

INTERVIEW USER RESEARCH MOBILE UI PROTOTYPE

Muse.

Connecting musicians, connecting music

Overview

The professional music industry can be a difficult world to navigate for emerging & early-career music artists.

With so many aspiring musicians vying for attention, it can be challenging to stand out and get noticed by the right people in the industry. And in the current digital age, user-generated content on social media such as Tik Tok and YouTube are becoming the preferred method for promotion and streaming. As the online world shrinks, the industry grows in divisive competition.

Muse is a digital platform that was created with the purpose of connecting music artists entering the industry with their audience and network to make authentic connections, grow their career and ultimately make the industry feel like a less daunting place.

CASE STUDY BY

Elisha Fitri

User Experience
and Interface

Problem framing

The emerging/early-career music artists community consists of aspiring musicians who are just starting their careers or are still in the process of developing their industry and career skills. To inform my understanding of members of this community and their context to improve it, I investigated user priorities and common experiences, particularly in the context of the current digital age.

A lack of exposure and recognition due to a highly competitive environment and false algorithmic recommendation feeds leads to further **isolation** of emerging artists from potential larger audiences, communities, and professional connections. This is exacerbated by control of online competition and global attention by giant labels and management agencies, increasing the imbalance of opportunity in the industry and further tipping the playing field.

These pain points call for a solution that centres around the community and their peers, to **increase discoverability in an accessible and genuine way** by using a **user-controlled, unbiased** algorithm feed.

Key findings

Within the category of exposure and recognition lay a number of sub-category areas that highlighted underlying causes and motivators of this issue:

01 Value and importance of 'discovery' by various audiences

02 Strategies for marketing and promotion

03 Expansion of audience

04 Authenticity in online sharing and promotional methods

05 Recognition from industry professionals/labels/management

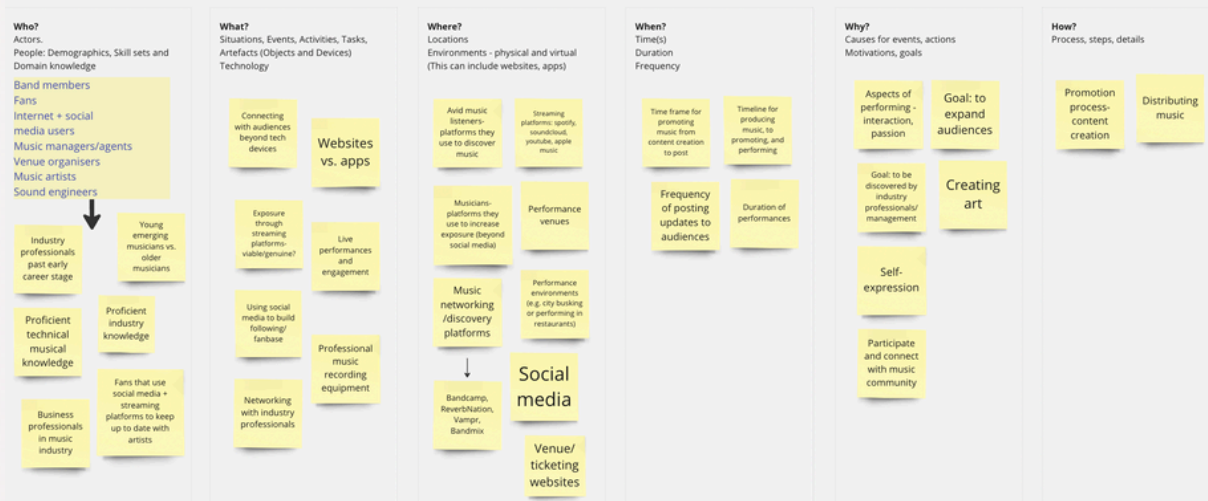
06 Algorithms and social platforms

07 Effectiveness of these features and behaviours online

Initial explorative research uncovered a need to investigate the **effectiveness of feed-based algorithmic recommendations** on online platforms to promote discoverability for music artists. Popular examples of this feature include Spotify song recommendations, Instagram suggested posts, and TikTok's 'For You' page. In particular, whether or not these features were a useful and beneficial tool, and if they could be implemented in a **non-biased** manner.

Primary and secondary research methods were then used to understand the many aspects of this problem, as well as the multiple perspectives that represented the diverse community of emerging and early-career musicians. Secondary research findings revealed that many issues arose from **a lack of access to or an unfairness in the professional music industry**, leading to consequences of **mistrust and isolation** for individuals within the community, as well as a general negative outlook on the industry and their role in it.

Tools such as empathy and context mapping, 5Ws and a H, affinity mapping, and task and domain exploration helped to further explore the main areas of investigation in the community and where they fit within my research objectives. Many of the notes were based on prior knowledge or assumptions which were to be filled through a more thorough investigation in the stage of primary research.



5WS AND A H

I conducted interviews with five members of the community. Each participant was unique in their field, background, skills, goals, and stage of their career. It was important for me to research a diverse group of participants to ensure a range of responses and attempt to represent the community as best as I could with a limited number of participants.

Once I reached the stage of research synthesis, I used the interview data to create continuum groups and multiple-choice visualisations, which revealed that most users felt confident in their current place in their industry based on a fairly optimistic outlook on their futures. However, most felt disheartened by the lack of access to the industry. In addition to this, many were concerned by a high sense of competition in the industry and a large gap between seasoned professionals and those just starting out.

Is it important?

3 out of 5 participants state that focusing on recognition and exposure is a current priority for them

Network

All participants agree that networking is a crucial part of their musical career

Algorithm

Feelings around the effectiveness of current algorithms was mixed, with 2 feeling slightly negative, 2 slightly positive, and 1 very positive

While most participants expressed similar concerns and perspectives, the opinion around algorithmic recommendations for the purpose of discoverability (think: Spotify song recommendations, Instagram suggested posts, Tik Tok's 'For You' page) varied greatly. This was an important aspect to consider regarding the final solution as it showed that there was a need for choice and user control.

The variation in responses was due to a mixed interpretation of the question based on the perspective of the interview participant and whether they first considered themselves primarily being a musician or a listener. Participants who primarily contextualised themselves as a musician considered the algorithm as a tool used to increase their discoverability. These participants felt negatively impacted by this system due to biases in the companies that used them. They felt that these “discover” features did not accurately portray upcoming artists and therefore were not genuine.

Participants who first considered themselves a listener expressed a less negative view of algorithms and viewed it as a helpful feature to explore and discover new music. The result of this question calls attention for a solution that considers differing perspectives of an algorithmic recommendation system.

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis was conducted to learn from competing products in a UX/UI context.

Direct competitors included:

- Reverb Nation - artist tools and discovery platform
- Bandcamp - streaming, artist support and discovery
- Vampr - Social networking site for musicians and others in the industry
- SoundCloud - streaming and audience interaction

Indirect competitors were:

- Spotify - streaming
- SoFar Sounds - intimate live events platform
- Instagram - social/promo

Name	URL	Type of "Competitor" (and why that type)	Tasks you can complete (What can you do with it)	Personalisation. (e.g. Login and save/favourite etc)	How useful is it? (How well does it help complete the activity and what other features help support the user)	How usable and easy to use is it? (Do the interactions have a good flow, can you navigate the feature easily, can you perform tasks quickly)
Reverb Nation	https://www.reverbnation.com	Discovery Social networking site for artists + audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Option to join as fan or artist Users can directly support & purchase music Promotional tools: artists can share music directly and gain real, unbiased feedback Discover section allows users to listen to new artists and explore collections of genres Crowd Picks section is a quick and easy way of discovering picks made by fans Users can also look at local live events (limited) Crowd review scores - unbiased constructive criticism for artists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profile accounts for different purposes/users Artist profiles include music, bio, "status", social media links, recommended music Comments on songs Follow artists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritises artists, so is most useful for them Opportunities: Members (paid tier) can gain opportunities such as mentorships, campaigns, access competitions and more Live event schedules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Navigation could be clearer by better distinction of features separated for audiences and for artists- particularly if the platform is prioritising the artists
Bandcamp	https://www.bandcamp.com/	Discovery platform for new artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows fans to directly support their favourite artists/purchase their music without using large streaming subscriptions Participate in live events/listening parties Home feed: includes new and following music artists Randomised searches - true "discovery" Bandcamp Daily: featured artist/albuns/etc. for that day Users can filter genres and other categories to find new music Listening Parties Fair recommendations + wishlists Artists can directly communicate with their followers to give music-related updates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Login-profile (As a fan, artist, or label) Artists can post music, gain revenue Users can create personal collections Follow Like Comment Artists can personalise their own pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to browse through many different categories (artist, album, track, genre, format, recommended) Artists can get real feedback on their music by supporters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easy to explore and forgiving if user makes errors However, for first-time users there is little explanation about how the website works (when users sign up, a short tutorial is offered, but it only explains the navigation of the menu, and there are other sections that have no explanation) - this may lead to more muddling through Users who already know how the website works will know what they want to use and may want to automatically go to their own feed rather than first be on the homepage Discover section is easy to navigate, however, slightly inefficient and could be better positioned than at the bottom of the homepage (for example as another menu category)
Vampr	https://www.vampr.com/	Discovery Social networking site for musicians (mostly beginner, pre-early career)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect: Like a tinder/linkedin for professionals in the music industry. Lets you swipe left and right on profiles to connect with new people If you don't want to "connect" you can just follow profiles, to keep up to date with their happenings Chat and collaborate with other emerging musicians Rooms for different roles, skills, favourite artists allow members to chat with each other about the relevant topic Watch: Like a tik tok page where users can view video posts of musicians performing (also for you, following and featured page) Learn: Includes courses with video lessons (paid features) Profile: Like a more portfolio/biography of yourself and what you may be primarily looking for (e.g. you might post that you are "looking for a producer/beatmaker/guitarist/etc.") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Login - profile (only as a creator) Profiles include skills, genres, links, favourite artists, bio and audition tracks Connect (like following) Like Comment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewing other profiles before you can "connect" with them gives you more information about what they do and if you would connect well Audition tracks provide a snippet of their music The room feature is very useful in that it allows people to bond over their favourite music-related topics However, this feature needs a second look as there are many chat rooms that end up being convoluted with self-promo or irrelevant messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easy to get the hang of, especially due to the use of labels for icons that may not be initially clear (self-evident -> self-explanatory) For users that are familiar with most social media apps, Vampr navigation is very intuitive and shares similar features - this can be completed efficiently
SoundCloud	https://www.soundcloud.com/	Discovery primarily a streaming platform but allows users to interact with the artists, message them, and discover emerging artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows listeners to comment and directly message artists Stream music and support artists Space for experimentation without copyright restrictions Huge reputation as a discovery platform, with a lot of new famous/successful/well-revered music artists being "discovered" (made popular) on there (e.g. Billie Eilish, Post Malone, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Login - profile Follow Like Comment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Artists can receive direct feedback with private messages between them and their listeners There is a lot for keen listeners to explore and discover new artists It is a more accessible streaming platform for uploading and sharing than spotify 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very intuitive, follows similar conventions to social media such as the bottom menu bar

Information needs supported	Ways of categorising	Nav systems and concepts used	UI Structure & Patterns (How strong and effective is the visual structure. Does it employ effective UI patterns)	UI Aesthetic (How effective is the styling of the UI, does the style resonate with the user group)	Other notes	Overall evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did not allow me to sign up as a fan? Needs more transparent info about paid/free tiers for artist memberships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Features - for music artists users Discover Crowd Picks Events Charts Opportunities Pricing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menu bar (header) Search Site map 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interface combines different user group functions (audience/artist) in a way that may cause confusion -> search bar becomes redundant as users may not know what to search for From a listener perspective there is less consistency with visual elements (e.g. no imagery/album cover next to songs - browsing becomes less interesting) Play music while you browse- great way to see what you are listening to at the bottom of the screen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall simple and easy to understand Style is simplistic in a way that feels basic or commercial - esp. in comparison to popular platforms used by same users such as Apple music/Spotify/Instagram Inconsistencies in UI elements (mix of flat design and skeuomorphic buttons as well as ambiguous clickable symbol icons) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A great site for emerging artists that provides a platform for a profile, resources and opportunities (and at different tier plans), streaming and artist financial support. However, from an audience POV, the site is less intuitive and friendly for those trying to discover new artists.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearer distinctions of main pages Focus on Discover section 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home feed (following and new) Live Events Bandcamp daily New and Notable Discover -> lacks direct communication? (Comments as only social interaction feature. Contact is an option, but difficult to find it is not a primary feature) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menu bar (header) Feed, profile, account Search Site map Mostly uses sections Individual artist pages use different customisable layouts and tabs for navigation within their profile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual hierarchy could be more effective, using distinctive headings While there is a lot of content, it is laid out in an understandable and digestible way Filtering system in Discover section has tiers of different lines of categories which makes it easy for users to see all their options and narrow down their search That being said, the section is a small section at the bottom of the home page and only shows 8 songs at a time, with pagination leading up to 200 pages -> time consuming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Text is slightly too small on some pages, and can sometimes be convoluted- although this casual feel and aesthetic may resonate with targeted user groups Personalisation of pages allows artist users to have creative freedom in building their brand and "look", however, also leads to risks of low contrast and other usability/accessibility issues Heading sections have interesting patterns and colours which makes for a bright, visually intriguing site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feature where fans must follow the artist's page to access their content/updates/posts means that they are more likely to be audiences with genuine interest in their lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Great platform for support of artists, big and small- easy to search for new music. Excellent recommendations for users
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect Feed Learn Rooms Profile Post Menu/settings/etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menu bar (bottom) Search for artists/skills/academy Watch for you/following/featured There are information icons that help explain functions and features that may seem ambiguous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent UI patterns include buttons and tags, clear textboxes and layout Filter by skills, location, genres, gender, etc Visual structure is strong due to effective use of headings, subheadings, etc. colour coding and tags (categorisation) Different sections (in menu bar) have distinct purposes and are self-evident or at least self-explanatory Users can easily recover from errors- but may be beneficial to have other ways of backing out/undoing, using swipe In the Watch section, there is a disruption in the user flow as videos automatically pause every time you swipe up to see the next video (unlike TikTok/Reels/Shorts where the video automatically plays) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Colourful palette and effective visual hierarchy allows for a seamless experience Could have better contrast with buttons and text (grey against white background) does not seem to be a "dark" mode version either 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ads between profiles as you flick through them are okay-ish, but the pop-up ads are very disruptive especially if you were about to click on a button and accidentally click on the ad instead. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall fantastic concept of connecting with other professionals- the intent is clear and it is easy to narrow down your search if you are on the hunt for a specific role. However, there are some issues with moderation in the chat rooms. There is no feature to connect with audiences- it is solely a networking app (which is fine for its purpose)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home Feed Search (like explore) Library Liked tracks, playlists, albums, following 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menu bar Library menu Search 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very strong structure Clearly defined sections and heading hierarchy Music player is creative and personalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple UI palette to contrast colourful imagery (album covers, playlists, artist profile pictures, etc.) Clean and consistent UI elements - e.g. stacked images, rounded corners, tags, icons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enables accessibility to smaller/emerging artists for users (no subscription) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall fantastic app with great opportunities for both artists and listeners who love music. A streaming platform that has the most interactive and social connection options.

Problem statements

To translate research into ideas, problem statements were created in order to eventually inform the conceptual elements for the final solution:

User	Need	Insight	Statement
Tom, guitarist in indie band	A platform to speak to an experienced musician who can advise him about booking venues	Emerging artists with little to no connections within the industry struggle to find ways or platforms that facilitate communication between themselves and seasoned professionals. Distrust within the business side of the industry also results in artists wanting to make direct contact with people in similar positions but more experience.	Tom needs a platform to speak to experienced musicians who can advise him on booking venues for his band, as it is difficult to navigate new experiences without the knowledge or right connections.
Gracie, young solo pop singer and songwriter	A system that allows her to quickly update her fast-growing fanbase about her music-related news	Although usually being highly proficient in technology, emerging artists are frustrated by the countless online platforms used for social interaction and promotion, and do not have the time to keep up with the competition and demands of creative content	Gracie needs a system that allows her to give quick music-related updates to her fans as content creation processes used for social platforms are highly time-consuming and not within the primary goals of her career

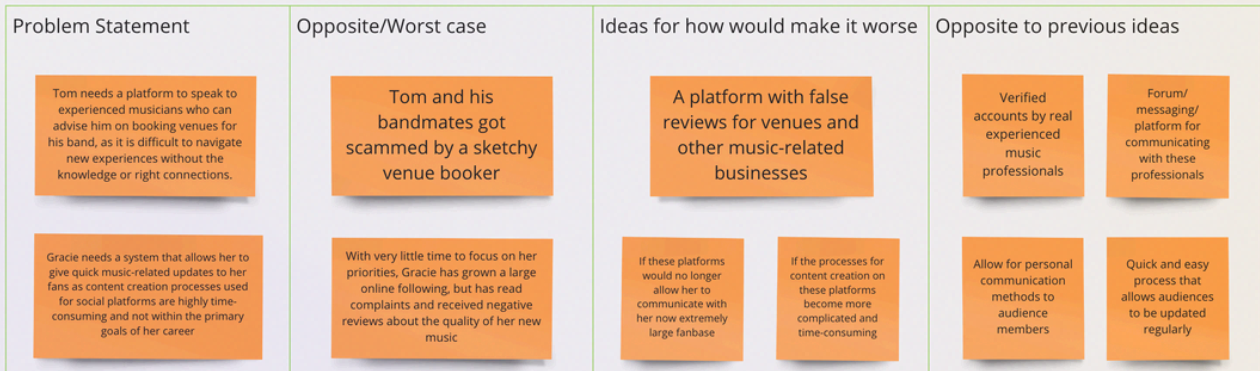
PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Problem	Why #1	Why #2	When	How often	How severe
Tom needs a platform to speak to experienced musicians who can advise him on booking venues for his band, as it is difficult to navigate new experiences without the knowledge or right connections.	Being new to the music scene, he is unsure about making decisions that could hinder his starting career or negatively affect the band	He does not want to lose money or backtrack from the hard work he and the band have already put into their music careers	He would like to perform to larger and newer audiences	Fairly often (every month) as one of the band's primary goals is to eventually go on tour by first gaining more live performance experiences	6/10 slightly severe as the band can still attempt to directly speak to businesses, without the knowledge or advice
Gracie needs a system that allows her to give quick music-related updates to her fans as content creation processes used for social platforms are highly time-consuming and not within the primary goals of her career	She ends up spending excessive time using numerous social platforms instead of focusing on her craft or properly connecting with her audience	She feels pressured by high competition made by the trending nature of these platforms	Every time she wants to promote a new change with her music	Often (at least every 2 weeks), as she would also like to be regularly active with her loyal audience	8/10 Severe due to her worries of falling out of competition

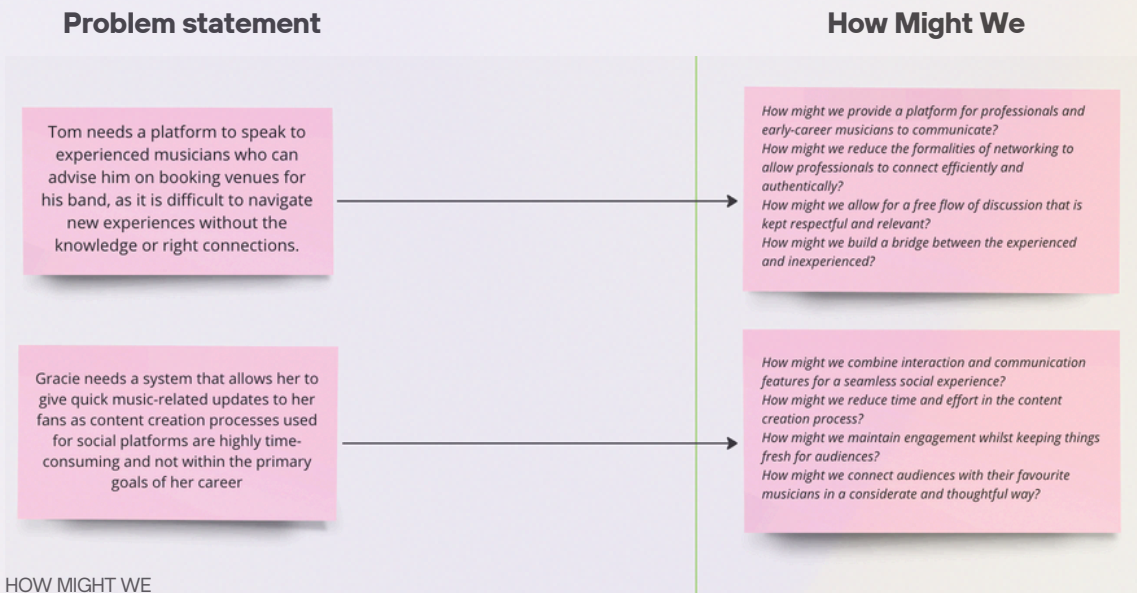
ASK WHY

Pains	Gains
Frustrated by need to keep up with numerous online platforms to promote and expand	Time to focus on other goals such as growing their skills in music
Fear of losing a deeper connection with their audience	Building authentic relationships to share with a community
Fear of making bad business decisions and causing problems for their fellow musicians	Being informed and taking the steps forward to advance their career, plus build connections with other professionals
Competition with other musicians fostering a hostile environment in the industry	A supportive community of music artists with a range of experiences
Fear of navigating industry processes alone	

PAIN GAIN MAP



PROBLEMS / ANTI-PROBLEMS



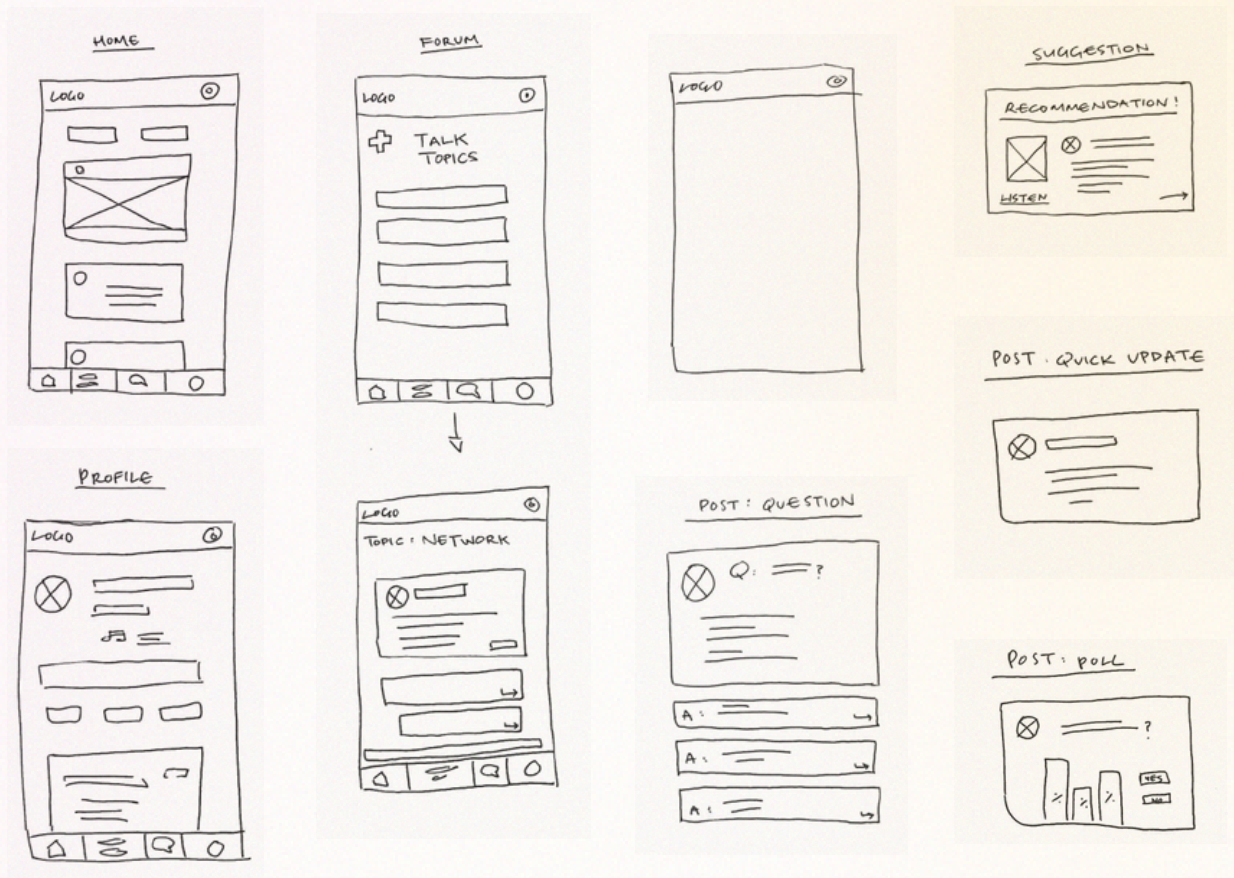
HOW MIGHT WE



USER STORIES

Prototyping solutions

Draft visualisations of the solution began with sketches of low fidelity wireframes, including major pages and featured functions. These were developed into mockups created in Figma. Interactions were then added to create the prototype.



Concept solution

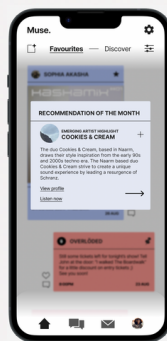
After mapping concept solutions and sketching wireframes informed by my research, the initial prototype was produced. The mobile app, Muse, would be made accessible through a quick sign up using an email address or account on existing music-related platforms. It is a platform primarily aimed towards emerging and early-career music artists to connect with fellow community members and assist in advancing their career goals.

Music enthusiasts who aren't necessarily musicians but are still in this community are also welcome to create an account and explore the emerging music scene and connect with them on a more personal level and in a music-oriented environment.

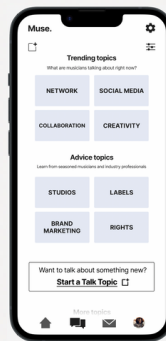
Concept features include a home social feed with separated viewing options, a moderated forum, direct messaging, music player and individual customised profiles.



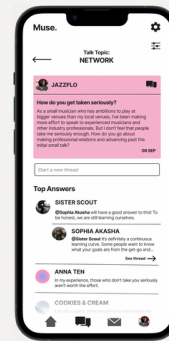
Log in / Sign up



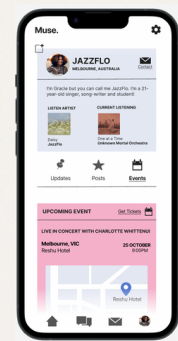
Recommended new music



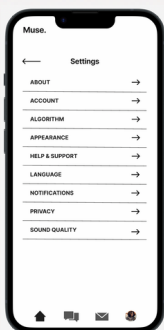
Talk Topics



Talk topic forum



Individual music artist profile



Settings



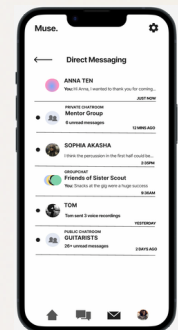
Create a post



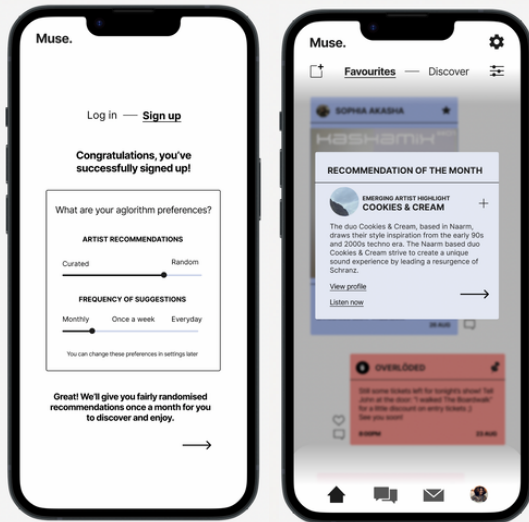
Home Feed: Discover



Home Feed: Favourites



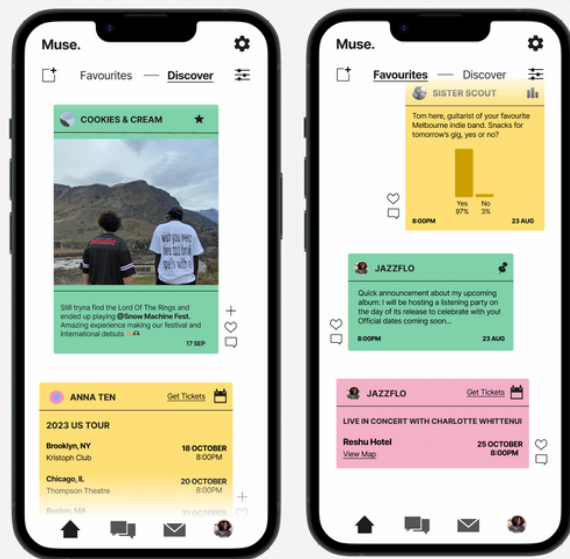
Direct messaging



In their homefeed, users have the ability to view favourited artists and content as well as new in the “discover” tab. This separation in the feed is also favourable for emerging music artists as new listener users will likely be more receptive to new recommendations having that choice. This feed can also be further filtered to the type of content they want to see- for example they may only want to see what events are coming up, or just quick updates from their favourite artists.

Feature focus: Homefeed

A big concern of users was that many felt that algorithms on social and other online platforms tended to ‘shove’ recommendations down their throat and did not feel genuine. With an ability to ‘personalise’ their algorithm and control how much of and what they want to be recommended, users can feel assured that their homefeed and content is to their preferences.



Interview participants as well as additional potential users of the mobile app were asked to complete a Tree test and a Design survey surrounding the prototype. The tree test would help test the effectiveness of the prototype’s organisational model, while the purpose of the survey was to ask open-ended questions to users of the mobile app in order to specifically gain feedback on the homefeed and algorithm feature. These responses would inform the next iteration to make further improvements.

Reflection

The general response in the survey was that the ‘Discover’ and ‘Favourites’ feature was helpful in separating content. It seemed that the users appreciated the organisational model of user-generated content as well as the algorithm preference sliders. There were a few notes on the interface and style of the app, such as rounding UI corners and better aligning content, which could definitely be considered and improved in the next stage of improving the prototype.

In the tree test, when users were asked, “Where would you go to discuss a topic concerning your music career?” 50% were successful at finding the Talk Topics section. This brought to attention a need for a better name or clearer identifier of the forum feature. Despite this, when users were asked, “Where would you go to discover new music artists and music-related content?”, 80% of users successfully navigated to the ‘Discover’ tab in the homefeed.

In order to further investigate and testing, it would be beneficial to explore which users (musicians or listeners) answered the test successfully. In the future, separate tests would be conducted, or they would be moderated to understand the individual user’s behaviour and mental models.