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Swimming Upstream? Independent Musicians and Music Platform Imaginaries

ABSTRACT This article investigates independent musicians' engagement with music streaming services, social media, and other algorithmic technologies in a music industry increasingly structured around digital media platforms. Based on nine interviews with experimental musicians from the UK, Portugal, and Sweden, the article introduces "music platform imaginary" as a term for analyzing how independent artists position their working practices and artistic values in relation to digital music and media platforms. It critically examines the assumption that the platform age stifles alternative modes of production by forcing independent artists to adapt to the sociotechnical logics of algorithmic systems. The findings show that these independent creators strategically engage with platforms including Bandcamp, Spotify, and Instagram in the distribution and promotion of their work. At the same time, artists frequently regard the technological and economic logics of platforms—and the literacies they draw on in navigating these logics—critically, and as conflicting with their professional values. Artists' experiences of change within a volatile digital media landscape further highlight this ambivalence. Nostalgic depictions of early twenty-first-century online music cultures and technologies are used to convey criticisms of the centralized corporate logics associated with the platform age. Theorizing artists' experiences of different platforms, the article discusses democratization, visibility, algorithms, and fatigue as four music platform imaginaries that underpin their navigation of the platform system. The ambivalence towards platformed music culture that frames these imaginaries highlights a need for further research on artistic practices and value systems that exist alongside, and at times fully disconnected from, the platform economy.

KEYWORDS platform imaginary, music streaming, independent musicians, platformization, social media

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how independent experimental musicians work with music streaming services, social media and other algorithmic systems as the "age of digital platforms" reaches maturity.¹ Amid persistent media hype around the disruptive effects of the new "platform society" on cultural production, dissemination and consumption, we explore how artists working on the "fringes" of the commercial music industry adapt to the

1. Tiziano Bonini and Paolo Magaudo, *Platformed!* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 5.

centralized and purportedly centralizing operational trajectories of these corporate structures.² In doing so, we question how growing demands for creators to vie for engagement in a dematerialized “attention economy” are perceived to impact the working practices and professional values of independent musicians.³ For this, we expand upon theorizations of sociotechnical imaginaries presented by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, Karin van Es and Tomas Poell, and Robert Prey and Marc Esteve Del Valle by mapping the *music platform imaginaries* that influence the practices of these independent creators, examining—in their own words—the emic logics employed to navigate the musical, social, and economic upheavals brought about by these technologies.⁴

We conceptualize algorithmic media platforms as sociotechnical systems that remediate existing discourses, practices, affects, and negotiations of power.⁵ Our study is situated within a growing field of research that seeks to understand the sociotechnical dimensions of algorithmic platforms—shifting from “what algorithms are to what they do,” and what insights they offer into the “values and cultural assumptions” informing the creation of these systems.⁶ In particular, we add to previous analyses that switch focus from the creators to the users of algorithmic platforms by investigating independent experimental musicians’ engagements with these platforms. We employ music platform imaginary as a two-part concept that theorizes, on the one hand, musicians’ structured and structuring experiences of and ideas about the logics underpinning the platform economy, and on the other, the effects of these imaginaries on their engagements with music and media platforms. We ultimately consider how musicians’ platform imaginaries relate to their wider musical practices and value systems that exist alongside, and at times fully disconnected from, the platform economy.

Our focus on independent experimental musicians allows us to explore the implications of platform engagement as they sit between the personal and professional demands of artists as “producers.”⁷ The independent sector is a recognized hub of innovation in the music industry, significantly contributing to the emergence of new talent and accounting for a growing share of new releases, currently representing over forty percent of the global market.⁸

2. José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4; Stephen Graham, *Sounds of the Underground* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 9; Steven Gamble, *Digital Flows* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 10.

3. David Hesmondhalgh, “Streaming’s Effects on Music Culture: Old Anxieties and New Simplifications,” *Cultural Sociology*, 2021, 14.

4. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Karin van Es and Thomas Poell, “Platform Imaginaries and Dutch Public Service Media,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (April 1, 2020); Robert Prey and Marc Esteve Del Valle, “The Algorithmic Network Imaginary: How Music Artists Understand and Experience Their Algorithmically Constructed Networks,” *The Information Society* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2024): 18–31.

5. Nick Seaver, “Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems,” *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 1–12.

6. Taina Bucher, *If . . . Then* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 42.

7. Axel Bruns, “Producers: Towards a Broader Framework for User-Led Content,” in *Proceedings of 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity and Cognition 2007*, 99–105.

8. Robert Prey, Marc Esteve Del Valle, and Leslie Zwerwer, “Platform Pop: Disentangling Spotify’s Intermediary Role in the Music Industry,” *Information, Communication & Society* 25, no. 1 (2022): 89; “Annual Report 2022–23” WIN (Worldwide Independent Network), August 22, 2023), <https://winformusic.org/mp-files/win-annual-report-2022-23.pdf/>.

Nevertheless, while music streaming platforms (MSPs) use the rhetoric of democratization to suggest increased profitability for independent artists, the dominance of major labels has remained relatively constant in recent years.⁹ Moreover, if MSPs and their algorithms work by (negatively) modeling “normative” listeners, it might be assumed that they likewise model normative artists.¹⁰ If this is the case, then empirically studying the behaviors and attitudes of fringe artists that actively—and selectively—sidestep these norms could shed some light on the epistemological blind spots of the algorithmic mediation of musico-social relations.

More concretely, we want to develop the claim that a “key concern of indie musicians in the platform age is that their distinctive sense of alterity might be rendered indistinct amidst a torrent of content from newly platform-enabled creators.”¹¹ To this end, we investigate the extent to which independent creators feel compelled to adopt particular working practices on streaming and other platforms, in essence coercing them to “swim upstream,” or whether alternative strategies for sustaining independence have emerged. Overall, our aims are to critically analyze independent musicians’ ideas on algorithmic music (and related media) platforms and the ways they shape negotiations of visibility, profitability, and new dependencies with contemporary platform infrastructures. This project is conceived in two parts, with this article articulating our artists’ uses of and imaginaries surrounding core music distribution and promotion platforms, and a separate publication that deals with the fiscal, moral, and conceptual value systems around autonomy in cultural production to follow.

THE PLATFORMIZATION OF MUSIC, INDEPENDENT MUSIC CREATION, AND PLATFORM IMAGINARIES

In the twenty-first century, the sociotechnical logics of music streaming platforms have informed new infrastructures of cultural production. Platformization has been used as a concept to theorize the technological, economic, and governmental effects of these shifts, where cultural commodities like music are positioned within multi-sided markets and continuously mediated by data on user behavior and preferences.¹² For MSPs like Spotify, corporate music curation has been discussed as a key element in the assertion of power in contingent relations with the music, advertising, and investment markets.¹³ MSPs thus increasingly perform the roles of “algotorial” gatekeepers via playlist selections co-constructed by humans and algorithms, taking over core intermediary roles previously held by radio stations and major labels, and shaping the listening habits and tastes of global music consumers.¹⁴

9. Thomas Hodgson, “Spotify and the Democratisation of Music,” *Popular Music* 40, no. 1 (February 2021): 2.

10. Eric Drott, “Why the Next Song Matters: Streaming, Recommendation, Scarcity,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 3 (2018): 325–57.

11. David Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones, and Andreas Rauh, “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 10.

12. David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275.

13. Robert Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization: Music Streaming Playlists and Curatorial Power,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (2020).

14. Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini, “First Week Is Editorial, Second Week Is Algorithmic”: Platform Gatekeepers and the Platformization of Music Curation, *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 2.

The platformization of the music industry has also had wide-ranging effects on music production, and it has been argued that musicians have become increasingly dependent on “the goals, features, and business models” of MSPs.¹⁵ Studies have mapped the ways some musicians attempt to increase exposure and profitability by “optimizing” their music for the logics of algorithmic platforms through aesthetic choices and the manipulation of metadata.¹⁶ Such practices are associated with mounting pressure on musicians to maintain relevance in an increasingly saturated market, where roughly 100,000 songs are uploaded daily to the dominant platform, Spotify.¹⁷ Under these conditions of abundance and impermanence, musicians—like other cultural creators—face a continuous “threat of invisibility.”¹⁸ Consequently, there is a growing impetus for artists to build relationships with fans using social media, where supposedly “intimate” forms of communication become intertwined with marketing, self-promotion and a neoliberal discourse of musicianship as individualized “enterprise.”¹⁹

Independent music creation in the platform economy

Against hopes for a profitable “long tail” of cultural creators in internet-based culture industries, and contrary to the utopian promises of music industry disintermediation proffered by platforms like Spotify, recent research concludes that the platform economy largely rearticulates the music industry power dynamics of center and periphery that were established in the twentieth century.²⁰ The reinforcement of this structure has been associated with close ties between dominant MSPs and major labels, which have owned (and since partially sold) shares in these companies—a factor that complicates discussions around fair compensation for artists, songwriters, and independent labels.²¹ However, some studies also challenge the notion of total complicity between MSPs and the majors, showing that the share of major label content on Spotify-owned playlists is considerably lower than on commercial radio and in record store retail space, and that Spotify’s promotional efforts highlight in-house playlist curation over those curated by the majors.²² The demonstrable contingency of these relations notwithstanding, the perception that MSPs like Spotify are primarily profitable for a small number of mainstream artists represented by an even smaller number of major labels has led independent musicians to embrace alternative digital music platforms like Bandcamp and Soundcloud, which are considered to

15. Jeremy Wade Morris, “Music Platforms and the Optimization of Culture,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 3 (2020): 2.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Tim Ingham, “Spotify Dreams of Artists Making a Living. It Probably Won’t Come True,” *Rolling Stone*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/spotify-million-artists-royalties-1038408/>.

18. Taina Bucher, “Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 7 (2012): 1164–80.

19. Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd* (New York: NYU Press, 2018); Ellis Jones, *DIY Music and the Politics of Social Media* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 107.

20. Hodgson, “Spotify and the Democratisation of Music”; Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail* (Hachette Books, 2008); Tamas Tofalvy and Júlia Koltai, “Splendid Isolation”: The Reproduction of Music Industry Inequalities in Spotify’s Recommendation System, *New Media & Society* 25, no. 7 (2023): 1582.

21. Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer, “Platform Pop,” 84; Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2019), 3, 46.

22. Prey, Esteve Del Valle, and Zwerwer, “Platform Pop,” 84.

be more artist-friendly by offering musicians greater autonomy in distribution and rights ownership.²³ Even Bandcamp, however, fails to “empower musicians collectively” and tends to “concentrate revenue” in the hands of bigger artists and labels.²⁴ So, while new streaming platforms are announced regularly—most recently the “collectively owned Bandcamp successor” Subvert in 2024—none has so far managed to present themselves as a viable challenger to hegemons like Spotify.²⁵

Musicians’ experiences and platform imaginaries

Despite growing academic attention to independent music in the context of platformization, few studies to date have centered independent experimental musicians’ practices and experiences. In a recent contribution to this field, Prey and Esteve Del Valle examine how musicians relate to the algorithmic artist networks they are assigned to by Spotify’s Fans Also Like feature.²⁶ Their study adds “algorithmic network imaginary” to a range of concepts, including “algorithmic imaginary” and “platform imaginary,” which have been introduced to analyze beliefs about and new representations of the sociotechnical logics of algorithmic platforms informing users’ engagement with these platforms.²⁷ In this article, we particularly draw on the concept of “platform imaginary” that seeks to capture how “social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences.”²⁸ Beyond the platform context, the term “sociotechnical imaginary” has been theorized by Jasanoff and Kim as a culturally particular, co-produced, intersubjective, durable, and performative understanding of the world (and one’s place in it) as reflected in the design and fulfillment of technological projects, with imaginaries capturing the “aspirational and normative dimensions of social order.”²⁹ Building on this work, we develop music platform imaginary as a focused concept to theorize independent musicians’ collective representations of the nature of musical work and the patterns of profitability and visibility shaped by the technological, economic, and corporate tendencies associated with music platformization, and how these beliefs inform musicians’ engagements with algorithmic music and media platforms.

DATA AND METHODS

Jasanoff and Kim recommend interpretive research methods that “probe the nature of structure-agency relationships through inquiries into meaning-making” for the study of

23. Hesmondhalgh, Jones, and Rauh, “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms.”

24. Federico Pilati, Antoine Houssard, and Pier Luigi Sacco, “Mirroring the Inequalities of Mainstream Music Platforms: Popularity, Revenue, and Monetization Strategies on Bandcamp,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 28 (May 2024): 12.

25. Subvert, 2024, <https://subvert.fm/success>.

26. Prey and Esteve Del Valle, “The Algorithmic Network Imaginary.”

27. Taina Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44; van Es and Poell, “Platform Imaginaries and Dutch Public Service Media.”

28. van Es and Poell, “Platform Imaginaries and Dutch Public Service Media,” 4.

29. Jasanoff and Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity*, 19, 5.

sociotechnical imaginaries.³⁰ To this end, we adopted a “content-driven” research design and used purposive sampling to select three artists each from Portugal, Sweden and the UK to interview.³¹ Each author recruited from their country of residence, drawing on language fluency and familiarity with the music scene. Specifically, we sought musicians who had significant releases, tours or advocacy positions within the last two years, have accounts on social media and MSPs, and who, besides being recording artists, also occupy at least one of the following roles in the music industry: (1) own an independent label (LO); (2) release music with an independent label (IL); (3) self-release music without label backing (SR). The focus on artists whose lives straddle multiple professional roles not only constitutes an authentic representation of the working realities of contemporary experimental musicians but also allows us to consider whether particular combinations of roles exert or relieve specific pressures on their platformed working lives. The final selection consists of seven male and four female participants, aged twenty-five to forty-five years old, spanning experimental practices adjacent to contemporary composition, rock, psych, ambient, and electronic dance music. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each artist’s roles and platform metrics, with pseudonyms reflecting artists’ countries of residence and primary music industry role used to protect confidentiality. We stress that we do not consider these metrics to be substantive representations of the artists’ reach, success or esteem, and include them solely to illustrate the distribution of followers across different platforms for artists occupying a similar musical niche.

A collectively designed interview protocol was used for all interviews, providing key touchpoints for an otherwise exploratory semi-structured format. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were conducted in Portuguese, Swedish, German and English via Zoom and telephone calls between April and June 2024. With the interlocutors’ permission, interviews were recorded, transcribed and (where necessary) translated into English for analysis. Inductive analysis of latent themes in each interview was performed manually, with authors identifying and assigning codes for their own interviews and then double-coding others’ transcripts.³² Finally, all themes were reconciled into a global framework that included general sentiments around algorithmic music and media platforms; use of and attitudes towards specific platforms; perceived changes in relationships with platforms and other industry infrastructures; reflections on professional autonomy; and the relationships between professional practice and wider value systems. In order to leave the character of their incorporated knowledge intact, and to counter the paucity of experimental artists’ voices in scholarship and wider discourse on the platform economy, we present our interlocutors’ views as much as possible in their own words. The findings below work through themes pertaining primarily to platform use, while questions of autonomy and value will be more fully explored in a follow-up publication.

30. Ibid., 24.

31. Greg Guest, Kathleen M. MacQueen, and Emily E. Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), 6.

32. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 85.

TABLE 1. Summary of interlocutor identifiers, musical roles and selected platform metrics.

Participant ID	Country	Gender	Role(s)	Spotify Monthly Listeners	Bandcamp Followers	Instagram Followers
UK-SR	UK	F	IL, SR	391	n/a	4,897
UK-IL	UK	M, M, F	IL	24,467	3,990	4,824
UK-LO	UK	M	LO, IL, SR	9,250	2758	1,823
SE-SR	SE	F	SR	4	1	632
SE-IL	SE	F	IL	3,476	n/a	1,163
SE-LO	SE	M	LO, IL	7	287	1,145
PT - LO	PT	M	LO	157	600	10,000
PT - IL	PT	M	IL, SR	28,502	n/a	8,024
PT - SR	PT	M	IL, SR	4,768	600	7,224

ANALYSIS

KEY PLATFORMS

Our participants use a diverse array of algorithmic music and media platforms for distributing and promoting their music. For them, Spotify, Bandcamp, and Instagram constitute key platforms, while others like TikTok and SoundCloud were mentioned less frequently. The artists use these platforms in different ways and for different reasons, based on divergent views regarding their affordances and the value systems associated with individual platforms. For example, several participants articulate criticisms of Spotify's corporate, technological, and economic logics, but perceive the platform as a (necessary) means to make their work more accessible. In contrast, Bandcamp is recognized for its user-friendly interface and quick financial returns, despite concerns related to its takeovers in recent years. Our respondents thus highlight complex negotiations of visibility, profitability, and professional values in navigating these platforms.

Bandcamp

Overwhelmingly, the artists in our study describe Bandcamp as a favored platform that grants them autonomy over release and distribution practices. SE-LO states:

Bandcamp is kind of where I upload everything really just because you have a lot of control over it, and [...] it's some kind of digital record collection-like thing you can set up, how many times someone gets to listen to something for free before they [...] need to buy it and lots of good features with download codes and so on [...] for PR purposes.

The usefulness of Bandcamp's features for artists is also noted by other interviewees, who highlight the possibility of flexible pricing (PT-SR), the ease of selling music and merchandise, the ability to re-upload music and access to listener analytics data (UK-SR). Given these characteristics, artists experience Bandcamp as a platform that offers them

financial rewards *and* creative experimentation. Our interlocutors describe the practice of releasing music on Bandcamp as playful, “fun” (SE-SR), and “charming” (UK-SR) as they experience the platform as a space removed from critical attention and mainstream media coverage.

The idea of Bandcamp as a separate space is also linked to notions of community several artists ascribe to the platform. For SE-SR, Bandcamp is experienced as a community of artists, as “everyone in my world of experimental music is there.” For others, Bandcamp’s features enable communion between artists and listeners as the platform facilitates real-time interaction, allowing listeners to ask questions and receive prompt responses (PT-LO, PT-SR) and give “direct support” to artists (PT-IL).

Nevertheless, artists’ positive experiences of Bandcamp are clouded by concerns about maintaining the platform’s operational model, considering the acquisition of the company by Epic Games in 2022 and then Songtradr in 2023. UK-IL presumes these decisions to be tied to the platform’s profit motive, as “they wouldn’t be doing that if they weren’t thinking of some way of turning into a cash cow.” They express weariness about these changes happening to a platform that “at a point, [. . .] felt like it was run in a way that was quite artist-focused” (UK-IL).

Spotify

In contrast to artists’ broadly favorable depictions of Bandcamp, they characterize Spotify as little more than a necessary means to increase audience accessibility in the music platform economy. As PT-LO explains,

Over time, we saw that people always asked why our music wasn’t available online. They looked for us on Spotify and couldn’t find us. So, we were forced to migrate to Spotify as well, since everyone uses it. But in terms of profitability, when it comes to digital platforms, Bandcamp is definitely the best and it’s where we do our premieres.

This artist points to the tension between the rhetoric of availability vis-à-vis the reality of profitability. Similar tensions arise from the pressure artists feel to release their music on Spotify in order to be included in playlists versus the actual results of being playlisted. As UK-SR asserts, inclusion in playlists may be of minimal significance: “[A]part from some publicity, it meant nothing to me. It didn’t result in anything.” Conversely, while being included in algorithmic playlists did have an observable impact on streaming numbers for UK-IL, they describe this experience as “a massive fluke.” Therefore, while the dominance of streaming playlists has shifted curatorial power from labels and artists to digital platforms, these artists’ experiences productively complicate the notion that being included in playlists is an effective promotional strategy and source of visibility.³³ While the impact of being playlisted is questionable, the opaque logics of (algorithmic) curation inhibit artists from using playlists strategically.

Alongside questions of profitability and impact, the majority of artists are also critical of Spotify’s corporate structure. By and large, our interviewees understand the

33. Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization.”

company's for-profit model to be incongruous with independent music creation. As SE-SR puts it:

Spotify [is] a company that wants to make money and so [...] you get extremely few royalties [...]. In the end, it's really about the fact that they don't work for [...] the independent musician or producer or composer. They don't work for them because we don't earn much from it.

The artist reflects the notion that Spotify's business model creates a "winner-takes-all market" that aligns with traditional media industries and is financially advantageous predominantly for musicians at the top of the charts.³⁴ UK-IL corroborate this view:

I know some people who won't put their music on Spotify for various reasons, and I guess I understand the feeling of unfairness a bit—you know, not getting paid for it. And as an aspiring professional musician who's not making money [...] when you're getting half a million listens, I'm like "I probably should be getting paid for this" because [...] the people who run that platform are.

This underscores the tension underpinning a financial system that favors a small number of highest-streamed artists versus the growing market share of independent musicians. According to Spotify's Loud & Clear report on the 2023 financial year, independent artists generated nearly US\$ 4.5 billion on the platform—a fourfold increase on 2017, and nearly half of the platform's total US revenue that year.³⁵ These vast sums, however, jar with the experiences of the musicians we interviewed, who feel pressure to use Spotify as a vehicle for increased visibility but are faced with an opaque, unequal and, at times, simply ineffective system. In this context, independent creators increasingly feel compelled to turn to platforms like Instagram as additional promotional tools.

Instagram

In addition to making their music available online, artists must also "sell" it by acting as managers for marketing purposes on social media platforms like Instagram. For example, PT-LO describes Instagram Stories as an effective promotional tool:

We post the music, put the name of the track, something unrelated to the music, and people start listening. Those who like it go and find it. They can share it too. So, in a way, it creates a small community.

With this approach, PT-LO harnesses Instagram's "positive network effects" by encouraging user engagement to attract increased exposure organically.³⁶ UK-IL, meanwhile, describes a different facet of community enabled by the sociotechnical affordances of Instagram, where "you're talking to each other directly, so people message [...]" and say

34. Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown*, 3.

35. "Loud and Clear," Spotify, 2024, <https://loudandclear.byspotify.com/>.

36. Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 43.

‘I like that song’ [...] or ‘can I book you for a gig.’” They describe Instagram as a “messaging platform,” which both leads to professional opportunities and allows for direct communication with fans. Alongside this, Instagram can also be crucial for connecting to other musicians. For SE-SR, Instagram represents “the most important social media,” which she uses for discovering artists and new releases as well as sharing her own music recommendations through the app’s Highlight feature.

Other artists express some weariness about the felt pressure of building and showcasing an artistic persona on platforms like Instagram. UK-IL reflect on their attempts to cultivate their sonic and visual aesthetics in the digital space:

We try to present ourselves like we are, but not over-present ourselves, which I think is the thing. Because then it’s not about how cool you are or aren’t, or anything [...] But aesthetics is important, you know [...] and it is all linked [...]. Instagram felt like a place we could execute that and now I’m not so sure anymore, and I don’t really know where, online, outside of that, is a place where we could create a kind of aesthetic world.

This highlights the challenges several artists articulate about navigating the boundaries of artistic identity and digital branding in the context of platformization, which we return to below. Furthermore, it underscores the extent to which what is professionally expected from musicians today extends far beyond music, with social media content creation requiring that they “do more work” that involves sophisticated “relational, communicative, self-presentational, entrepreneurial and technological skills.”³⁷

PLATFORM LITERACIES

The strong views and ideological aversions our interlocutors have regarding the platforms that they work with are also often undercut with shrewd pragmatism, as their positions on the fringes of the music industry encourage them to manage “independent platform dependency” by developing platform literacies.³⁸ To this end, they have come up with strategies for instrumentalizing platforms to fulfill their needs while also conforming to what they believe their algorithms require. This includes playing different platform functionalities against each other for promotion, adapting the tone of posts to different platforms, and translating literacies between media. Our conversations suggest that artists have internalized the view that developing platform literacies makes them “better-equipped to take part in and make sense of” the “business logics” of platformed music, while failure to do so would, conversely, leave them behind.³⁹ Indeed, UK-IL makes a direct link between platform literacy and the democratization of opportunities for success, while simultaneously hinting at the paradox at the heart of the idea of “everyone” becoming famous:

37. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*, 8.

38. Anja Nylund Hagen, “Datafication, Literacy, and Democratization in the Music Industry,” *Popular Music and Society* 45, no. 2 (2022): 184–201.

39. *Ibid.*, 196.

It's almost like you've got a little weapon that's in the arsenal of the fat cats as an indie person. That's the whole online culture, isn't it—everyone feels like they could get famous if they had the right idea and delivered the content in the right way.

For PT-LO, the need to work across multiple platforms arises out of frustration with Spotify's lack of interactive features like feeds and messaging:

I feel like you can “post” on Spotify but [it] just stays there. That is, there's no way it can appear in a feed [and] you don't have [. . .] something where you can suddenly share or repost. [. . .] It just stays there, and we have to use third-party social networks to create some rotation.

PT-IL likewise emphasizes the need for swift communication and forward planning with MSPs, “otherwise the audience would have a delay in receiving your message [and] this could mess with your algorithms.” UK-LO argues that Bandcamp has a significant advantage over Spotify in terms of its promotional potential due to its mailing list function, which he calls “the Holy Grail [for] reaching people.” At the same time, he is cautious about not abusing the trust that it represents between him and his subscribers by posting too often:

I limit it to about once a month. But obviously, if I'm not releasing anything, or if I'm not touring [. . .] then I'll just leave it [. . .] because I don't want to be that guy in the inbox all the time. (UK-LO).

Furthermore, UK-LO argues that the tone of a post has to be tailored to individual platforms:

If the last 10–15 years have taught me anything it's basically that you have to have a different voice for each platform [. . .] you can't just post the same thing on everything [. . .] because the demographics are a little different for each one. [. . .] For example, Bluesky would be “Oh, I'm enjoying these records at the moment, and here's a link.” On Instagram, I've been doing the same sort of thing but with a picture of the artwork and maybe a bit of the song and stuff, and a link to their Instagram.

Instagram, in particular, is perceived as having unwritten rules that have to be followed to maximize visibility. UK-IL describes a content formatting strategy that latterly has become almost an obligation:

People are like “if you want to get more engagement, then you have to have the more images thing,” but the first one has to be a picture of your face and then the second one should be a picture of whatever the hell you want to talk about. If you're promoting a gig, then it's like: picture of your face, swipe, picture of the gig poster. It's insane.

Blind submission to these rules, however, can also attract criticism for attempting to “game” the algorithm, as UK-LO puts it. He explains that:

I see lots of people doing that whole picture of your face thing and little videos of them saying, like, “Hey guys, I've got a talk coming up”, and it's like, “Come on, man—I know who you are and you make weird ambient music. You don't need to do this.” (UK-LO).

Despite articulating the importance of adopting different voices to suit platform affordances and demographics, UK-LO believes those voices have to be congruent with an artist's broader persona. If they are not, artists could be seen to be pursuing an algorithmic advantage through dishonest means. The invocation of genre here also suggests that certain online forms of address are considered inappropriate to the subcultural norms of "weird" musics and could leave them open to the increasingly nebulous, though still potent, charge of "selling out."⁴⁰

Our interviewees' reservations about the commercial and ethical values of chasing the favor of algorithmic logics are counterbalanced by the sense that a base level of outreach on social media is necessary to sustain their work. Despite saying that social media does not feel "like a tool" for him as a label owner and musician, SE-LO later adjusts his position, reasoning that "no one knows [about new releases or gigs] if you don't upload a post or a story about something happening, so purely marketing-wise I use Instagram and Facebook". Relatedly, having left Twitter/X and pulled some songs from Spotify after the introduction of their Discover Mode feature, UK-LO describes feeling sanguine about cutting his losses, while also needing to compensate for them with increased activity elsewhere:

It doesn't matter that much. I guess I'm in a pretty good position where I can sort of do what I want. [. . .] I'm hoping people will follow me from place to place. So I just put loads more effort into my Bandcamp mailing list, and my Instagram [. . .], and Bluesky and things like that.

Trading off old platforms, however, also carries a risk that the level of literacy attained previously will not translate in a new setting. As an avid YouTube user and creator of audio-visual material alongside her music releases, UK-SR is tentative about the best ways to host these works:

The relationship between Bandcamp and YouTube is pretty dislocated [. . .]. Bandcamp are trying to start doing videos now so it would be interesting to see how that takes off. [. . .] I think you can already do it maybe, but everyone's too scared to be the first one to do it, so I'm going to wait till somebody else does it as well.

Her statement reflects a broader sense that, irrespective of how articulate our interviewees are about the platforms they work with, the perpetual change—described by Wendy Chun as 'updating to remain the same'—and ostensible hiddenness of the operational logics of these technologies can lead to ambivalence as to how they can be usefully incorporated.⁴¹ The same inscrutability, however, also contributes to their allure, fueling the desire to find the secret weapons to success described by UK-IL.

CHANGE

Narratives of change featured prominently in our conversations, both on the parts of platforms and the artists as individuals. At times, these recollections became explicitly

40. Bethany Klein, Leslie M. Meier, and Devon Powers, "Selling Out: Musicians, Autonomy, and Compromise in the Digital Age," *Popular Music and Society* 40, no. 2 (2017): 223.

41. Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

nostalgic, lamenting past golden eras for sites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter/X with palpable affection. Given that nostalgic sentiment towards defunct media and consumer goods has been recognized as a peculiarly pervasive late capitalist phenomenon, this was not altogether surprising, although nostalgia for “live” web-based practices is currently less well understood.⁴² Notably, slippages between producer (artist) and consumer (fan) mentalities were apparent in these discussions, reflecting the fact that all interviewees had come of age in tandem with the rise of social media and user-generated Web 2.0 culture more broadly. These transitions were not always frictionless and fed into the reservations expressed about what were understood to be inevitable and imminent new overhauls in music’s online mediation.

Many of our interlocutors describe Facebook as a platform that is “in decline” (PT-LO), having been overtaken by Instagram, but whose initial affordances are expressed in largely positive terms. UK-SR admits that:

I do miss the old groups Facebook had—and still does to be fair—even for things around music gear [. . .], swapping advice and tips, and then the fact that you could post an event [. . .]. It used to be that if you ticked “going” or “interested”, people were like, “Oh my god, this many people are interested! It’s going to be big!” and now you know that it doesn’t mean much at all [. . .]. It was sort of fun because it’s a fan club, kind of like, “Oh, I saw that you’re going to see them, let’s go together,” and that doesn’t happen on Instagram.

SE-IL adopts a self-deprecating tone when reminiscing about Facebook, describing herself as a “Boomer” for still using it. Nevertheless, referencing the conversational format of earlier blog cultures, she reasons that Facebook represents “something a little more innocent” because its features are “based more on relationships,” and that using it feels “a bit ‘old media,’ which is nice” (SE-IL). A similar emphasis on relationships and discursivity is evident in discussions of Twitter, specifically before its rebranding as X, with SE-SR stating, “In the past, I used Twitter a lot to follow people, [. . .] people had conversations and chats.” UK-LO agrees, though rather than presenting the platform as in decline, he suggests it has suffered a more definitive fall from grace: “It was an absolute lifeline to [. . .] have that playing field where you can reach anybody, and it was part of everyday life. Now obviously, [. . .] it’s an absolute wasteland.”

There is a sense that currently dominant platforms create fewer opportunities for spontaneous expression than older, forum-based online spaces. For SE-IL, “the digital is not the problem. It’s the platforms and how they’re designed. [. . .] I miss forums [. . .] on the early internet. It was much more the type of digital context you could move in.” Instagram is invoked as a counter-example, because it feels “so present [. . .]. Everything matters [and] should be thought through” (SE-IL). This perception of a lack of freedom appears to be linked to the much-vaunted promise that the web would democratize knowledge

42. Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Emily van der Nagel, “Sunset and Memories: How We Bury and Mourn Dead Platforms,” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2019; Grafton Tanner, *The Circle of the Snake* (Winchester: O Books, 2020).

production and access to information. As an artist that began his career in the heyday of a disintermediated blogging culture, UK-LO observes :

Everything's very regimented now, weirdly enough, and I was always told the internet was going to blow this whole thing wide open. [...] The democratization of the music industry was a big thing when I was making stuff to begin with, but now I feel that's pretty much gone.

For UK-IL, however, while equally underscored by a broader narrative of civic and political decline, this reversal of democratization is framed in more personal terms as negatively impacting the discovery of alternative forms of expression:

I really miss the early YouTube days when [...] basically it wasn't about your taste so much and you could go on these holes and [...] end up watching videos with like three views—really deep YouTube. [...] Now, it's like you can't find that bit of it—it's locked out.

Furthermore, they interpret the restrictions on the freedom to roam to be an effect of the centralization of power by Big Tech corporations:

I remember back in the day, the promotional tools for stuff like *Donnie Darko* when that came out, had this website [...]. It had a really early feeling [...] like a portal to some kind of parallel universe [...]. But nowhere on the internet feels like that to me anymore. [...] The vibe has become more centralized—it's ruled by a load of master Silicon Valley elites rather than this big, decentralized network. (UK-IL).

This structural critique of shadowy elites that amass resources for political gain becomes resolutely individual in the case of Twitter/X. SE-IL explains her reason for abandoning the platform by saying, “I don't have the energy [...] it's politically infected [...]. And Elon Musk—blah, blah, blah.” The fatigue that she describes manifests in how she speaks about the platform, cutting herself off before verbalizing Musk's (presumably) deleterious influence but relying on the sentiment being recognized by the interviewer. The invocation of the hackneyed trope of Silicon Valley elites by UK-IL has a similar air of ennui, suggesting that the interlocutors are performing precisely the types of opinion sound-bites that are a result of the centripetal communication structures they are trying to critique.

The centralization of the ownership of online spaces also brings with it fears of corporate greed and speculative capitalism. SE-SR rails against the emerging trend of Blockchain-enabled musical share ownership and how it has been pre-figured by the streaming model:

There are those [...] sites [...] that have popped up in recent years where you can invest in shares of a song [and] in that way pay someone, and I've found that extremely disgusting. [...] This [...] has really got me to boil because this speculative [...] way to somehow make money or promote music, where only what is expected to generate money or be successful gets more money . . . In this way there is an accumulation of capital for those who actually already have it from the beginning, either through cultural capital or by having a record label behind them, or simply because they make popular music. There will be an intensification of what Spotify is already doing.

She relates this development to the increasing prevalence of royalty-free soundtracking services like Epidemic Sound:

They have many such ghost writers who have different names and they release a lot of stuff so that money [...] is basically channeled to Spotify [...]. People sell their rights for little money then it just goes there, and the rest to Epidemic Sound, so that it becomes [...] a kind of “contentification” [...] where it’s more about this pastime than interaction. (SE-SR).

The fear of what SE-SR describes as contentification is echoed from a platform user perspective by UK-IL when they speak about TikTok:

There’s a thing on TikTok called sludge videos, which are basically four videos playing at once, in one screen [...]. It’s absolute sensory overload [...]. The most unsettling one is when you can tell that the text is AI-generated, the voice is AI-generated, and then someone’s just thrown together a slideshow of images and it’s just like, “Wait, I just accidentally listened to a few seconds of this thing that’s just not even real—it’s just fucking pure abstract content.”

For them, Tik Tok represents “the most distilled endorphin-rushing bit of all the other platforms” which, despite finding “fascinating in a dark way,” they rule out using for promotion or discovery because of what they see as its toxic, addictive and psychologically damaging qualities (UK-IL). SE-SR likewise does not see TikTok as offering anything advantageous to her as an artist because of how it changes her medium:

I don’t feel that it’s anything relevant. I mean, if you think simply with Spotify, “OK, three-minute songs are good,” then “OK, TikTok [...] it sounds good for ten seconds,” like, it’s a completely different way of listening to music [...]. It’s not about [...] techno-conservatism, it’s about a different way that music is made in some way.

Her criticisms reflect familiar anxieties about waning attention spans in the social media age and fears that artistic forms would become compromised as they try to optimize for platform affordances.⁴³ This is a source of contention for UK-IL as well, who again links online content to the ingestion of something harmful, and intimates that the current state of things constitutes a breaking point in their relationship with certain platforms:

Knowing that [...] people generally imbibe [our Instagram videos] as a split second among split seconds of loads of other stuff—which is mainly garbage [...] that’s algorithmically forced on people—I don’t even want to participate in that anymore, personally, on a kind of purist level [...] and I think that it’s kind of eating itself, as maybe a lot of online platforms do, and then a new one will probably come, as it often does.

This exasperated statement sums up many of the themes of change expressed throughout our interviews. While there is a distinct sense that “the internet’s ‘Age of Innocence’ is over,” diagnoses of what went wrong suggest that contemporary social media platforms

43. Hesmondhalgh, “Streaming’s Effects on Music Culture.”

are simultaneously too toxic and too gentrified.⁴⁴ At the same time, artists recognize that they have agency over the platforms that they work with, and that no single technological innovation can force them to abandon their fundamental personal and artistic values. The overall picture presented suggests that artists see the tumultuous life cycles of individual platforms—which are thought to burn bright at first before being cannibalized by finance—to be evened out by a more general ebb and flow of innovations, creating a media condition that is experienced as an ever-changing same. Moreover, the nostalgia evoked by older platforms is not so potent that it prompts calls for their recovery, with SE-IL summarizing the resignation of their position: “I guess it’s just old media versus the new.”

MUSIC PLATFORM IMAGINARIES

Artists’ discussions of change highlight how their deep literacies and engagements with a changing platform economy are juxtaposed with criticisms of the financial system of streaming, companies’ corporate structures, and the imagined logics of algorithmic technologies. In the final part of our analysis, we present music platform imaginary as an umbrella term to bring together the beliefs underpinning the artists’ engagements with a changing platform ecosystem discussed above. We focus on (1) accessibility as democratization, (2) visibility, (3) algorithms, and (4) fatigue as four key imaginaries that structure and are structured by artists’ negotiations of professional practices and values in the context of platformization.

Accessibility as democratization

The notion of increased accessibility of music associated with MSPs is a core touchstone in several interviews. As discussed above, the perceived accessibility of music on Spotify leads musicians to release their music on Spotify, despite their critical views on the company’s business model, revenue system, and algorithmic logics. Some musicians link the notion of accessibility to the idea that music streaming has led to a democratization of the music industry by sidestepping gatekeepers and making “all” music directly accessible to “all” listeners.⁴⁵ PT-IL echoes this trope in his description of the potential of reaching listeners through platforms like Bandcamp:

[Bandcamp] is a platform [. . .] for everyone. [. . .] On a label that perhaps monetarily yields little, but maybe makes five hundred records and that person, maybe, is there in China and sees this release and says, “I want to buy this record.”

This musician articulates the trope of “cultural democracy” in music streaming, whereby it is possible for music created by an unknown artist and released on a local independent label to reach individual listeners directly, globally, and at scale.⁴⁶ Other musicians complicate

44. Udi Ben-Porat, Anat Bremner-Barr, and Hanoah Levy, “Computer and Network Performance: Graduating from the ‘Age of Innocence,’” *Computer Networks* 66 (2014): 69; Kate M. Miltner and Ysabel Gerrard, “‘Tom Had Us All Doing Front-End Web Development’: A Nostalgic (Re)Imagining of Myspace,” *Internet Histories*, 2022, 61.

45. Raphaël Nowak and Benjamin A. Morgan, “New Model, Same Old Stories?: Reproducing Narratives of Democratization in Music Streaming Debates,” in *Music and Democracy: Participatory Approaches*, ed. Marko Köbl and Fritz Trümpi (Vienna: mdwPress, 2022), 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839456576-003>.

46. Ibid., 65.

the equation of the *potential* accessibility of music with a democratization of the music industry through streaming. In their view, the relative ease of releasing music in the streaming economy has entailed an abundance of music that may ultimately stifle accessibility. UK-IL reason that:

It is also [...] really easy to just be like “yeah, cool, I’m going to release an album, chuck it on Bandcamp, do a post about it to a couple people” and then it’s just in the void [...]. I mean that is the void at the end of the day, that’s sort of unavoidable.

For them, music streaming does not signify democratized, globalized accessibility, but an impermanent and “saturated space,” in which new releases can quickly disappear and remain unheard.⁴⁷ Artists’ divergent views also rest on the distinction between a democratization of listening and of music production, echoing their generally more positive views of music streaming as listeners versus musicians. SE-LO also points to the ambivalence of accessibility, which he describes as the simultaneous upside and downside of music streaming. While accessibility allows him to follow the work of friends and colleagues in other locations, he believes it is harder for “good music” to cut through the noise of growing numbers of releases. The accessibility of music, therefore, is understood by our interlocutors to be closely tied with visibility on digital music and media platforms.

Visibility

As we have shown, independent musicians not only release music on platforms like Spotify, Bandcamp, and Soundcloud, but also routinely use social media to promote their work. Our respondents often describe self-promotion as an uncomfortable necessity, where being “visible” is perceived as a requirement for being heard. SE-IL describes the qualms she experiences about promoting her recent album release on an independent label:

I should have [promoted the album online more but] I hate [doing] it . . . I think it’s terrible, so I’m incredibly bad at it too [...] I really feel mentally bad about it, [laughs]. Now in retrospect, I feel that I should have done it more, because it’s like [...] you may have been working on an album, it has taken, like, at least a year . . . You have put in a lot of time and energy and emotions and so on. And then when it’s released, it’s like, what is it, forty thousand songs that are released on Spotify a day, or it’s something completely crazy [...] But [...] you still want it to reach out *a little* [laughs].

The quote vividly depicts this artist’s mental struggles with self-promotion. It also highlights many artists’ convictions that visibility through self-promotion is a necessary part of their work as an abundance of daily releases heightens the “threat of invisibility” in a saturated market. Thus, while music streaming has increased potential accessibility for independent musicians and small record labels, “generating sufficient interest in a song or artist brand [...] still requires investment and expertise.”⁴⁸ For independent experimental artists, whose music is frequently self-released or released on independent labels with small

47. Nowak and Morgan, 72.

48. Nowak and Morgan, 72.

budgets and limited distribution deals, the investment and expertise to promote their music is often the artists' own.

While artists feel required to self-promote, these practices are frequently depicted as an external pressure exerted by the industry, and as detrimental to artists' subcultural and aesthetic values. UK-IL argue that many artists' use of social media posts "is as much about just the presence of it than the content itself," and it thereby becomes "effectively advertising, the way a lot of people use it, or at least the way labels want you to use it." Several artists explicitly position themselves against these pressures and ascribe subcultural value to creating a more enigmatic online presence. For SE-LO, "In a way it becomes an aesthetic thing too, that you can't bear [...] all these fucking pre-saves." Here, this musician positions the pressure of visibility felt by artists against his experience as a listener, where "too much" promotion is considered aesthetically off-putting: "It makes me personally not want to listen when I've been reading about this record for two months" (SE-LO). Furthermore, while several artists associate self-promotion and the requirement of visibility with the mechanisms and values of the music industry, the felt pressure to be visible is also repeatedly linked to ideas about the sociotechnical logics of algorithmic systems.

Algorithms

While musicians enact profound literacies in navigating music and social media platforms, their ideas about these technologies' algorithmic logics toggle between wonder and criticism. At times, musicians articulate off-hand criticisms of algorithms without offering any detail or further elaboration. For SE-SR, the felt sense that "[Instagram] has become more and more algorithm [led]" marks a negative change, and she contrasts Bandcamp favorably to Spotify since she perceives the former "not as algorithmic," given Bandcamp's editorial content and sense of community with other listeners and musicians. Such criticisms of algorithms tie in with artists' nostalgic experiences of change discussed above.

Elsewhere, critical positions are paired with attempts to understand the logics of algorithmic systems. Speaking about visibility, UK-IL articulate the idea that more frequent social media posting enhances the rate at which posts are recommended, as "to get in the algorithm you have to participate constantly as well." Not participating is understood as detrimental to recommendations: "You knock yourself out by not being involved as much as possible" (UK-IL). PT-IL similarly associates his tight release schedule to favorable recommendation rates, as he suggests that his previous annual release of twelve to fourteen tracks may have shaped "[his] algorithm." These artists' algorithmic imaginaries reflect the quantification of system interactions as a core metric in attention-based technologies, as every interaction yields user data that enables the optimization of recommender systems and becomes a commodity exchanged for advertising revenue.⁴⁹ Yet while some artists attempt to understand the logics of algorithms, they also often perceive them as elusive and constantly evolving: "It's a fucking arms race almost between people using it and the algorithm

49. Nick Seaver, "Seeing like an Infrastructure: Avidity and Difference in Algorithmic Recommendation," *Cultural Studies (London, England)* 35, no. 4–5 (2021): 773.

constantly changing,” as UK-IL put it. This depiction captures the “algorithmic precarity” that digital content creators experience in their attempts to optimize their media practices in relation to abstruse algorithmic logics of digital media platforms.⁵⁰

For most musicians, despite their otherwise technically knowledgeable remarks on other aspects of platform culture, the algorithmic logics of music streaming remain elusive. UK-IL describes their experiences of being playlisted as songs getting “magically [. . .] picked by some weird ghost [. . .] in the algorithm.” Such characterizations reflect the naturalization of algorithmic technology as “quotidian technical magic,” which remains opaque but becomes fundamentally accepted as it entrenches in many parts of contemporary life.⁵¹ Other musicians depict the opacity of algorithmic systems in more critical terms. For SE-IL, the streaming numbers of her songs “[don’t] say anything, because [. . .] it’s just that [the most played] song has ended up in an algorithm or has kind of been in a playlist that everyone listened to.” The quote highlights a conscious positioning against algorithmic systems that characterizes several of our interviews, suggesting that acceptance and embedding of these technologies in everyday life does not equate to unconditional trust. Initial research on musicians’ algorithmic imaginaries found that artists’ awareness of algorithmic sorting and grouping sometimes influences musicians’ self-perceptions in relationship to an algorithmized network of artists.⁵² In contrast, our participants depict the algorithmic logics of streaming technologies as elusive and largely incongruous with their aesthetic interests and values. In other words, the independent musicians in our study do not articulate attempts to alter their practices to appease these “ghosts.”

Fatigue

Alongside their astute criticisms of the technological and economic aspects of music platformization, our interlocutors also articulate a sense of fatigue about being required to (critically) engage with the platform economy as individual musicians, an economy they describe as structurally flawed. As SE-IL puts it:

You become a bit tired of your time. It’s almost like I don’t have the energy to have a strong opinion about, like . . . all the distortions in these power imbalances that exist in this world [. . .], like streaming platforms and social media and so on [. . .]. You get kind of exhausted from even thinking about a system that’s so . . . crass sometimes.

Our artists’ simultaneous engagements and disengagements with the streaming economy mark a position of “creative ambivalence” that functions as a strategy for independent musicians to negotiate a system that is “fundamentally opaque yet increasingly hegemonic.”⁵³ More broadly, this fatigue can be understood as a symptom of “precorporation,” resulting from the “pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations

50. Brooke Erin Duffy, “Algorithmic Precarity in Cultural Work,” *Communication and the Public* 5, no. 3–4 (2020): 103–7.

51. Ed Finn, *What Algorithms Want* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2017), 16.

52. Prey and Esteve Del Valle, “The Algorithmic Network Imaginary.”

53. Hodgson, “Spotify and the Democratisation of Music,” 13.

and hopes by capitalist culture.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, articulations of distance and fatigue with the platform system are also informed by other musical practices and infrastructures that are central to our participants’ existence as experimental independent musicians. Physical releases, live venues, touring, musical associations, local communities, and forum-based digital networks are key aspects of our interlocutors’ musical practices that cannot be analyzed in depth within the remit of this article but are crucially important to these musicians’ negotiations of dependency and autonomy in the music industry.

CONCLUSION

The findings of our study complicate the notion of “swimming upstream,” that is, the idea that independent musicians are forced to exist within and adapt to a platform economy that is fundamentally detrimental to their practices and values. Instead, we find that our interlocutors use and experience algorithmic music and media platforms in multifaceted, deeply knowledgeable and often contradictory ways. Our analysis highlights the complex interplay between technology and artistic practice, illustrating diverse strategies used by independent artists to navigate platforms like Spotify, Bandcamp, and Instagram. Each of them plays a distinct role in distribution, sales and marketing, while musicians continuously adapt to overcome perpetual market fluctuations to optimize both resources and visibility. Simultaneously, artists regard the technological and economic logics of platforms—and the literacies they enact in parsing these logics—critically and reflexively, often depicting them as conflicting with their values. Artists’ experiences of change within a volatile digital media landscape further highlight this ambivalence. Here, articulations of nostalgia for earlier online music cultures enable criticisms of the corporate and technological logics associated with the platform age. The consistency of the portrayals of Bandcamp as the “good cop” versus Spotify’s “bad cop” shows that these platforms have distinct personalities and emotional attributes for artists. Under further scrutiny, however, grievances and justifications emerge for both, suggesting that no platform attachment is unconditional.

Expanding on these analyses, we ultimately discussed democratization, visibility, algorithms, and fatigue as four motivating themes that characterize these artists’ music platform imaginaries. Through these, we have shown that artists’ understandings of and engagements with digital music and media platforms coalesce critical yet pragmatic stances on the logics of accessibility and visibility, algorithmic recommendation, and the platform economy at large. The musicians’ sense of resignation about the inscrutability of the ghosts they encounter in algorithmic systems arguably encapsulates their stances on the platform economy at large, whereby their patchy and provisory (dis)engagements with MSPs and social media grant them only a partial, and perhaps itself spectral, presence in the platformed music industry. Importantly, while these musicians participate in the platform economy, they are simultaneously able to assume positions of detached criticism because their musical practices also exist elsewhere: they frequently tour and play shows, press vinyl and record tapes, are chairs and members of music associations, and participate in local and

54. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Ropley: O Books, 2009), 9.

international networked communities of fringe, experimental music. Focusing on these artists' music platform imaginaries thus only paints a partial picture of independent musicians' working lives in the context of platformization, showing that the "possible worlds" they represent do not make up the fullness of the sociotechnical order these musicians seek.⁵⁵ Further research is needed to situate musicians' platform practices, literacies, and imaginaries alongside their engagements with local, networked, and often offline music communities and infrastructures. We contribute to this incipient work in a companion article that theorizes artists' negotiations of autonomy, dependencies, and value systems as they intersect with—and often move beyond—the platform economy. ■

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55. Jasanoff and Kim, 24.

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