everything has been I'm just I'm totally independent I have no ties to the music industry whatsoever. I've sort of created my own little ecosystem outside of the music industry. I produce all my music I write all my songs my Girlfriend shoots all my videos we distribute my music independently. There is no affiliation with any record label, manager PR team, marketing publicist. This road nothing so it's just us and I've been doing it for about 10 years. ([49], lines 40–70)

Another way MacDonald is preoccupied with failure is by preempting attacks by appealing to patriotism. "My people of this country and we're under attack They banning us, they cancel us for speaking the facts If you man enough, come stand with us, take USA back And every time we pull up all you're gonna see's American flags" ([30], lines 1–3).

MacDonald shows several ways he is sensitive to operations, but the clearest evidence is in how he talks to potential advertisers when they reach out. "Obviously I dealt with brands being a YouTuber and uh doing sponsorships and stuff like that and um I always make sure I communicate to them very clearly like you are working with someone who is seen as controversial you will likely get angry emails for appearing in my videos you will likely get angry tweets and I'm only interested in working with brands that are willing to withstand that" [53] (lines 637–641). This sensitivity to operations also helps lead to his commitment to resilience.

MacDonald acknowledges how controversial he and his lyrics are, but he builds resilience through the foundations of his organizing and his ability to bounce back.

Is Tom MacDonald independent? Are you new here I literally tell people I'm independent so much that people have begged me in the comment section to stop talking about how independent I am. I'm as independent as it gets.

Is Tom MacDonald rich? Yes, Tom MacDonald is rich

Is Tom MacDonald famous? Yes, Tom MacDonald is famous.

Why is Tom MacDonald famous? Your guess is as good as mine I'm still in disbelief every day. I have no idea, I don't. it could be uh my ravishing, good looks it could be my undeniable sense of humor it could be my extraordinary ability to write songs and produce beats I'm a mixed bag really. [51] (lines 142–180)

He builds resilience in his fan base by answering their questions transparently, so they go to him for answers before believing what others say.

Reluctance to simplify is a clear strength for Tom MacDonald. He posts songs on Apple Music, Spotify, SoundCloud, YouTube, and personally through Hang Over Gang. This allows MacDonald to be able to continue distributing music even if one of the sites was to go down or revoke his publishing privileges.

I'll start from the beginning. I've never done a digital album before, and Adam has only done digital albums, so we compromise and decide to do both. When I brought this idea to Nova she realized that this would be the perfect time for us to report our physical sales to billboard for the first time, and after a little research we realized that if we combined our digital sales with our physical sales, it would practically guarantee us the number one spot on the album charts on billboard independently. Look we all got really excited. We honestly couldn't believe it, but numbers don't lie and we realized that we had an opportunity to deal a massive blow to the music industry by outperforming major label artists on a chart that was

specifically designed for them. So, we rescheduled our entire release around this idea we were going to drop our digital album and our physical album at the same time so all of the numbers would be accounted for simultaneously. [57] (lines 114–162)

This approach shows not only how Tom MacDonald is reluctant to simplify but also how he is committed to operations.

The final HRO principle is deference to expertise. Some of the quotes above have illustrated this point already. MacDonald has developed himself into an expert by carefully studying the craft of the music business and finding ways to circumvent the traditional music business norms. Additionally, MacDonald knows how to delegate when someone else can better handle the situation “Nova has been the person emailing back and forth with them, and i’ve just been kind of watching from a distance. Now Nova wants this so bad for us that it’s literally all that she’s thinking about. She’s waiting at her computer all day, just hoping that she’s going to get a reply from them” [57] (lines 547–552).

MacDonald’s music has impacted the music industry (RQ2, RQ3) by challenging the Billboard streaming ranking norms. In 2018, Billboard adjusted its method, valuing user-initiated plays over passive listens, reflecting the evolving landscape of music consumption. MacDonald’s lyrics resonate with audiences seeking genuine expression rather than manufactured content tailored to commercial success.

But I ain’t tripping ‘bout these bullies, it ain’t sixth grade  
 Go ahead and diss me, tryna sell a couple mixtapes  
 I’m not afraid, take my face and my name, paste it on the front page  
 I’m already famous, and you’ll never change it by hating  
 Or claiming you’ll take it away  
 My grind wicked, write my rhymes different,  
 You could try to quantify, defy limits  
 There’s a dying gimmick in denying winning,  
 This is pure fire; this ain’t white privilege [34] (lines 27–34)

MacDonald has been challenging music industry norms for over ten years. “They so fake woke, facts don’t care ‘bout feelings”(fake woke, [20,21]). He also speaks to how fast the team can turn around songs through arduous work ethic. “The work ethic it takes is tough because I think we filmed the “Snowflakes” video on a Friday we put it out on Monday” [34–37,53]. In 2020, Billboard expanded its data sources by incorporating video and audio data from YouTube and other streaming services into the Billboard 200, recognizing the growing influence of online platforms in shaping music consumption patterns. These changes are not without controversy. In 2023, Billboard excluded downloads from artists’ web stores from its rankings, sparking debate in the industry [65]. MacDonald’s independent approach to music creation and distribution stands out, embodied by the hard work ethos embraced by many contemporary musicians. His outspoken criticism of mainstream norms resonates with audiences seeking authenticity in an increasingly commercially driven industry [16].

## 6. Discussion

The music industry is undergoing significant changes due to the adoption of innovative technologies, evolving consumer behaviors, and the rise of social media platforms. Adopting innovative technologies, evolving consumer behaviors, and rising social media platforms contribute to leveling the field between major industry players and independent artists. Aspiring artists and independent musicians can easily reach audiences worldwide by sharing their content on social media and streaming services at a minimal cost, an act previously hindered by gatekeepers like record labels and studios. Independent artists can bypass these gatekeepers by directly engaging with audiences on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, X (Twitter), and Spotify. Artists can also analyze social media metrics

such as views, streams, likes, and shares to build their brand as they desire. This process enables aspiring artists and independent musicians to monetize content, foresee potential content-related challenges, and establish robust connections with their fanbase. Artists and musicians strategically choose the type of social media (i.e., media platform) based on audience demographics, such as gender, age, and race/ethnicity, to maximize their success. Independent artists rely on multiple social media platforms and cross-share content for maximum engagement. Engaging with fans through responses on social media platforms is a successful strategy, as the case of Tom MacDonald illustrates, due to the ability to create direct connections and foster engagement, a success notably observed among female politicians [66] trying to break into political coverage.

Through his independent, online, and provocative approach, Tom MacDonald's success in the music industry offers valuable insights for founders and leaders in various organizations, especially when viewed through a high-reliability organization (HRO) theoretical lens. MacDonald's music often challenges conventional wisdom and societal norms by embracing a diversity of thought. Similarly, in HRO theory, an emphasis is placed on avoiding oversimplification and welcoming diverse perspectives. Leaders can cultivate an environment that values diverse perspectives, encouraging the consideration of unconventional viewpoints within their teams and fostering creativity, innovation, and fresh approaches to challenges.

HROs prioritize open communication channels where all members feel comfortable reporting concerns and sharing insights. MacDonald's approach to music follows this pattern as he listens to critics and fans to adjust his strategies accordingly. Leaders can establish a culture empowering employees to raise concerns without fear of reprisal, fostering organizational transparency and accountability by adopting anonymous feedback platforms to allow reports to be made without fear of retaliation. MacDonald's success showcases the importance of adaptability and resilience in the rapidly changing music industry. HROs invest in training and resources to build redundancy and flexibility into their systems, allowing them to respond effectively to unexpected events, also known as being committed to resilience. Leaders can support employees by promoting ongoing learning and offering resources and support to navigate changing circumstances. MacDonald's unconventional approach to music production and promotion highlights the value of creativity and innovation in achieving success. HROs foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, encouraging employees to explore innovative ideas and approaches. Organizational leaders can also foster innovation by encouraging team members to innovate and then publicly acknowledging and rewarding those creative ideas. MacDonald keeps his artistic vision and values despite criticism and controversy. HROs remain steadfast in their mission even in adversity. Leaders can ensure mission alignment and values by clearly articulating, reinforcing, and modeling them [67].

MacDonald's success aligns with embracing the principles of HRO theory; leaders can gain valuable insights into creating resilient, high-performing organizations. Leaders can cultivate a culture that supports reliability, safety, and success by embracing diversity of thought, promoting open communication, fostering adaptability and innovation, and maintaining a focus on mission and values. For many reasons, competent communication is crucial for leaders in the modern workforce. Competent communication balances practical and appropriate communication based on the context and ensures employees understand the organization's roles, responsibilities, and objectives. When leaders articulate values and goals, employees can better align their efforts with organizational priorities, improving productivity and performance. Competent communication helps alignment and collaboration across teams and departments. This can reduce the siloing of information and enhance cooperation, leading to more experimental, efficient, and effective outcomes. Competent communication is critical to both preventing and managing organizational crises. When leaders communicate proactively and visibly model the behaviors they suggest, they can find and address minor issues before they become major crises. This can foster a positive work environment, promote collaboration, establish organizational alignment, provide

problem-solving, and prompt decision-making, hopefully preventing minor issues before they escalate.

## 7. Limitations and Future Directions

While this research is a step in the right direction for establishing the versatility of HRO theory, other aspects for further research include the following: (1) A comparative analysis with other independent artists who have successfully utilized technology to organize their careers. This could facilitate the identification and emphasis of distinctive methods and shared methodologies employed by accomplished artists. (2) Comparative instances may involve artists from other genres or geographic regions to examine how different circumstances impact the implementation of HRO principles. This approach would offer a broader perspective on the effectiveness of new technology in high-reliability organizing. (3) The scope of the research could be expanded to include a global perspective. Researchers could compare MacDonald's strategies with those of other independent artists in different countries to understand cultural and regional variations when applying HRO principles.

## 8. Conclusions

In today's rapidly evolving and increasingly complex world, organizations across various industries face numerous challenges, including managing risks, ensuring safety, and maintaining reliability in their operations. High-reliability organizations (HROs) offer a valuable framework to guide organizations by providing significant insights into managing risks and avoiding crises. MacDonald's career and organizational strategies exemplify how HRO principles can be adapted to ensure consistency, safety, and success in non-HRO environments. Leveraging online digital platforms for direct fan engagement, data analytics for strategic planning, and diversified revenue streams, MacDonald built a resilient and sustainable business model that allows for artistic freedom and independence. This approach highlights the potential of new technologies to transform traditional industry practices and enhance reliability and performance. This study also contributes to the broader discourse on digital media strategies and their impact on independent artistic careers. In examining MacDonald's case, we understand how new technologies can support high-reliability organizing in creative fields. Integrating HRO principles with innovative technology offers a promising framework for artists seeking to thrive in an evolving industry.

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