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ORGANIZATION SCIENCE
Articles in Advance, pp. 1–24
ISSN 1047-7039 (print), ISSN 1526-5455 (online)

Stay True to Your Roots? Category Distance, Hierarchy, and the Performance of New Entrants in the Music Industry

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Received: January 18, 2017
Revised: April 17, 2018; January 9, 2019; June 28, 2019
Accepted: July 5, 2019
Published Online in Articles in Advance: March 11, 2020

https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2019.1323

Abstract. New entrants in established markets face competing recommendations over whether it is better to establish their legitimacy by conforming to type or to differentiate themselves from incumbents by proposing novel contributions. This dilemma is particularly acute in cultural markets in which demand for novelty and attention to legitimacy are both high. We draw upon research in organizational theory and entrepreneurship to hypothesize the effects of pursuing narrow or broad appeals on the performance of new entrants in the music industry. We propose that the sales of novel products vary with the distance perceived between the classes being combined and that this happens, in part, because combinations that appear to span great distances encourage consumers to adopt superordinate rather than subordinate classes (e.g., to classify and evaluate something as a "song" rather than a "country song"). Using a sample of 144 artists introduced to the public via the U.S. television program *The Voice*, we find evidence of a U-shaped relationship between category distance and consumer response. Specifically, consumers reward new entrants who pursue either familiarity (i.e., nonspanning) or distinctive combinations (i.e., combine distant genres) but reject efforts that try to balance both goals. An experimental test validates that manipulating the perceived distance an artist spans influences individual evaluations of product quality and the hierarchy of categorization. Together these results provide initial evidence that distant combinations are more likely to be classified using a superordinate category, mitigating the potential confusion and legitimacy-based penalties that affect middle-distance combinations.

Supplemental Material: The online appendix is available at https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2019.1323.

Keywords: organizational theory • entrepreneurship • music industry • categories

One of the core dilemmas of entrepreneurship is how to establish legitimacy while simultaneously demonstrating novelty (Navis and Glynn 2010, 2011; Wry and Lounsbury 2013). The question reflects two competing approaches on how to signal the value of a new actor to the consumers, investors, and employees whose support they require. But it also reflects a tension between the opportunity afforded by a lack of expectations and the constraint imposed by needing to establish a clear identity (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001). This tension is particularly acute in cultural industries, in which a few hits capture a majority of sales (Hirsch 1972) and in which consumers and critical gatekeepers often treat variation as deviant (Phillips and Kim 2009, Zhao et al. 2013). Although research has begun to identify the market (Wry et al. 2014) or firm-level (Smith 2011, Paolella and Durand 2016) characteristics that allow established organizations to engage in the boundary-spanning work that can produce novel products, the prescription for new entrants remains unclear. Specifically, does their newness free them to pursue novel combinations or does their need for legitimacy amplify their constraints?

On the one hand, new entrants benefit from reduced expectations. As a result, their identity is mutable, and they have freedom to experiment, altering which attributes are most salient to their audience (Navis and Glynn 2010, Kacperczyk and Younkin 2017). New entrants also need to garner attention to compete with the incumbents as a similar product from an unknown firm is unlikely to succeed. This array of factors provides both means and motivation to pursue novelty, suggesting that a new entrant's best strategy might be to ignore traditional boundaries and to try combining elements or techniques from disparate environments. This combinatory approach is often cited as a precursor to innovation (Hargadon and Douglas 2001, Singh and Fleming 2010, de Vaan et al. 2015) and allows new firms to expand their range of consumers (Kim and Jensen 2011, Paolella and Durand 2016) or to create new consumer classes altogether (Kennedy 2008, Khaire and Wadhwani 2010, Jones et al. 2012).

On the other hand, combining elements from different domains in pursuit of novelty is inherently

risky as a robust set of research in organizational theory finds that products or ideas that do so are more difficult to produce (Leahey et al. 2017) and face a higher likelihood of rejection (Rao et al. 2003, Negro and Leung 2013, Leung and Sharkey 2014). Consumers generally find hybrid products confusing (Kennedy 2008), illegitimate (McKendrick and Hannan 2014, Hahl 2016), or otherwise less appealing (Phillips et al. 2013, Jensen and Kim 2014), causing products with a potentially broad appeal to face high rates of rejection. This problem is particularly acute for new entrants to a market who must demonstrate sufficient novelty to challenge incumbents but also must demonstrate sufficient conformity to be perceived as legitimate players in the market (Navis and Glynn 2011). This generates a puzzle for new entrants: is it better to combine elements in search of novelty or to conform to a type and attain legitimacy?

We propose that one resolution to this dilemma can be found by separating the possible combinations according to the distance consumers perceive between the classes the producer spans. This approach extends recent findings that suggest that the characteristics of a category—the dominant logic (Wry et al. 2014, Lo and Kennedy 2015), the frequency with which their ideas are shared (Rao et al. 2003, Leung 2014), the audience's preferences (Cattani et al. 2017b)—moderates their ability to be combined. To these, we contribute an understanding of how the relationship between the audiences—in our setting, consumers or fans of a particular musical genre—determines how they respond to attempts to unify them. Specifically, we introduce the concept of categorical distance—the perceived relatedness of two categories[1]—and demonstrate that, as producers move to solicit new fans or to incorporate elements of a new category, the consumer response to the resulting product varies in a U-shaped relation to the perceived distance separating the categories the producer combines. Given that the ability of cross-categorized products to succeed (or "break out") is a function of the willingness of one audience to accept ideas or elements associated with another, this approach reflects how intergroup perceptions of dissimilarity influences their response to combinatory products.

The resulting curvilinear relationship between the distance a producer moves—from its original location to the new category—and the consumer's response reflects the rise and fall of the oft-debated spanning penalty (Zuckerman 1999). Although organizational research helps to explain why this penalty may increase as the producer moves to borrow from or solicit more distant audiences, we draw upon recent work in social psychology (Kang and Bodenhausen 2015) and organizational theory (Bowers 2015, Smith and Chae 2017) to propose that, beyond an identifiable threshold, the distance between two classes converts into a positive moderator of consumer receptivity by altering the selection of the reference category. Specifically, we build upon the idea that categories can be both horizontally and vertically arranged (Gaertner et al. 1993) to hypothesize that, as producers attempt to bridge more and more distant categories, consumers become more likely to place the product within a superordinate (i.e., more abstract) class. Moreover, as it is easier to meet the expectations of a broader class (e.g., it is easier to prove that a given set of notes is "music" than that it is "baroque piano music"), the use of a superordinate class can mitigate the confusion and legitimacy-based concerns that help generate spanning penalties.

To test our principal hypothesis that, for new entrants, the success of a spanning product depends upon the perceived distance separating the combined classes, we proceed with a two-stage empirical analysis. First, we use an experimental design to determine if perceived distance affects the classification and evaluation process in the manner hypothesized. Second, we use observational data to test the effect of categorical distance on the song sales of new musicians.

The experiment asked each participant to listen to one 30-second song clip by a new artist but varied the background information provided to indicate that the performer was trying to bridge genres that were different distances apart. This allowed us to isolate the influence of perceived distance on the evaluation of identical products. The results show that altering the perceived distance a producer moves affected the evaluations of a song's quality in a pattern consistent with our hypotheses. Specifically, when an individual believes that a singer attempted a distant span, they reward them by raising their estimate of the song and singer's quality and asking to learn more information about them. In addition, the experiment provides support for our proposed mechanism as respondents were more likely to classify a song using a superordinate class when the perceived distance increased.

The observational study used a sample of songs released by 144 new singers introduced to the public via the U.S. television program *The Voice*. Our results indicate that consumers did not reject all new song combinations equally; they favored songs that are genre conforming and those that result from artists moving into genres perceived as highly dissimilar from their home genre. But, in contrast to an expectation that combining similar styles is a low-risk means of reaching new audiences, we find that, when performers try to extend their audience by moving to proximate genres, the resulting song is more likely to be rejected. The two sets of results confirm that one significant factor influencing consumer's receptivity to novelty is the perceived distance separating the spanned classes

and provide initial evidence of the value in considering the difference between superordinate and subordinate classes in addition to the distinctions within a given strata.

The findings help extend recent work on the legitimation of novelty (Sgourev 2013; Cattani et al. 2014, 2017a; Jensen and Kim 2014) and, specifically, the role of legitimacy in explaining the success of new entrants (Navis and Glynn 2010, 2011; Kacperczyk and Younkin 2017). In addition, the results also complement recent work on the process of classification (Bowers 2015, Smith and Chae 2017) and offer us an additional way to understand how classification may occur and one potential outcome of moving between super and subordinate classes. As explained in detail, we believe that a consideration of categorical distance may help to clarify some recent work on the conditions under which cross-categorized products evade discounting (Durand and Paolella 2013, Glynn and Navis 2013, Kennedy and Fiss 2013, Sgourev and Althuizen 2014).

Theory and Hypotheses

New Entrants and the Pursuit of Novelty

New entrants face a conundrum when considering the introduction of their first products. They can conform to type in an effort to gain legitimacy, or they can pursue varying degrees of distinctiveness (Navis and Glynn 2011). Research from across a variety of fields demonstrates the advantage of differentiation. Teams develop more original ideas and better performing ones when they include a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar partners (Uzzi and Spiro 2005, de Vaan et al. 2015). Product innovations occur when ideas are carried from one domain to another (Hargadon and Douglas 2001). Scientific discoveries are more likely to occur when researchers in one field incorporate insights from other disciplines (Uzzi et al. 2013). Even songs are more likely to become commercial hits when they largely adhere to conventional attributes but also introduce a few new sonic elements (Peterson 1997, Askin and Mauskapf 2017). Although these studies vary from analysis of a group to an individual to a product, they share a similar general conclusion that "hits" result from incorporating elements or ideas from across classes.

Given that new entrants face intense competition for attention and a brief window in which to act (Stinchcombe 1965), the value in pursuing novel combinations with a potentially broader appeal may be particularly high. Although incorporating elements from across domains can help with the ideation stage, generating potential new use cases (Hargadon and Sutton 1997) or new markets (Kennedy 2008), it also allows the producer to potentially appeal to a broader set of consumers (Jensen and Kim 2014). This is particularly important in the cultural industries in which sales are a function of the number of distinct audiences captured and a hit product is described as having crossed-over (Rossman 2012). For example, when a Broadway play incorporates hip-hop into a historical story, the producers hope that the ability to appeal to distinct and diverse groups (i.e., hip-hop fans, history buffs, and theatergoers) broadens the appeal, just as music executives rejoice when a singer transcends the singer's genre and appears on radio stations across the dial. Although the language is specific to each industry, the core notion that the financial value of a product is correlated with its ability to attract a diverse set of consumers exists in industries as diverse as fashion and video games. It would, therefore, seem that the best option for new entrants is to pursue the high-variance potential of a product that speaks to a variety of different types of consumers.

At the same time, the promise of a product with broad appeal may also sow the seeds of the producer's demise. The crucial assumption of these claims is that otherwise distinct sets of consumers are receptive to products that contain foreign elements. For example, that a rap fan will go to Broadway and that a musical fan will listen to rap. Successfully broadening the appeal requires consumers to accept that a product is not diminished by borrowing features from other domains. Although there is some evidence of conditions under which this may occur (Paolella and Durand 2016), the bulk of empirical evidence finds that consumers penalize producers that borrow techniques (Negro and Leung 2013), material (Jensen and Kim 2014), or ideas (Hahl 2016) from adjacent domains, treating their products as either confusing or illegitimate (Kim and Jensen 2011).

The value of both clarity and legitimacy are particularly strong in cultural markets, in which support from the core fans is critical to success (Salganik et al. 2006, Lena 2012), and in entrepreneurship, in which they function as important signals of quality. For example, Navis and Glynn (2010) argue that competing satellite radio companies had to collectively highlight their similarity to a known commodity, terrestrial radio, before any single firm was seen as viable by consumers and investors. This parallels studies on the rise of craft breweries (Verhaal et al. 2017), record labels (Kacperczyk and Younkin 2017), and new art genres (Khaire and Wadhwani 2010) in arguing that differentiation only offers producers an advantage if they also establish their legitimacy. These findings may help to explain why analyses of entrepreneurial organizations find greater conformity to type (Aldrich and Martinez 2015) than might be expected of outsiders seeking to disrupt the status quo.

The paradox that those who are best positioned to generate new ideas (i.e., outsiders or new entrants) are often, precisely because of their position, least able to enact them has led others to ask how organizations ever legitimate novel products (Hardy and Maguire 2008, Cattani et al. 2017a). Their answer, in broad terms, suggests three distinct paths to legitimation. First, extending Weber's (1964) theory of charismatic authority there is evidence that legitimacy can result from singular individual ability. Most frequently, this is observed through status differentials in which audiences are more tolerant of novelty when it is introduced by a person with high status than they are when it comes from someone else (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001, Rao et al. 2003, Sgourev and Althuizen 2014), but it may also reflect innate differences in talent or charisma. Irrespective of the particular quality that provides the advantage, this research suggests that legitimation depends as much upon the attributes of the producer as it does on the attributes of the product. Institutional theorists favor a second mechanism, emphasizing the role of environmental change (i.e., exogenous shocks) in creating fissures in the status quo and thereby generating openings for new entrants and tolerance for new ideas (Tolbert and Zucker 1983, Fligstein 1996). Support for novelty is, therefore, temporal, and new entrants are wise to pursue novelty in the aftermath of a shock but not during periods of greater institutional stability (Tolbert et al. 2011). Finally, meso-level accounts describe variation between audiences as the primary determinant of whether a novel idea is also perceived as legitimate. Building upon research on audience heterogeneity (Pontikes 2012), this approach emphasizes that audiences both control resources (Cattani et al. 2014) and vary in their interest in novelty (Ertug et al. 2016); therefore, the acceptance of a novel idea is liable to depend heavily upon the a priori values of their audience. For example, Anand and Watson (2004) document how changes in the composition of the Grammy voters across time enabled the legitimation of previously heterodox musical genres, such as rap or rock. Similarly, Sgourev (2013) shows how changes in audience-level preferences facilitated the rise of new art forms.

Although these paths are useful for incumbent organizations that can await an environmental change or afford to test the receptivity of a given audience, they offer less prescriptive advice to new entrants who must simply hope that a shock occurs, markets are amenable, or the founders possess sufficient charisma. Further, these theories suggest we would find minimal within-firm variation, and yet producers often follow up a hit with a "bust" in a relatively short period of time. To address these limitations, we build upon recent work that has considered the strategic choices an organization can make to enhance a product's reception (Jensen 2010, Kim and Jensen 2011, Jones et al. 2012, Cattani et al. 2017a) and propose that one underexamined source of variation comes in the perceived distance separating the categories the producer seeks to combine. In essence, we extend this research on audience-specific factors to show how it is not merely the audience's interest in novelty but also the perceived distance separating the classes that helps to explain legitimation.

Categorical Distance and Hierarchical Classification

We begin with the claim that some combinations are hailed as breakthroughs although others are quickly forgotten not simply because innovation is risky, but because some combinations generate claims of illegitimacy but are unlikely to be seen as novel or interesting. For example, a rock musician covering a rap song may receive less criticism and the resulting product be seen as more original than the same musician releasing a Christmas album. In both cases, the artist moved into a new genre of music, potentially acquiring more fans and increasing the odds of a breakout hit, but the acts are unlikely to be treated as similarly novel by either their core or new consumers. This approach emphasizes the perceptual rather than technical barriers and is, therefore, a particularly useful extension of work that grounds a discount to collaborations in the audience's perception (Navis and Glynn 2011, Hsu et al. 2012, Wry and Lounsbury 2013, Jensen and Kim 2014, Leung 2014, Leung and Sharkey 2014, Wry et al. 2014).

To establish a theory for when combinations elicit penalties, we first conceive of categories (musical genres in our setting) as arrayed in space with some being proximate and others more distant. The distance between these categories is a subjective measure reflecting how similar the members of a given class perceive another class as being. Distant categories are perceived as sharing few elements, speaking to unrelated audiences, or emphasizing different characteristics. In addition, the distance between two categories can be asymmetric. For example, fans of graphic novels may see themselves as readers akin to fans of serious literature and, therefore, distant from the people who read comic books, and fiction readers see that both graphic novels and comics include drawings and, therefore, perceive them as virtually identical and yet significantly different from the audience for "real" books. Although each audience bases their assessment in some objective criteria, the resulting perception is largely subjective and yet no less influential.

Once we know the relative position of the categories, we can now calculate the distance a given producer moves when introducing a combinatory

product. It is this distance "traveled" or the space between where they begin and the classes from which they borrow that we hypothesize moderate the reception of the resulting product. An analogy may help to clarify the construct: we might imagine categories arrayed like islands in the sea and producers at work building a bridge between two islands as they borrow ideas or try to broaden their appeal. Our hypotheses focus upon how the length of that bridge affects the likelihood that their product succeeds. By extension, how organizations or individuals fit within a category helps to identify their location on a given island (e.g., are they building a bridge from the middle or starting at the water's edge) and gives a more precise measure of how far they need to "move" to solicit or borrow from the new class. In summary, we are proposing that classes are arrayed at varying distances from each other and then derive hypotheses for how consumers respond as producers form bridges of varying lengths.

The concept of categorical distance we describe builds upon recent work showing how actors blend, bridge, or expand categorical boundaries successfully (Rao et al. 2003, Durand and Paolella 2013) or catalyze the emergence of new categories entirely (Kennedy 2008, Kennedy and Fiss 2013) to argue that the perceived relationship between two categories is one additional factor influencing how their combination is received. For instance, categorical distance is liable to influence the classification process that precedes—and informs— evaluation. Recent work in organizational theory on referent-selection (Smith and Chae 2017) and classification (Bowers 2015) emphasizes that audiences follow a process in which they encounter objects or organizations, identify the relevant traits, place them into a group or category, and *then* use this classification to inform their assessments. Moreover, this initial classification can be influenced by individual preferences (Cattani et al. 2014), organizational features (Smith and Chae 2017), or even by attendant information (Saperstein and Penner 2012), allowing people to assign a single object to a variety of classes (Pachet and Cazaly 2000, Hsu 2006, Cattani et al. 2017b) and reach a correspondingly broad array of evaluations.

Combinatory products, by incorporating ideas or elements from a variety of classes, pose a known challenge to classification. Prior work has generally focused upon how evidence of cross-categorization (i.e., fitness in multiple classes) generates confusion and uncertainty (Zuckerman 1999) or questions about legitimacy (Negro and Leung 2013) that reflect an inability to easily classify. However, recent work in psychology suggests the existence of an alternative method for resolving the tensions that result from multiple potential classifications. Studies of recategorization (Dovidio et al. 1997) or the process by which people change the classification of a given object find that people can resolve contentious categorizations through the use of "inclusive superordinate categories" (Kang and Bodenhausen 2015, p. 554). For example, by redefining a "female colleague" as simply a "colleague" (Zhu et al. 2014).

We borrow this central insight that people can shift not just "horizontally" between classes, but also "vertically" between levels of abstraction to propose that one way in which distance might affect reception is by influencing the *level* of classification of an object. Following Dovidio et al. (1997), we begin with the understanding that classification involves matching recognizable elements to the parameters of a known category. For example, if I see children on a sports field, I might begin by saying they're playing a "game." As I notice them kicking a ball, I might refine my classification to "soccer." The more attributes I identify and match, the more precisely I can classify the object. This process can continue until we reach a point at which we can no longer place the recognized signals within an available class, either because we lack deeper knowledge of the class or because the elements themselves do not seem to fit any classes we do know.

This also suggests two paths by which a consumer might select a more abstract or superordinate class in place of a more specific one: first and most obviously when the consumer lacks an understanding of the potential subordinate classes. For instance, someone unfamiliar with soccer might be able to identify that the children are using a ball and their feet but not match these to any schema beyond "game." Second and most relevant to the case at hand is when consumers cannot reconcile the features they recognize with the parameters of a single class. In this latter case, we propose that how people classify the object under scrutiny is, in part, motivated by the perceived distance between the classes they are trying to reconcile. We predict that, when an object incorporates elements from distinct but proximate classes, the consumer experiences tension over whether the object belongs more to one or the other. But, if the product contains elements from perceptually distant classes, the consumers' inability to reconcile these elements motivate them to adopt a superordinate class. To continue this example, if I now notice that the children's game is played on sand and involves a net, I might struggle to identify it as some form of soccer–beach volleyball hybrid that is neither truly volleyball nor truly soccer.[2] However if, instead of a net, I noticed that the players are holding brooms and periodically sweeping while they played, it would be difficult to refer to this cleaning activity as a variant of soccer and more likely that the inclusion of these new

elements would lead me to revert back to the superordinate class "game."

This latter case is particularly instructive for producers of spanning products as it suggests that the inclusion of more unfamiliar or perceptually distant elements could, effectively, stop the classification process at a more abstract level. By introducing elements, even ones from recognizable classes, that are so distant they do not create tension but only unfamiliarity, the producers increase the likelihood that their consumers classify the product and thereby evaluate it using a superordinate category. By contrast, when a producer tries to incorporate elements from an adjacent category, it is more likely that consumers wrestle with the proper classification and that this tension negatively affects their evaluation of the product. To bring this to the context under study, we would, therefore, predict that when musicians incorporate elements of Indonesian gamelan drumming into a country song, they are less likely to have audiences debating whether the new song is more Indonesian than country and more likely to refer to the resulting product as simply "music."

In summary, combining starkly different classes renders fine-grained distinctions less relevant and increases the likelihood that people adopt a superordinate class to resolve their uncertainty. By contrast, when a product combines classes at less extreme distances, people are more likely to try and reconcile fit between the competing categories, leading to the penalties described. As a result, we propose that one way in which categorical distance affects consumer receptivity is by influencing the likelihood a person categorizes the product using a more abstract class.

Hypothesis 1. *As the categorical distance between the spanned classes increases, people are more likely to classify the product using a superordinate category.*

The Effect of Distance on Performance

As classification is a precursor to evaluation (Bowers 2015), if distance helps explain the classification of spanning products, it follows that it may also influence their performance. Therefore, to consider how the distance a producer moves might affect a consumer's receptivity, we begin with the simplest case: an artist who remains "home." There is a long tradition of work extolling the virtue of sole membership or remaining within a single category as it increases the comprehensibility of products (Zuckerman 2000) and helps the producer procure valued legitimacy (Frake 2017). Therefore, producers who opts to remain home facilitate the classification of their product and are more likely to be assessed by their consumers according to known criteria.

The trouble arises as these producers seek to capture some of the potential gains promised by adopting elements from adjacent fields or by soliciting new audiences. Although there is some evidence that minor deviations—or what we might call short-distance moves—offer a balance of cost and benefit (Leung 2014), these benefits appear to erode quickly. As a result, as new entrants try to combine more distant audiences the odds that either set of consumers accepts the resulting product declines (Jensen and Kim 2014). Evidence across a range of industries and sectors consistently finds that these efforts to bridge distinct consumer groups (Kim and Jensen 2011), market categories (Leung and Sharkey 2014), or genres (Hsu et al. 2009) reduce perceived value. Critical to our theory, these penalties arise even when the combination is merely suggested (Negro and Leung 2013), indicating that the discount is not entirely reflective of the technical challenge inherent in combining two fields. Instead, the finding holds that efforts to pursue novelty or extend an audience by bridging two distinct classes of consumers or product categories generally generates confusion (Rosa et al. 1999) and avoidance (Hsu et al. 2009, Kim and Jensen 2011). Further, authors have theorized that the penalty may vary in strength with the fragmentation (Sgourev 2013) or dispersion (Jensen and Kim 2014) of the audience, suggesting a potential relationship between the degree of separation and the likelihood of rejection. One implication of these findings is that, as the distance between categories increases (e.g., artists moving into more distant genres), the likelihood of a confusion or illegitimacy-based penalty also increases.

Absent any other factors, this would seem to predict a negative linear relationship between categorical distance and consumer response. However, there is some evidence that consumers may tolerate the combination of extremely dissimilar classes, indicating the existence of a potential threshold beyond which spanning ceases to engender audience hostility. For example, it has been suggested that extreme breadth can function to signal novelty and help candidates demonstrate their distinctiveness (Durand and Paolella 2013, Paolella and Durand 2016) and even produce a counterbalancing form of legitimacy (Carroll and Wheaton 2009). Consistent with this claim, Hsu et al. (2012) found that, when films combine genres in innovative ways, consumers becomes less resistant and sales increase. Additionally, if penalties derive in part from audience opposition (Ertug et al. 2016)—the notion that some classes do not want to be coassociated—then this should dissipate if the consumer groups are so distinct that their boundaries remain intact. For example, opera critics may need to prove they are distinct from a typical opera fan and,

therefore, favor the operas that a season-ticket holder disparages (Kim and Jensen 2011). But those same critics face little risk of being confused with fans of rock music and, therefore, may respond enthusiastically to the production of a "rock opera."

Most directly, the relationship between distance and classification level developed in the first hypothesis—that distant combinations evoke superordinate categorizations—offers a possible mechanism for the moderation of a spanning penalty. Although the adoption of a superordinate class in place of a subordinate one does not automatically increase evaluations (i.e., a given person may prefer "Japanese" over "Asian" food), it can positively affect consumer evaluations of cross-categorized products in a number of important ways. Most obviously, it adjusts the referent so that the evaluation is based on a comparison with a general, rather than a specific, alter. In our setting, respondents might try to determine whether they heard a good *song* rather than a good *country song*. This benefits cross-categorized products by reducing penalties attached to concerns about lack of "fit." Relatedly, because categories are influential in defining the "acceptable" organizational practices (Jensen and Kim 2014), a broader classification offers producers greater latitude in what they can offer without appearing illegitimate. To continue our example, although the inclusion of Indonesian instruments may strike a country aficionado as disqualifying, no one would dispute that the result is still a "song." Because the initial classification is so fundamental to the process by which we evaluate (Bowers 2015), the adoption of a more general class is, therefore, liable to reduce illegitimacy-based penalties, in particular for the "loyalists" (Kim and Jensen 2011), who are wary of accepting a compromised product. It, therefore, follows that people are more likely to accept a boundary-spanning product if they use a broad classification than if they use a subordinate class. As a result, audiences should be both more willing to engage and less likely to discount products that span highly dissimilar classes. Collectively, these findings suggest that the confusion and aversion driving a consumer's negative responses to spanning may attenuate at extreme distances.

These two sets of factors—an initial spanning penalty and the later emergence of superordinate classification—imply the existence of a dynamic relationship between categorical distance and product performance. Although a null hypothesis would hold that consumer responses do not vary with categorical distance, we draw upon the preceding research to predict that consumers become more negative as producers span more distant classes to generate their product but also that this penalty diminishes as they combine extremely distant classes and audiences become more likely to invoke superordinate categories. In short, we propose a U-shaped pattern in which consumers become less and then more receptive as the categorical distance increases.

Hypothesis 2. *The relationship between categorical distance and the performance of new entrants varies in a U-shaped pattern.*

New Entrants and the Music Industry

The music industry offers an ideal setting for the estimation of our hypotheses. It is a multibillion-dollar industry, employing tens of thousands of people, and represents precisely the types of cultural producers whose significance increases in the United States as manufacturing jobs continue to disappear. Further, the use of defined categories to divide organizational activities, job functions, and consumption have made the music industry a frequent setting for the study of organizational processes (Anand and Peterson 2000, Anand and Watson 2004) and, in particular, the relationship between organizations and submarket categories (Hirsch 1975, Roy 2002, Glynn and Lounsbury 2005, Phillips and Kim 2009, Roy and Dowd 2010). Specifically, the prominent role of music genres in organizing both consumer and firm behavior is central to our selection of the setting and merits some explanation. Despite recent concern that cultural boundaries are eroding, music genres continue to function as a primary organizing principle for firms, distribution channels, and products (Negus 1999) as evidenced by the fact that labels, periodicals, radio stations, and even critics adopt genre-specific positions. Critically, these broad classes capture how the artists and songs are identified and presented by the recording industry, described in the press, and organized for sale.

These boundaries are particularly relevant for emerging artists who lack any prior reputation on which to trade and are, therefore, trained (Negus 1999) to work within established genre conventions to attract an audience and increase sales. Both external analysts and industry executives rely on these same genre classifications to assess band, label, and corporate performance and to guide business decisions (Peterson 1997, Lena and Peterson 2008). As a result, Becker (1982) notes that, although artists may protest and claim to be unconfined by genres, their acts are bound by the expectations of other performers, consumers, critics, and other audiences. These dynamics in the music industry are consistent with findings across the cultural industries. For example, Bielby and Bielby (1994) describe how television stations use genre assignations to determine which new shows to broadcast, and Zuckerman et al. (2003)

describe how talent agents identify new actors using commercial genre classes.

Given the centrality of these genres to organize artists and orient the audience, it provides an ideal setting to test the trade-off new entrants face between establishing their legitimacy and pursuing novel offerings. In the music industry, new entrants must choose a genre designation before they even begin production (i.e., in order to secure the resources necessary to record) as their genre designation helps to determine their budget, their partners (e.g., producers, writers, session musicians, etc.), even the city in which they might record. In addition, their genre drives many of the most significant aspects of the postproduction process from where they are marketed (e.g., which stations or disk jockeys play them) to how a consumer locates them within a store or online. Remaining within a single genre allows for greater consistency across this process and helps reinforce the legitimacy of the artist within that space. At the same time, a new entrant must find a way to garner consumer attention amid the cacophony of new offerings. One way to do this is to branch outside the confines of their home genre and to incorporate ideas, elements, even whole songs from other classes of music. Creating a product that spans across genres offers multiple potential rewards—that chance to appeal to a broader consumer base and to achieve musical novelty among them—but it also threatens to undermine the strength of their initial genre designation and to introduce the spanning-based penalties described.

This pursuit of novelty presents a unique way to understand the constraints and opportunities inherent in the classification systems that dominate an industry. The type of genre spanning done by music artists is analogous to what might happen when an actor tries to branch from comedy to drama, a wine producer moves from selling raspberry wine to pinot noir, a writer moves from children's books about wizards to serious fiction, or a physicist tries to publish articles in a medical journal. In each case, the decision to move between widely understood schemas elicits reactions that, we argue, depend less on the act of moving than they do upon the perception of the distance between the schema. At the same time, as we spell out, the setting establishes important boundaries on our findings as there are bound to be significant differences between how consumers respond to new performers in the creative industries and, for instance, how a prospective employee evaluates a new venture that spans two industries.

Study 1: Categorical Distance, Classification, and Quality

Our first hypothesis proposes that, as the categorical distance producers appear to span increases (i.e., the relatedness of the categories they combine decreases) respondents become more likely to classify the resulting product with a superordinate category. Our second hypothesis predicts that this shift in categorization mitigates an expected spanning penalty, producing a U-shaped relationship between categorical distance and consumer interest. To test these hypotheses, we proceeded with a two-stage design that involved both experimental and observational data. The virtue of complementing an observational study with an experiment is that it allows us to examine both the individual-level reception to spanning different distances and the commercial consequences of spanning for a given artist. Studied independently, it would be impossible to separate the influence of spanning from either the skill required to span or from audience inertia. A decline in sales alone might indicate that consumers are indifferent to spanning but that artists have trouble moving from classical to rap effectively. Alternately, steady sales might occur despite a dislike of spanning if consumers elect to support their preferred artists even when they err. By conducting both an experimental and multivariate study, we are able to isolate the effect of perceiving a span and to test one possible mechanism behind this effect while also controlling for artist and product-level differences.

Subject Recruitment

In January 2018, we conducted an online experiment in which we recruited 700 online respondents through Amazon's mechanical turk (mTurk) platform to "evaluate songs by new musicians." Respondents were instructed that they would listen to one 30-second song clip by a new artist and then answer a few questions. They were told the task would take approximately 5 minutes and were paid $0.50 irrespective of whether they completed the task or not. We only accepted U.S.-based respondents with 500+ prior hits and a 95%+ approval rating and did not allow people from the same Internet Protocol address to complete the task a second time. Respondents who tried to repeat the task, failed the attention check, finished too quickly (<2 minutes), or reported any problems with the survey were not included in the analyses. As a result, a total of 549 respondents were used in the principal analysis.[3] These respondents self-reported as male (53%) with a mean age of 37, with at least some college education (49%), and stated their music habits as "daily" (71%). Respondent characteristics for each condition are presented in Table 1.

Experimental Design

To test the effect of perceived distance on musical interest, we adopted a between-subjects design comparing the effect of three treatment conditions on

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics by Condition

Respondents	Control	Close	Moderate	Distant
Listens to music daily, %	61	75	73	70
Male, %	46	49	53	60
Age, years	38.2	36.8	37.3	36.6
Some college, %	55	48	50	46
Respondents	100	166	140	145

respondent classification and evaluation of an unknown song. Specifically, after consenting to participate in the project, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of four possible conditions (*control*, *close*, *moderate*, *distant)* and one of five songs.[4] Respondents in the latter three conditions were then shown a prime that corresponded to their specific song; for example, respondents listening to the rock song saw "The clip you will hear is from an artist that was initially signed as a [pop/folk/classical] musician [and/but then] decided to record this rock song." The genres were chosen based on responses from a survey on perceived distance in which respondents were asked to rank the relatedness of nine genres relative to a focal genre (described in detail in the second study). From these results, we selected as the *close* genre the one ranked first by respondents, the *moderate* was ranked fourth, and the *distant* ninth. Respondents were required to listen to the clip at least once before progressing. They were then asked to evaluate the quality of the song (seven-point scale), whether they would like to know the name of the musician, and whether they would like to hear a full version of the song. Next, respondents were asked how they would categorize the song they heard with choices ranging from the abstract (e.g., "sound") to the highly specific (e.g., "conscious rap"). Then respondents were asked to assess the authenticity of the performer using a modified set of five questions borrowed from prior research on authenticity and experiments (Lehman et al. 2018). Finally, respondents were asked an attention check: "The song you heard features a male/female singer," a manipulation check ("Please rank the following genres in terms of how similar they are to [the genre of their song]"), and a few questions regarding their interest in music.

Test of Distance and Superordinate Classification (Hypothesis 1)

The first hypothesis proposed that, when respondents perceive a product as spanning two cognitively distant categories, they resolve this by invoking a superordinate class—in other words, that they cease to consider the song as "country rock" and instead think of it solely as "country" or as "music." To test this, we asked respondents how they would describe the song they just heard using five preset choices and one option for "other." The choices were displayed in random order but ranged from the most abstract (e.g., "sound") to that song's specific subgenre (e.g., "outlaw country") in which a lower number indicated a higher-order category. For example, a person hearing the country song would have the choices: (1) sound, (2) a song, (3) a country song, (4) a country-rock song, (5) an outlaw country song, or other [text box]. To control for differences in respondent's musical knowledge and taste, Model 1 of Table 2 presents the estimates of the treatment conditions (relative to the unprimed control) on category selection using an ordered logistic regression. As seen in the table and consistent with our first hypothesis, respondents in the *distant* condition (−0.46, 0.23) were more likely to invoke a higher-order (i.e., superordinate) class. These results are consistent with mean-comparison tests that compared responses between the treatment conditions. In general, there appears to be a direct relationship between the perception of distance and the selection of a superordinate reference category as the mean for each group declined from the *close* (mean = 3.31, standard deviation [SD] = 1.51) through the *distant* (mean = 2.92, SD = 1.57), $t(385) = 2.15$, $p = 0.03$, conditions. These results provide some support for the first hypothesis, showing songs that combine distant genres are more likely to be classified and potentially evaluated differently than those that combine more genres seen as more proximate.

Test of Distance and Quality (Hypothesis 2)

The second hypothesis proposed that respondents would discount projects that spanned moderate distances but not those that spanned either far or short spans. To test this, in Table 3, Model 1 presents a naive ordinary least squares regression estimating the effect of perceived distance on the evaluation of song quality (seven-point scale), controlling for respondent-level differences. Consistent with the second hypotheses, we find that respondents rate identical songs as lower in quality (−0.42, 0.19) when they believe the artist spanned a *moderate* distance than they do when they hear the song without a prime. Again, consistent with our hypothesis, this penalty does not attach in either the *close* or *distant* conditions. The results are unchanged if the model is estimated using an ordered logistic regression and are consistent with the results of mean-comparison tests used to analyze the significance of the differences between the conditions. For example, respondents in the *close* (mean = 4.7, SD = 1.38) condition rated the song more favorably than did those in the *moderate* condition (mean = 4.41, SD = 1.63), $t(305) = 1.47$, $p = 0.07$) using a Welch's t-test.

As a second test of respondent interest, Model 2 presents a logit regression on the likelihood that a respondent asked to know the artist's name after

Table 2. Span Distance and Referent Selection

	Level of classification	Authenticity scale		Fan support	Wrong genre	Artist is "genuine"
Condition	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Close condition	−0.17 (0.22)	−0.05 (0.12)		−0.42^{+} (0.23)	0.25 (0.23)	
Moderate condition	−0.37 (0.24)	−0.11 (0.12)		−0.49* (0.24)	0.46* (0.23)	
Distant condition	−0.46* (0.23)	0.07 (0.12)	0.19^{+} (0.11)	−0.29 (0.23)	0.23 (0.23)	0.48* (0.22)
Genre familiarity	0.05 (0.06)	0.07* (0.03)	0.08^{+} (0.05)	0.15* (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.19* (0.09)
Listening habits	0.02 (0.09)	0.05 (0.05)	0.06 (0.07)	0.11 (0.10)	−0.05 (0.10)	0.11 (0.17)
Male	−0.04 (0.14)	−0.29*** (0.08)	−0.36*** (0.11)	−0.41** (0.15)	0.05 (0.15)	−0.72*** (0.22)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
Education	0.09^{+} (0.05)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.07)
Song indicator	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Respondents	549	549	283	549	549	283
R^2	0.03	0.06	0.08			
Pseudo-R^2				0.02	0.01	0.03

Notes. This table reports ordered logistic regressions on the perception of respondents listening to song samples. In Models 1, 2, 4, and 5, coefficients for the treatment condition are relative to the unprimed *control* condition. In Models 3 and 6, coefficients for the *distant* condition are relative to the *moderate* condition.

$^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

hearing the initial song clip. Again, we find some evidence of a penalty specific to the *moderate* treatment (−0.56, 0.31). And again, the results are consistent with those provided by a Welch's *t*-test, in which respondents in the *moderate* (mean = 0.667, SD = 0.473) were significantly less likely than those in the *distant* condition (mean = 0.759, SD = 0.429), $t(284) = 1.72$, $p = 0.04$, or the *close* condition (mean = 0.747, SD = 0.436), $t(307) = 1.55$, $p = 0.06$, to request the artist's name. As a third and final test, Model 3 presents a logit regression on the likelihood the respondents asked to hear the song again. Here we see some evidence of a broader spanning penalty as respondents in all treatment conditions were less likely to ask to hear the whole song than were those in the *control*. Although this appears to contradict the hypothesis, Models 4 and 5 also show that respondents in the *distant* condition spent more time on the clip (5.41, 2.68) and clicked replay more often (0.39, 0.16) than those in the *control*—in other words, they had already listened to the song for extra time. However, respondents in the *moderate* condition exhibited no interest in the initial clip nor an interest in learning more about the artist. Taken together, these results suggest that, even controlling for artist or product-level differences, the effect of spanning is not uniform, and they provide some evidence in support of the claim that an artist spanning a moderate distance results in a greater penalty than attaches at other distances.

Perceived Distance and Illegitimacy Penalties

In motivating our hypotheses, we described the role of categorical clarity and perceived legitimacy in the success of spanning products. We also proposed that

Table 3. Span Distance and Respondent Interest

	Song quality	Request for artist's name	Request for full song	Time listening	Number of plays
Condition	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Close condition	−0.21 (0.19)	−0.13 (0.31)	−0.47^{+} (0.27)	3.68 (2.62)	0.36* (0.16)
Moderate condition	−0.42* (0.19)	−0.56^{+} (0.31)	−0.69* (0.28)	2.75 (2.70)	0.11 (0.17)
Distant condition	−0.19 (0.19)	0.09 (0.32)	−0.79** (0.28)	5.41* (2.68)	0.39* (0.16)
Genre familiarity	0.10^{+} (0.05)	0.36*** (0.09)	0.19* (0.08)	−1.93** (0.73)	−0.06 (0.04)
Listening habits	0.11 (0.08)	0.57*** (0.12)	0.24^{+} (0.13)	−1.92^{+} (1.10)	−0.02 (0.06)
Male	−0.47*** (0.12)	−0.62** (0.20)	−0.23 (0.18)	−0.44 (1.66)	−0.45*** (0.10)
Age	−0.01* (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.12 (0.08)	−0.02*** (0.00)
Education	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.06)	1.19* (0.53)	−0.01 (0.03)
Song indicator	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	4.79*** (0.51)	−2.95*** (0.86)	−1.05 (0.82)	46.70*** (7.26)	0.38 (0.42)
Respondents	549	549	549	549	549
R^2	0.07			0.06	
Pseudo-R^2		0.10	0.04		0.03

Note. Coefficients for each condition are relative to the unprimed *control* condition.

$^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

one way in which the use of a superordinate class may affect consumers' perception of quality is by reducing their concerns about the artist's legitimacy. Although we do not specifically hypothesize this pathway, the experimental design does provide us with a means of testing the implied relationship. Therefore, we used a five-question scale established in recent work on how to test authenticity in experimental settings (Lehman et al. 2018) and modified to fit our context and then used principal component factor analysis to create a single *authenticity scale* variable from these responses (all five eigenvalues > 1). The scale included the questions "How 'genuine' do you believe this artist is?", "How likely are fans of the genre to support this artist?", and "Would the artist be more successful in a different genre?" Model 2 reports the results relative to the *control* condition and does not indicate any significant differences. However, Model 3 compares the authenticity scores for the *distant* condition to the *moderate* and finds that respondents evaluated artists spanning a great distance more favorably (0.19, 0.11) than artists believed to engage moderate spans. As before, these results remain unchanged when we use a Welch's *t*-test to compare the significance between groups. When we disaggregate the scale, we find, consistent with our proposition (Model 4), that respondents perceive fans of a given genre as less likely to support artists that engage moderate spans (−0.49, 0.24) or even close spans (−0.42, 0.23), but they do not predict a penalty for artists engaged in distant spans. Similarly, when they believed the artist engaged in moderate spans, the respondents indicated that the artist would be happier in a different genre (0.46, 0.23), but they did not express any sentiment about artists who did close or distant spans (Model 5). Finally, although the treatments did not vary significantly from the control, Model 6 reports that respondents did rate artists engaged in a distant span as "more genuine" (0.48, 0.22) than those perceived as pursuing a moderate course. Altogether, these findings offer only weak support for this mechanism but do provide some evidence that respondents interpret the act of spanning as an indication of the producer's intent, a proxy for whether the producer is "genuine" and, therefore, whether the fans will remain loyal. Consistent with the second hypothesis, this helps engender a penalty for people perceived as bridging a moderate span and a premium for those seen as bridging two distant categories.

Finally, it should be noted that we have elected for a very conservative test of the hypotheses in which the spanning is merely suggested and not reflected—as in the songs were held constant and only the information varied. We did this to reduce potentially confounding factors and to provide a cleaner experiment, but we would anticipate that a spanning product—which would introduce sonic variations as well—would amplify the effect and lead to stronger results.

Study 2: The Performance of New Musicians

Although the first study provides some evidence in support of our claim that the perceived distance separating two fields (e.g., musical genres) affects the reception of a combinatory product, the experiment tested just two specific behaviors: classification and evaluation. The decision to purchase a song reflects a wider array of motivations, and it remains plausible that although spanning affects consumers' perception of a product, it does not significantly alter their willingness to purchase. Therefore, to test our second hypotheses more directly and to determine whether the decision to span affects consumer behavior, we turn to a unique sample of observations: 293 performances by the 144 new singers who participated in the first three seasons of the American television show *The Voice*. What follows is a description of the setting and an explanation for its selection. *The Voice* is a televised vocal competition broadcast in the United States and Canada starting April 2011 (season 2 began February 2012, season 3, September 10, 2012), which features amateur singers competing in a series of rounds for a recording contract and cash prize. The show has consistently ranked as one of the most popular on television with individual episodes averaging more than 10 million viewers with a median age of 43 (Halperin 2012). Two features are unique to the show: (1) although all candidates are prescreened to ensure a baseline quality, judges select the final contestants in a blind audition at which they can only hear the singer's voice, (2) the contestants then select a single judge from those who voted to keep them to serve as a coach. The contest advances using a combination of fan votes plus song sales to eliminate the lowest ranked performers at each round. This produces an imbalanced sample with performers recording between one and eight songs after their initial audition. The sample includes all the contestants from the first three seasons and all the songs they performed after the selection process.

This sample offered multiple advantages for the estimation of our second hypothesis. First, the contestants are genuine new entrants: they are unknown actors without prior associations or identities, resulting in a sample with limited left-censoring. Second, the instant publicity these contestants enjoy provides a rare opportunity to test whether new entrants enjoy leeway in selecting identities or if it is an artifact of their initial low profile. Third, as each performance was instantly available for purchase, we can assess outcomes in terms of actual song sales. Fourth, the initial screening by producers reduces the influence of talent on sales

as all performers are above a high threshold, and there is little evidence of any additional linear relationship between musical ability and album sales. Fifth, the performers had equal access to material and expert advisors, reducing the influence of potential resource advantages and allowing us to measure the influence of their strategic choices directly. Finally, the ease with which performers could switch genres allows us to test whether categorical discounts are a function of the costs of spanning and, therefore, less applicable in low-threshold settings. This offers a valuable complement to research that has focused on settings in which individuals or organizations are unable to span (Zuckerman et al. 2003) or in which spanning requires specialized knowledge or resources (Leahey et al. 2017). The absence of barriers in music means that any performer can *attempt* any genre at any time—allowing us to extend prior findings to low-threshold arenas.

Measures

Dependent Variable. We measured success using the log of sales for each performance. In excess of five million songs were sold for the performances in our sample with several artists ranking among the top ten most downloaded on iTunes for a given week. All sales were made through iTunes only, and data were provided by Nielsen Soundscan for Canada. U.S. sales data were only available for the first two seasons, but produced similar results (1 Canadian dollar sale equaling approximately 10 U.S. sales). Because the focus is on individual artists, any duets or multivocalist performances were not included in the measure of sales. Also, because most auditions were not available for purchase, we only included data on artists who were selected to participate and, therefore, performed at least two televised songs.

Independent Variables

Distance. This study examines whether the reception of a new product varies with the perceived distance between the classes or categories it combines. In our specific case, this means the distance separating artists' home from the elements they incorporate into their newest song. To calculate this, we, therefore, need to know the perceived distance from the singers' home genre to the genres they borrow from to create their newest song. Artists who only use elements from within their genre don't "travel" at all, and their resulting distance score is zero. This score then increases as the artist borrows elements or even entire songs from less and less related genres. As described, we constrain the score between zero and one with higher values corresponding to a greater distance.

This adds to a growing set of research on how the characteristics of a category—the frequency with which it is combined (Kovacs and Hannan 2015) or the governing logic (Lo and Kennedy 2015)—affect receptivity. Given the centrality of audience perception in studies of categorization (Pontikes 2012, Negro and Leung 2013), we contribute a new measure that treats distance as the degree to which two audiences share members (i.e., overlap). This approach complements recent work that has focused on attributes of the product—situating objects according to the number of shared features (Askin and Mauskapf 2017) or the frequency of combination (Leahey et al. 2017)—by providing a means for measuring the relationship between audiences. Critically, this approach recognizes that genres, consumers, academic disciplines, and market segments are not equidistant and that the degree to which the audiences are separate influences the ability to appeal to them simultaneously and, ultimately, reception of the product.

To operationalize the distance spanned by a producer, we need to identify first the relative position of the combined genres (i.e., the degree of overlap) and then, using these, determine the starting location of the artist and the final position of the song.[5] To achieve the first, we used the results from the National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) to calculate the ratio of shared fans for any genre pair given by (F_{jk}), $F_{jk} = Y_k/X_j$, where X_j is the number of people who like genre j "best," and Y_k is the number of those people who also "like" genre k. Put differently, the fan ratio is the percentage of people that like j genre best that also enjoy k-genre music. In other words, moving a "far" distance would mean moving into a genre that few fans of your home genre also enjoy, whereas moving a "close" distance would mean moving into a genre that a significant percentage of your core fans also support. The SPPA is the most recent and comprehensive survey of its kind, asking 5,371 people to identify their preference for a range of musical genres. Prior versions of the survey have been used to establish musical genres and their properties (Peterson and Kern 1996, Garcia-Alvarez et al. 2007) as it offers a singularly robust sample of American musical preferences. Of the 13 genres included in the 2008 SPPA, nine also appeared in the coding of contestants or songs. Table 4 offers a summary of artist and song categorizations.

Calculating the space (L_{jk}) between genres as $L_{jk} = 1 - F_{jk}$ constrains the value between zero and one, where one indicates complete disparity—none of the fans of j like k music—and zero indicates perfect overlap—everyone who likes j best also likes k. In practice, this means that pop is considered close to rock (0.199) but far from classical (0.47). The largest distance is between folk and rap (0.83), and the closest is pop to rock (0.199).

Table 4. Artist and Song Classification by Genre

For artists			For songs		
Musical genre	Sole members	Partial members	Musical genre	Sole members	Partial members
Country	21	6	Country	24	16
Pop	21	49	Pop	16	170
Rock	5	29	Rock	28	139
R&B/soul	14	39	R&B/soul	9	94
Rap/hip-hop	1	2	Rap/hip-hop	1	16
Classical	1	1	Classical	2	3
Gospel	1	3	Gospel	0	6
Latin	1	4	Latin	1	1
Folk	9	10	Folk	0	15
Other (jazz, dance, "every genre")	4	12	Other (jazz, dance, "every genre")	2	55

Once we know the position of the genres, we are able to triangulate where the song and artist are located by calculating (described subsequently and in greater detail in Online Appendix A) the degree to which an artist/song is identified with each of the nine genres. In essence, we use these two positions (song and artist) to calculate the distance (D) an artist moves as a function of the artist's genre membership (A_i) and song genre membership (S_i) in the set of M musical genres, multiplied by the distance between each genre pair.

$$D = \sum_{i \in M} A_i * S_i * L(A_i S_i).$$

In practice, this means that, when an artist solely identified as a country singer elects to sing a song that is coded as half rock and half rhythm and blues (R&B), the distance is measured using the degree to which they identify with country (1), the song's classification as rock (0.5) and R&B (0.5), and the distance between country and rock (0.299), and country and R&B (0.588) or ((1) × (0.5) × (0.299) + (1) × (0.5) × (0.588) = 0.444). By contrast, country singers singing a country song would earn a score of zero as their summation would be (1) × (1) × (0) = 0. This results in a continuous measure of distance constrained between zero and one for all artists. As we hypothesize a curvilinear penalty, we also include a square of the distance term in our models.

This approach allows for a methodological refinement of recent work that has implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the distance between audiences by allowing the same span to have a different value depending upon the direction actors move (i.e., which genre is their home and which their destination). What is relevant then, is not merely that an artist transgressed a given boundary, but also in what direction. The difference between audience perceptions is apparent in several combinations; for instance, country audiences see folk as very distant (0.69) although folk fans see themselves as nearly aligned with country (0.3). Allowing for this asymmetry distances, this measure from alternatives based in objective attributes (e.g., shared components) and reflects our interest in identifying the influence of the relationship between the audiences. Our measure is, therefore, designed to reflect the possibility that differences between audiences have a direct bearing on perceptions of distance. Prior studies either make the explicit assumption that all audiences, however heterogeneous, share a common understanding of the categorical schema or they measure the co-occurrence of category combinations based on the assumption that co-occurrence reflects similarity (Goldberg et al. 2016).

Although our measure of spanning does not consider the motivation to span, it is important to note that we estimate the results on songs selected by the artists themselves. Interviews with past performers and members of the production staff corroborate the claim that, although the artists receive input, the decision on whether to remain in their genre or to branch out is their own. The decision we model is, therefore, an actual choice by the artist on whether to build up their standing with a core group of fans or to try and broaden their appeal to a new set of consumers.

We recognize that this implies a potential endogeneity concern as artists may succeed because they select better songs rather than because of attributes of the particular span. Fortunately, this concern is addressed by the particular structure of the show (and further tested in our experiment). Once selected to participate, all the singers receive comparable levels of professional advice and assistance in selecting their songs from the coaches and veteran producers. Interviews with show participants indicate that this is not pro forma, but a serious and time-consuming process. This limits the degree to which any variation in sales results from an individual-level difference in the ability to pick appropriate songs. All analyses also include controls for the prior popularity of the song selected.

Artist Genre. To determine an artist's home genre, we coded the self-identified style for the artists on two artist-run sites: their own personal site and/or their MySpace page. Analysis of the first season revealed that these measures accurately reflect how the artists were introduced and promoted on the show. In addition, in interviews with members of *The Voice* production team and individual performers, they reinforced the centrality of an artist's home genre in the creation of artist identities and the marketing of these artists as early as the audition stage. It is clear from these interviews that both artists and producers made conscious and public decisions regarding their home genre identity. In keeping with past studies (Hsu et al. 2009), we coded the mention of any subgenre as a reference to the broader genre (classic rock and Southern rock both become rock) and account for cross-genre identities by assigning each artist a grade of membership (from zero to one) in all nine genres. In prior work, a lack of information on the classification process meant that an actor listing two categories was considered equally in each and not primarily one with the second as a modifier. In this sample, because artists list their genres in rank order, we were able to weight the position of each genre mentioned to better specify their position. This resulted in a membership score (M) for each genre i given by

$$M_i = \frac{\sum_{r=1}^{n} \left(\frac{1}{r}\right) N_{ir}}{X},$$

where N = count of all mentions of genre i at rank r and X = number of sites referenced. To prevent people with multiple memberships from having deceptive distance scores, we converted this initial membership score into a ratio (in which the sum cannot exceed one) by dividing each genre score (M_i) by the sum of all their genre scores so that an artist's membership (A) in genre i was given by the formula

$$A_i = \frac{M_i}{\sum_i^n M_i}.$$

In practice, this is far simpler than it may sound (Online Appendix A contains a detailed description of the method). For example, if we imagine a singer who identified as country on their own site and mostly country with a little rock on their MySpace page, we would first need to calculate their scores for the various genres. For most genres, as they claim no membership, the score is zero. In country, we add the two primary mentions of country (one point each) and divide by the sites referenced (two) to reach a score of one. For rock, they receive zero points and 0.5 points as the first site does not consider them a member and the second considers them a lesser affiliate. This too is divided by the two sites, resulting in a score of 0.25. Because they now have 1.25 total genre memberships, we finish the process by dividing their scores by this total score, to arrive at a country membership (A_{country}) of 0.8 (1/1.25) and rock membership of 0.2 (0.25/1.25).

Song Genre. To assign songs a membership score in each of the nine genres, we used a method similar to the one described (again converting each to a ratio score). We extracted song genre designations from four popular sites: iTunes, Wikipedia, Allmusic.com, and Last.fm. These sites vary in their method—iTunes classifies songs according to the genre assigned by the record label, and Last.fm indicates the priority of genres by the number of people who tag it with each. Together they offer a holistic assessment of how different consumers perceive each song, capturing more subtlety than is provided in the designation by the label alone. The genre of music (GoM) score reflects the degree to which all four sites classify a given song as belonging to a specific genre and the priority they each give to that genre. For instance, the Drake song "Find Your Love" is listed as hip-hop (iTunes); pop, R&B (Wikipedia); rap (Allmusic.com); and R&B, hip-hop, pop (Last.fm). We use a process identical to the one described for artist genre to determine first the scores for any genre that appears for the song (e.g., rap/hip-hop, pop, R&B for "Find Your Love") and then measure the ratio of membership within each genre. The virtue of this method is that it distinguishes between two songs otherwise identified as primarily in the same genre. Table 5 provides examples of how four songs found in our sample were coded and converted to a score.

Control Variables. To effectively test our hypotheses, we include several control variables that have been used in prior studies to predict sales in the music industry. First, the most obvious explanation for variance in sales is an innate difference in the *ability* of the performers. Although the show's producers limit variation by eliminating untalented singers from consideration, there still may exist discrepancies between the talented and the most talented that explain the resulting sales. To control for this, we included an indicator variable for whether the artist had received a record contract prior to appearing on the show. To capture the effect of an *endorsement* by the coaches we included a measure of the percentage of judges who voted for each artist.

Second, individuals may vary in the clarity of their home genre; although the artists in our sample largely self-identified with a single genre of music, some did present themselves as rock-country hybrids or, in one case, as not belonging to any one genre. Prior work has found that the variety of membership claims

Table 5. Song Classification Examples

						Weighted GoM score								
Song title	Original artist	iTunes	Wikipedia	Allmusic	Last.fm	Country	Pop	Rock	R&B/soul	Rap/ hip-hop	Classical	Gospel	Folk	Other
Bleeding Love	Leona Lewis	Pop	Pop, R&B	Pop, R&B	Pop, soul		0.73		0.27					
Bring it on Home to Me	Sam Cooke	R&B/soul	Soul	R&B	Soul, R&B				1					
Find Your Love	Drake	Hip-hop	Pop, R&B	Rap	R&B, hip-hop, pop		0.25		0.28	0.47				
Not Ready to Make Nice	Dixie Chicks	Country	Country, pop	Country	Country, pop	0.8	0.2							

negatively influence performance (Hsu 2006, Hsu et al. 2009); therefore, to capture the *home width* of each artist, we use a Herfindahl index that sums the square of proportional membership in each genre. A score of zero indicates that the artist solely identified with one category, and the score increases with the number of categories claimed. We used the same process to calculate the width of the niche occupied by each song.

We also measured the within-genre *diversity* of each artist and song as a count of the subgenres claimed within their primary genre (genre with highest membership). This helped separate people who span within genres from those who span across, for example, an artist with narrow width (e.g., solely rock) but with multiple subgenres (e.g., indie rock, southern rock, hard rock).

Third, we sought to limit the influence of song-level variations by capturing the popularity and competition for attention. We controlled for the *song popularity* using the log of the peak Billboard rank for each song with unranked songs given a score of 101. We logged the data to adjust for skew and to account for the fact that the difference between being ranked #1 or #10 were not equal to the difference between #71 and #80. In separate analyses, we also tested the sales of the song in the week prior to the performance. However, as Nielsen does not record the individual sales of all songs—only those released as singles—data were not available for all songs, and therefore, we use the Billboard rank in the primary analyses. Regressions run on the more limited pool that includes prior sales returned similar results. As a measure of the degree of *competition* within a market segment, we created a count measure of the number of songs claiming each genre during each season. Alternate measures using a GoM sum by genre (and, thus, counting partial and full membership differently) did not return different results.

Fourth, differences in the characteristics of the genres or their respective consumers may also influence the sales of a given performance. Most obviously, more popular genres or those with wealthier consumers may generate higher returns. Consistent with prior research on the music industry (Peterson and Kern 1996, Lizardo 2006, Garcia-Alvarez et al. 2007), we measure the median *income* and *status* for each genre using data derived from the 2012 SPPA. Income captures the percentage of fans (i.e., people who like a given genre best) above the median income, and status reflects the likelihood the fan of a given genre also attended high-status events (i.e., ballet, opera, art museums). We also tested genre education, using percentage of college graduates, but the variable was highly correlated with income, and the

results do not change if we substitute education for income.

To control for differences between the genres themselves, we measured *genre popularity* using the log of 2012 digital sales by genre as reported by Nielsen Soundscan. And, to account for the fact that some styles of music may be more permissive of combinations, we include the *genre contrast* or the frequency with which a given genre was the subject of cross-genre combinations. Finally, we include dummy variables to control for the differences between *season* and *round* of the show. Summary statistics and correlations for the included variables are available in Table 6.

Methods

We structured our data as time series cross-sectional at the artist level with the release of a song by a new artist as the unit of analysis. Because of the need to include time-invariant variables, we estimated all results using random effect regressions and reported standard errors clustered by artist. A Hausman test confirmed the appropriateness of random effects. A test of the variation inflation factors (vif in *STATA 13*) returned no significant problem (max: song diversity, 3.72). In addition, the models met all normality and linearity requirements after the dependent variable was log transformed. Clustering the standard errors at the individual level reduced any heteroskedasticity.

Results

Table 7 presents the tests of our second hypothesis; the first model presents a baseline model with all the controls included. The second model introduces the measure for the distance between an artist and the song they perform. The 3rd through 10th models provide additional tests of the robustness of our findings and the accuracy of our interpretation.

The results in Model 2 affirm our second hypothesis demonstrating that distance influences song performance in a U-shaped pattern (Figure 1). The negative effect of distance (−1.71, 0.71) combined with the positive effect of the squared term (2.84, 0.99) reflects a penalty for moderate spans and a potential benefit to extreme spans. This reinforces and extends prior claims that spanning resulted in penalties, showing that the degree of penalty is mediated by the distance separating the combined categories and that there exist safe or even beneficial combination types. In this setting, combining adjacent genres resulted in lower variation but no evident penalties relative to remaining loyal to your core genre. But, as the distance between the combined genres increased, artist sales declined appreciably. However, extreme combinations reversed this pattern, providing artists with both higher average sales and increased variation, reinforcing the intuition that extreme combinations occasionally produce very high returns. These findings indicate that consumers prefer that new entrants adopt one of two extreme personas: either true to their roots or iconoclastic but reject middling attempts to balance both goals.

In addition, the influence of the controls is constant across all models and worth noting. Consistent with prior work, we see that within-genre competition negatively affects artist sales (−0.03, 0.01) and, significant at the 0.10 level, that artists are penalized for claiming diffuse identities (−1.14, 0.62). However, appealing to multiple subgenres within the primary genre (0.44, 0.19) and placing yourself in a larger market (4.81, 1.76) help increase sales. The former offers evidence of the benefit of what might be termed constrained breadth: variation within a bounded space. The latter suggests that, even for new artists, smaller markets generate a smaller sales volume.

Test of Perceived Distance

The measure of distance described is based in the degree of overlap between two distinct audiences. We believe this is the appropriate measure because we are modeling the singer's effort to increase market size by appealing simultaneously to different groups of consumers. Hence, a measure for whether these consumers are oppositional or intermixed is logical. However, it is also true that the mechanism we describe is rooted in individual perception and not audience cointerest. It is, therefore, fair to ask whether a consumer-based measure functions as an accurate aggregation of individual perception. To test this, we conducted an online survey in January 2018 in which we asked 500 respondents to rank a set of 10 genres in terms of how close they were to a focal genre.[6] We then averaged the rankings for each focal genre-ranked genre pair to create unidirectional scores—in other words, allowing the score for rock-country to differ from that of country-rock by averaging all respondent's rankings for rock's distance from country separately from country's distance from rock. We then replaced the audience-overlap score with this survey-based measure in each of the preceding equations. Most obviously, we multiplied the new score by the GoM for each song and artist to determine the *perceived distance* each performer appeared to move. This produces a measure of distance based in individual perceptions and, therefore, offers an important additional test of our claim that subjective assessments of distance influence receptivity. The results of this analysis are presented in Model 3 and provide additional support for the hypothesis, showing that spans are penalized at moderate distances but not at close or far ones. Substituting perceived distance for categorical distance in the other models (Online Appendix B) does not significantly alter the

Table 6. Summary of Descriptive Statistics

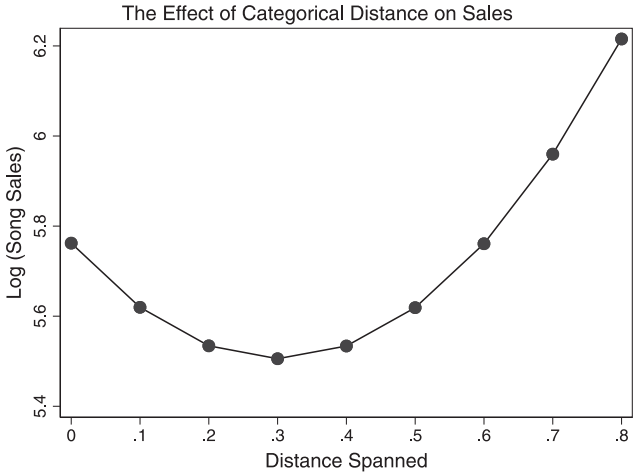
	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
	Mean	5.97	0.25	0.28	0.42	0.56	0.21	0.56	0.94	1.04	166	9.99	0.20	0.51	0.12	0.63	2.25	2.20	0.29	0.08
	Standard deviation	1.63	0.19	0.19	0.49	0.27	025	0.56	0.89	0.84	60.1	8.13	0.02	0.44	0.07	0.10	0.77	1.62	0.91	0.08
	Minimum	0.69	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.50	0.13	−0.38	0.01	0.50	1.00	1.00	−3.33	0.00
	Maximum	10.2	0.92	0.91	1.00	1.00	0.72	2.88	4.00	4.00	199	28.3	0.23	1.49	0.27	0.85	3.00	8.00	3.369	0.22
	Number of observations	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293
1	log(*Sales*)	1.00																		
2	*Distance*	0.03	1.00																	
3	*Perceived distance*	0.07	0.85	1.00																
4	*Artist ability*	0.07	−0.07	−0.07	1.00															
5	*Endorsement*	0.34	0.09	0.03	0.09	1.00														
6	*Home width*	−0.05	0.11	0.10	−0.04	−0.09	1.00													
7	*Song width*	0.06	0.27	0.27	−0.11	0.06	0.09	1.00												
8	*Home diversity*	0.11	0.12	0.11	0.11	−0.16	0.69	0.04	1.00											
9	*Song diversity*	−0.01	0.28	0.28	−0.15	−0.02	0.15	0.84	0.10	1.00										
10	*Song popularity*	−0.14	−0.02	0.00	0.00	−0.15	−0.09	0.01	−0.10	0.08	1.00									
11	*Competition*	−0.49	0.01	0.01	−0.04	−0.12	0.18	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.13	1.00								
12	*Audience income*	−0.04	−0.04	−0.04	−0.13	−0.09	0.22	0.20	0.22	0.22	0.07	0.13	1.00							
13	*Audience status*	0.01	0.16	0.27	−0.13	−0.02	0.18	0.27	0.21	0.26	−0.03	0.11	0.73	1.00						
14	*Genre popularity*	0.16	−0.19	0.29	0.11	0.03	0.12	−0.21	0.11	−0.21	−0.11	−0.07	−0.31	−0.56	1.00					
15	*Genre contrast*	−0.07	−0.10	−0.12	0.10	0.06	−0.33	−0.14	−0.35	−0.17	0.01	−0.05	−0.46	−0.46	0.26	1.00				
16	*Season*	−0.09	0.13	0.16	−0.29	0.20	0.10	0.05	−0.16	0.09	−0.02	0.25	−0.08	0.09	−0.10	−0.12	1.00			
17	*Round*	0.56	0.07	0.09	−0.02	0.18	−0.07	0.06	−0.05	0.06	−0.05	−0.58	−0.03	0.00	0.06	−0.10	0.22	1.00		
18	*Popularity change*	−0.03	−0.03	0.20	0.11	0.02	−0.05	0.04	0.01	−0.01	0.05	0.16	−0.19	0.23	−0.34	−0.02	0.15	−0.04	1.00	
19	*Typicality*	−0.13	−0.43	−0.48	−0.02	−0.09	0.13	0.03	−0.01	−0.03	0.15	0.29	0.47	0.10	−0.01	0.04	−0.13	−0.14	−0.23	1.00

Table 7. Effect of Categorical Distance on log(*Sales*)

	log(*Sales*)									
Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Distance		−1.71* (0.714)		−1.03 (1.668)	−2.56* (1.039)	−9.72** (3.481)	−1.92** (0.720)	−1.91* (0.755)	−1.54* (0.735)	−2.04* (1.018)
Distance^2		2.84** (0.990)		1.65 (2.134)	3.21* (1.428)	11.47* (5.612)	3.25** (1.040)	3.63** (1.133)	2.75** (0.987)	3.71** (1.330)
Perceived distance			−1.05$^+$ (0.610)							
Perceived distance^2			2.06* (0.988)							
Ability	−0.16 (0.183)	−0.17 (0.182)	−0.16 (0.183)	−0.17 (0.182)	−0.51* (0.252)	−0.21 (0.183)	−0.18 (0.180)	−0.19 (0.181)	−0.17 (0.182)	−0.18 (0.182)
Endorsement	2.25*** (0.437)	2.23*** (0.441)	2.23*** (0.436)	2.31*** (0.601)	2.26*** (0.440)	2.23*** (0.443)	2.23*** (0.441)	2.20*** (0.445)	2.23*** (0.440)	2.22*** (0.433)
Home width	−1.14$^+$ (0.618)	−1.03$^+$ (0.625)	−1.03 (0.633)	−1.03 (0.629)	−1.02 (0.628)	−0.95 (0.624)	−1.01 (0.625)	−1.18$^+$ (0.625)	−1.08$^+$ (0.618)	−1.17$^+$ (0.600)
Song width	0.23 (0.180)	0.28 (0.182)	0.25 (0.187)	0.29 (0.183)	0.29 (0.178)	0.32$^+$ (0.184)	0.28 (0.182)	0.30 (0.185)	0.26 (0.186)	0.27 (0.190)
Home diversity	0.44* (0.192)	0.46* (0.193)	0.44* (0.193)	0.45* (0.193)	0.44* (0.197)	0.46* (0.194)	0.45* (0.193)	0.47* (0.191)	0.46* (0.192)	0.47* (0.191)
Song diversity	−0.13 (0.105)	−0.13 (0.105)	−0.13 (0.108)	−0.13 (0.105)	−0.12 (0.101)	−0.16 (0.105)	−0.12 (0.105)	−0.13 (0.105)	−0.11 (0.107)	−0.11 (0.110)
Song popularity	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)
Competition	−0.03* (0.012)	−0.02* (0.011)	−0.03* (0.012)	−0.02* (0.011)	−0.02* (0.011)	−0.02* (0.011)	−0.03* (0.012)	−0.02$^+$ (0.012)	−0.03* (0.012)	−0.02$^+$ (0.012)
Audience income	−5.53 (6.316)	−5.23 (6.264)	−3.74 (6.333)	−5.08 (6.302)	−5.52 (6.404)	−6.25 (6.250)	−3.10 (7.249)	−3.11 (7.389)	−7.11 (7.108)	−7.35 (7.143)
Audience status	0.64 (0.406)	0.63 (0.410)	0.58 (0.397)	0.62 (0.413)	0.67 (0.409)	0.58 (0.407)	0.53 (0.445)	0.52 (0.450)	0.68 (0.424)	0.68 (0.433)
Genre popularity	4.81** (1.757)	4.62** (1.785)	4.97** (1.807)	4.67** (1.809)	4.67** (1.729)	4.42* (1.812)	4.81** (1.804)	4.87** (1.824)	4.75** (1.809)	4.85** (1.825)
Genre contrast	−1.47 (1.332)	−1.57 (1.343)	−1.47 (1.349)	−1.54 (1.356)	−1.63 (1.317)	−0.46** (0.176)	−1.57 (1.342)	−1.60 (1.331)	−1.72 (1.345)	−1.66 (1.345)
Season	−0.43* (0.177)	−0.43* (0.177)	−0.43* (0.178)	−0.44* (0.178)	−0.42* (0.180)	0.18*** (0.045)	−0.43* (0.177)	−0.45* (0.179)	−0.42* (0.176)	−0.44* (0.176)
Round	0.16*** (0.049)	0.17*** (0.046)	0.16*** (0.048)	0.16*** (0.047)	0.17*** (0.044)	−0.21 (0.183)	0.17*** (0.046)	0.17*** (0.049)	0.16*** (0.046)	0.18*** (0.046)
Popularity change							0.06 (0.073)	0.61** (0.219)		
Typicality									0.71 (0.985)	−0.97 (1.522)
Distance × ability				−1.22 (2.344)						
Distance^2 *× ability*				2.18 (2.795)						
Distance × endorsement					1.77 (1.331)					
Distance^2 *× endorsement*					−0.89 (1.761)					
Distance × genre contrast						12.31* (5.131)				
Distance^2 *× genre contrast*						−13.20 (8.474)				
Distance × popularity change								−2.51** (0.954)		
Distance^2 *× popularity change*								2.38* (0.938)		
Distance × typicality										24.5$^+$ (14.3)
Distance^2 *× typicality*										−62.3$^+$ (37.1)
Constant	6.26*** (1.709)	6.33*** (1.714)	5.94** (1.806)	6.25*** (1.792)	6.53*** (1.691)	7.65*** (1.842)	5.96** (1.852)	5.94** (1.867)	6.69*** (1.815)	6.75*** (1.841)
Observations	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293	293
Artists	144	144	144	144	144	144	144	144	144	144
Adjusted R^2	0.43	0.43	0.43	0.44	0.44	0.44	0.43	0.44	0.43	0.44

Note. This table reports random-effect regressions on log(*Sales*) for individual songs.
$^+p < 0.10$; $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Graph of Observed Relationship Between Distance and Sales



findings. Specifically, as in the prior models, the coefficient for distance is negative (−1.05, 0.61) while the coefficient of the squared term is positive (2.06, 0.99), indicating a U-shaped relationship between perceived distance and song sales that is consistent with what was proposed.

Tests of Alternate Explanations

We interpret these results as evidence that bridging distant categories generates potential benefits that do not occur when the classes are perceived as closer. We also conducted an experiment to determine whether we can recover the results when controlling for differences between products. However, we recognize that there are plausible alternate interpretations of this evidence; Models 4–10 provide tests of these alternatives.

First, it is possible that success influences an artist's ability to pursue distant spans, in other words, that there is either a skill-based effect, in which the returns to distant spans are only positive for talented artists or a legitimacy-based effect by which success is necessary before consumers consider novel offerings from a given producer. Our setting limits both possibilities as these are all new entrants vetted to ensure they pass a talent threshold, but there is variation in their initial performance results that might condition the reception of their subsequent decisions. To test these two possibilities, in Model 4, we interact our measure of artist ability with distance and find no evidence that the returns to distance vary with ability. To test the need for prior legitimation, in Model 5, we interact the quality of an artist's initial performance with the distance of subsequent songs to determine whether the influence of spanning was moderated by the judge's endorsement. Again, we find no evidence that the effect of distance varied based on the success or failure of the initial performance.

Next, it is possible that the returns to combinations depend not upon the distance, but on the attributes of the audiences being combined. For example, prior research has suggested that audiences vary in tolerance to novelty, and therefore, distance may be moderated by the tolerance of the primary consumers to "contamination" generally (i.e., association with any other genre). Model 6 estimates the moderating effect of genre contrast on distance and does find, consistent with prior work, that the effect is amplified for artists starting in lower-contrast (i.e., more tolerant) genres but also that the general pattern recurs across all genres.

A third plausible explanation is that the value of a combination depends not on the distance but on the degree to which the artist increases the potential number of consumers. In other words, we might conclude that spanning is not inherently problematic; it is the strategic mistake of moving into a worse market that elicits penalties. In contrast, we might anticipate that moving into a wealthy or popular genre would be rewarded. We, therefore, consider the possibility that artists act strategically, and what appears to be a distance bonus is simply the result of singers moving out of low-popularity genres. This claim lacks face validity as relatively few artists (<15%) try to move into a significantly more popular genre; however, to test whether distance is merely a proxy for movement to larger audiences (Model 7), we include a measure of the difference in popularity (*popularity change)* between the home and song genres, in which a larger positive number indicates a move to a bigger audience. As the results show, including this variable does not alter the significance or direction of the distance coefficient, nor is the variable itself significant in the model. In Model 8, we interact distance with change in market size to estimate whether distance matters more when moving from low- to high-popularity genres. The results here are significant and show that, although a U-shaped pattern prevails for 95% of the artists, an exception is found in artists moving from the most to least popular genres. Interestingly, in these rare cases, there is no middle-distance penalty; instead sales of the artist's new song increase as the distance between the genres they combine increases.

Finally, it is possible that categorical distance is no different from the frequency with which two genres are combined. As a result, the benefit of a distant combination is scarcity-based as opposed to reflecting the cognitive difference between classes. If this is true, then atypical or infrequent combinations are rewarded irrespective of their distance. To test this, in Model 9, we include a measure of the frequency with which similar artist–song pairs occurred in our sample, and in Model 10, we interact this *typicality* measure with our

distance measure. In neither model does the variable prove significant, nor does the interaction term influence the direction or significance of distance, suggesting that distance is distinct from typicality.

In addition, we tested the moderating effect (available upon request) of consumer income, status, and the popularity of the artist's home genre on the distance measure. We do not find evidence that differences in the primary set of consumers influences the returns to distance.

Sensitivity Analyses

Given the novelty of our concept of distance, we sought to ensure that the results were robust to a variety of alternate specifications and means of analysis. First, to reduce the influence of outlier performances, Models 1 and 2 of Table 8 split the sample into hits (songs with more than 100,000 sales) and nonhits. In Model 3, we consider the effect of distance only on the performances that span genres, excluding the effect of those artists who constrained their appeal. In Model 4, we estimate the results excluding those who pursued an "extreme" span to determine if our results were driven by a few exceptional cases. Model 5 estimates distance on a restricted pool of actors, excluding the artists who self-identified with a genre outside of one of those used in the SPPA survey. Model 6 includes a measure for the coach to assess any halo effect by which more popular coaches increased sales for their performers. The results in each model affirm our finding and show that the effect of distance is consistent across a range of subsamples.

In addition to these, we considered several alternate specifications of the distance measure itself. Alternative distance measures included other audience-based measures, for example, (1) the percentage of people who like the focal genre that also like the alter genre, (2) subtracting the percentage that dislike the alter genre from those who like it, or (3) estimating the likelihood that a person who likes the focal genre also likes the alter. We also used unweighted coding of the genre mentions to calculate the GoM scores for artist and songs. Finally, we estimated ordinal measures (e.g., high, low, nonspanning) and according to decile (i.e., top 10%, bottom 10%). In total, we calculated 10 different audience-based measures, each of which had more than a 0.85 correlation with the measure used in the paper. The results of these various measures were not significantly different from those presented here for the explanatory variables. We, therefore, selected the most logical proxy for distance with the most obvious interpretation—the more fans of a focal genre also like the alter genre, the closer those two genres are.

Discussion

This paper investigates a critical question facing new entrants to an established market: is it better to conform to norms and demonstrate legitimacy or to pursue novelty and risk rejection? We combine observational

Table 8. Tests of Alternate Specifications

	Split sample: Hits	Split sample: Nonhits	Only spanners	Common spans	No "others"	Coach "halo"
Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Distance	−2.4** (0.952)	−2.25** (0.860)	−2.81*** (0.853)	−3.81* (1.703)	−1.72* (0.714)	−1.58* (0.709)
Distance^2	2.64* (1.026)	3.29** (1.170)	4.05*** (1.032)	5.89* (2.943)	2.95** (0.998)	2.73** (1.007)
Artist ability	−0.13 (0.186)	−0.17 (0.152)	−0.06 (0.200)	−0.11 (0.212)	−0.18 (0.187)	−0.17 (0.179)
Endorsement	1.04** (0.341)	1.72*** (0.358)	2.35*** (0.480)	2.33*** (0.509)	2.26*** (0.454)	2.26*** (0.423)
Home width	−0.32 (0.317)	−0.77 (0.537)	−1.26* (0.613)	−1.19$^+$ (0.614)	−1.04$^+$ (0.629)	−1.00 (0.615)
Song width	−0.19 (0.187)	0.46* (0.215)	0.29 (0.186)	0.29 (0.197)	0.22 (0.177)	0.27 (0.188)
Home diversity	0.18$^+$ (0.095)	0.34* (0.165)	0.48** (0.186)	0.48* (0.191)	0.45* (0.198)	0.45* (0.194)
Song diversity	0.15 (0.137)	−0.22$^+$ (0.126)	−0.15 (0.106)	−0.14 (0.110)	−0.09 (0.102)	−0.13 (0.106)
Song popularity	0.00 (0.001)	−0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)	0.00 (0.001)
Competition	−0.01 (0.019)	−0.03* (0.012)	−0.02* (0.012)	−0.03* (0.013)	−0.02* (0.012)	−0.02* (0.011)
Audience income	6.77 (8.666)	−3.47 (5.010)	−8.05 (6.675)	−9.66 (7.187)	−5.65 (6.649)	−3.64 (6.364)
Audience status	−0.27 (0.283)	0.38 (0.332)	0.76$^+$ (0.424)	0.86$^+$ (0.470)	0.66 (0.429)	0.58 (0.419)
Genre popularity	−1.41 (1.223)	3.63* (1.721)	6.34*** (1.897)	6.22** (2.005)	4.65** (1.787)	4.42* (1.722)
Genre contrast	0.53 (0.808)	−2.18$^+$ (1.243)	−1.59 (1.484)	−1.54 (1.558)	−1.65 (1.378)	−1.56 (1.313)
Season	0.02 (0.127)	−0.33* (0.150)	−0.43* (0.198)	−0.44* (0.203)	−0.43* (0.180)	−0.44** (0.171)
Round	−0.01 (0.064)	0.16* (0.077)	0.16*** (0.045)	0.15** (0.048)	0.16*** (0.047)	0.17*** (0.048)
Coach control	N	N	N	N	N	Y
Constant	−0.13 (0.186)	−0.17 (0.152)	−0.06 (0.200)	−0.11 (0.212)	−0.18 (0.187)	−0.17 (0.179)
Observations	60.00	233.00	258	247.00	288	293
Artists	18.00	137.00	131.00	125.00	140.00	144.00
Adjusted R^2	0.26	0.43	0.45	0.42	0.45	0.47

Note. This table reports random-effect regressions on log(*Sales*) for individual songs.
$^+p < 0.10$; $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

analyses of the performance of 144 new musicians with an experiment designed to measure how the perception of movement between genres affects evaluation to show that new entrants are rewarded when they remain within their home genre or when they combine very distant genres. But efforts to pursue an intuitive approach of "balancing" authenticity and novelty by combining genres neither too close nor too far resulted in both a perceptual penalty and lower song sales. The paper contributes a novel concept of *categorical distance* that helps to explain why these types of combinatory products often vary in their performance. Further, we provide initial evidence that part of the benefit experienced at distant combinations is driven by consumer's adoption of a superordinate class as their referent and the resulting attenuation of clarity and illegitimacy-based discounts. The findings, therefore, suggest an additional means of understanding the process of classification—namely the effect of super and subordinate classes on the subsequent evaluation (and legitimation) of novel products. In addition, the results complement recent work on the role of legitimacy on the performance of new ventures and also help to explain recent findings showing inconsistent evidence of a category-based penalty. By recognizing and providing one means to measure, the way in which two combinations may differ, we hope to illuminate some of the conditions under which recombination can achieve the benefit of novelty without also engendering an illegitimacy penalty.

There are several limitations to the scope of these findings. First, we deal solely with new entrants to a cultural industry. Although we frame the paper around an established dilemma in entrepreneurship, it is possible that the results found here are specific to the experience of new entrants in cultural industries or even just for new musicians. For instance, spanning may be more permissible in a creative industry because there is greater demand-side interest in novelty than in a traditional field, such as legal services. The fact that our findings reinforce and extend prior work done on actors and movies suggests that the results should hold true for creative industries more broadly, but additional work would be required to test them in other settings in which actors can electively span or in which consumers are less focused upon novelty. One of the more unique aspects of this setting, the low barrier to spanning, may also prove a constraint on generalizability as industries in which the costs of spanning (medicine, for instance) are higher may witness distance-moderating penalties in a different fashion. It is possible that, in these industries, we witness an inversion in which proximate spans are rewarded but distant ones are excessively penalized. So, tax attorneys can branch into estates and trusts and be seen as having complimentary knowledge, but if they move toward personal liability, they are seen as an opportunist. As one intent of this article is to introduce the notion of a spanning distance, we envision multiple avenues for research to test the scope conditions of the concept.

Second, these findings speak to one specific outcome—consumer receptivity—but the success of a new venture depends on a great variety of factors. Therefore, although we begin this paper by drawing upon a known dilemma facing founders, we need to take particular care not to draw overly broad conclusions about whether, even strictly within the cultural industries, the pursuit of breadth is a fundamentally superior strategy for new entrants. Prior research has emphasized that targeting a narrow niche can help founders improve product–market fit and reduce the costs associated with accessing new customers. Further, targeting a narrow market allows the organization to remain lean, reducing the costs and complexity of execution in a potentially critical fashion. And, in some industries, particularly those in which spanning is technically challenging or capital-intensive, the financial or time cost of spanning could easily outweigh the benefits of a broader consumer base. Our findings are, therefore, intended merely to complement these established considerations and to help new entrants identify a path toward realizing some of the potential benefits of recombination. In that way, we hope that considering the perceived distance between classes as a way to predict receptivity allows new entrants to make more informed decisions regarding the total costs and benefits of breadth.

Relatedly, although the hypotheses are motivated by research that has examined audience receptivity across a range of populations, here the focus is exclusively on one type of audience: consumers. We, therefore, cannot yet speak to how categorical distance might alter receptivity of different audiences: critics, investors, awards committees, etc. The results presented here offer very specific insight into how evidence of bridging can affect commercial performance, but whether this relationship holds for artistic or critical evaluations merits further investigation.

More generally, the limitations to our study are also opportunities for future research. For example, we consider one form of breadth between categories: the perceived distance between clearly delineated sets. However, there may be breadth within a class as well or forms of breadth based in objective attributes. And it is possible that these forms of breadth predict different patterns because they alter the process of classification in distinct ways. In addition, we are primarily conducting a quantitative analysis, but a qualitative analysis looking at how people describe products at different distances may provide useful

clues into additional processes that motivate the principal effect. Finally, it may be that superordinate classes are not valuable per se but because they allow users to adopt a single class rather than trying to distinguish between two competing classes. In effect, what matters for producers are ways of classifying combinatory products within a single category, and the use of a superordinate class is just one way to achieve this result. We hope that future work continues to test and explore these limits and further refine the notion of distance between classes.

In closing, the results presented here contribute to three distinct streams of research. First, for research on identity and entrepreneurship (Navis and Glynn 2010, Wry and Lounsbury 2013, Wry et al. 2014, Kacperczyk and Younkin 2017), these findings provide evidence of a means by which new ventures can balance the competing needs to establish their legitimacy and introduce novel products. Second, we extend work on the broader process by which novel products achieve legitimacy (Sgourev 2013; Cattani et al. 2014, 2017a; Jensen and Kim 2014) to clarify how it is not merely the diversity of the audience (Kim and Jensen 2011, Pontikes 2012, Jensen and Kim 2014) but also the relationship between the audiences that influences reception. Third, extending recent work on the role of reference selection in the process of evaluation (Bowers 2015, Smith and Chae 2017), we introduce the notion that the level of abstraction (i.e., the use of superordinate or subordinate classes) affects the perceived legitimacy and eventual assessment of combinatory products.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Noah Askin, Lisa Cohen, Daphne Demetry, Peer Fiss, Oliver Hahl, Jenn Lena, Ming Leung, and Ezra Zuckerman for their feedback and recommendations throughout the process. They also thank Gino Cattani and the anonymous reviewers for their consistently constructive and sage advice. Previous versions of the paper were presented at the European Group for Organization Studies Conference, the Academy of Management, and American Sociological Association conferences. All experiments were conducted in compliance with IRB approval granted by the first author's university.

Endnotes

[1] There are multiple ways to consider the distance separating two classes. Most obviously, one can consider objective criteria (e.g., shared elements, frequency of combination) or subjective (e.g., perceived similarity). In this paper, we focus upon the latter, estimating how individuals' perception that two categories are similar or dissimilar affects the response to their combination. This approach is a valuable complement to recent work that has considered objective differences to, implicitly or explicitly, assess how degree of difference affects production.

[2] Not surprisingly, such a game does exist, and is popular in places such as Paraguay (where it is called *piki*) and southeast Asia (where it is called *sepak takraw*).

[3] Analyses conducted using a less-restrictive sample (n = 622) that only rejected repeated respondents and those reporting a problem with the survey returned similar results available from the authors upon request.

[4] The clips were selected from songs by new artists who had released their first album within one year of the experiment and had not had a single in the Billboard 100. In a pretest in June 2017, respondents on mTurk were asked to evaluate the quality and clarity of a 30-second song clip randomly selected from a pool of 46 clips. Subsequent analysis identified five clips from different musical genres that were perceived as equal in quality and enjoyment. Details of the pretest are available upon request.

[5] In addition to this measure, we created a second measure (*perceived distance*) based on survey results of individual perceptions of the similarity/dissimilarity of genre pairs. The correlation between the two measures was 0.85. A discussion of this measure and analyses conducted using it in place of an audience-based measure are included as a robustness test with the principal results. Separate analyses run using just this measure were not significantly different from those included with the paper and are available upon request.

[6] Respondents were recruited on Amazon's mechanical turk service and paid $0.25 to complete this single task. We only accepted respondents based in the United States with a 95%+ prior approval rating and who had completed 500+ prior hits.

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