

**Future of Music Streaming: Gen Z Musicians'  
Vision For Alternative Platform Models**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / DEDICATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the precarious conditions faced by independent producers in the contemporary music streaming ecosystem. Despite the convenience and wide reach of music streaming platforms, musicians face critical challenges related to creative autonomy, fair compensation, and control over their own work. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ten independent Gen Z musicians based in the United States, this paper explores the constraints of the current streaming model, and the possibilities of alternative models grounded in fairer revenue models, robust public policy, and community-driven platform design. Emphasizing the crucial perspective of digital natives in shaping future imaginaries, this research proposes a multi-stakeholder collaboration – including government leaders, researchers, consumers, and artists – to challenge the current exploitative streaming ecosystem and co-create sustainable cultural ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Alternative Platform Models, Cultural Production, Music Distribution, Platform Cooperativism, Digital Commons, Collective Platforms

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Understanding the Cultural Industries

As David Hesmondhalgh explains in his influential work *The Cultural Industries*, the creation and circulation of culture has an immense influence on our collective “understanding and knowledge of the world” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 4). He also elaborates on the role of individual creators (e.g. musicians, filmmakers, artists) within the broader cultural production and distribution process. While artistic production, is often celebrated for its autonomy and creativity, he highlights how the cultural labor market is structured to influence the creators’ autonomy (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Over time, large corporations in the cultural labor market heavily invested in both vertical and horizontal integrations, bringing about the intentional pluralization of *cultural industries*.

Music has been proven to be strongly connected to fundamental aspects of being human – reflecting our cognitive capabilities and individual expressions (Schulkin & Raglan, 2014). With evidence of music began dating back to 40,000 years, music is one of the earliest forms of expressing creativity and culture in human history (d’Errico et al., 2003). Scholars widely suggest that vocal music likely preceded the development of musical instruments (Killin, 2018).

The creation, distribution, and consumption of music have continuously evolved in response to broader societal, economic, political, and technological transformations. Since the industrial revolution, the consolidation of music production, publication, and distribution led to the development of major recording labels. These corporations have historically wielded an immense share of the global music industry – by leveraging their power through economies of scale, access to global distribution networks, and ownership of music catalogs (Cosper, 2007). The major players have changed over the decades, but the big three today – Universal Music

Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group – have become familiar household names with their vast reach and impact on the cultural landscape (Kizer, 2023).

Some have explored that this consolidation of activities by the majors have allowed certain musicians to thrive at a global level, with access to advanced recording technologies and position across various distribution mediums (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Marshall, 2013). This set of industrial consolidations, critiques argue, has commodified art and reduced creative autonomy, producing standardized cultural products under capitalistic routines (Negus, 2013; Tschmuck, 2012).

## 1.2 Evolving Distribution Models in the Music Industry

Prior to the internet era, music was predominantly distributed through physical structures such as vinyl records, cassette tapes, and compact discs (CDs) (K. Harrington, 2019). Du Gay and Negus (1994) highlights the tensions between recording labels and music retailers in the 1990s as a significant development – evolving due to the impact of transitions in the association between *production* and *consumption* in the cultural industries.

As mass digitization of media ensued, the launch of Napster's peer-to-peer file sharing service in 1999 transformed consumers' ability to access any piece of recorded music (Cosper, 2007). Many scholars identify this as a pivotal moment in which mass digitization facilitated widespread unpaid access to recorded music, leading to a massive decline in revenue for the music industry (Waldfoegel, 2017). Shortly after, Apple decided to launch its iTunes Music Store, which enabled consumers to purchase individual tracks or albums at a low cost (Apple, 2003). However, the four years between Napster and iTunes established a ripe environment for consumers to normalize music as a *free commodity* (Waldfoegel, 2017).

Preceding the arrival of Music Streaming Platforms (MSPs), major recording labels attempted to create their own streaming services (Mishra, 2020). Many stakeholders in the

industry, including musicians and their representatives, recognized early on that streaming would not be a viable path for sustainable revenue. The labels were ultimately unable to implement a feasible platform due to government intimidations against industry consolidations (Billboard, 2001), leading to their disreputable partnerships with the MSPs instead. In these partnerships, the major labels continue to dictate the distribution process, further entrenching their longstanding power in the industry (Khumalo, 2023).

### **1.3 Economics of Music Streaming**

The recorded music industry is commonly recognized as the first of the cultural industries to have been disturbed by the dual “forces of digitalization and the internet” (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p.1). Over the years, scholars have analyzed the industry’s transformations – both in terms of structural transitions and continuities (Leyshon, 2014; J. W. Morris, 2015; Wikström, 2020).

As of 2025, streaming accounts for more than 89% of total revenue in the recorded music industry (Durrani, 2023). Spotify leads the U.S. market with over 36% of music listeners relying on it as their primary streaming platform, followed by Apple Music, Amazon Music, and YouTube Music (Smith, 2024). Spotify’s rapid ascent in the U.S. market can be attributed partly to a strategic partnership with Facebook, which allegedly aimed to enhance the social aspects of the music streaming experience (Giacomo, 2024) and early support from Facebook and Napster co-founder, Sean King (King, 2011). Like most MSPs, Spotify utilizes a tiered subscription model. Users can choose between a free tier with ads and a paid tier that provides access with no ads (Thomes, 2013). Spotify has two primary sources of revenue – advertising and subscriptions with the latter making up the bulk of the revenue (87%) (Cuofano, 2024). Their strategy focuses on recruiting new users with the free tier and subsequently encouraging them to become paid members with additional features (Larsen,

2023). As scholars note, this subscription-based model is emblematic of the broader sharing economy (Liang et al., 2022) – as corporations strive to eradicate the concept of ownership in favor of supposed expansive access. At first glance, the subscription model provides immense value for the consumer, providing them with entry to immense records of music for free (with ads) or at a relatively low monthly cost to enjoy an unlimited number of songs. However, this apparent consumer value merits critical attention as it also significantly reshapes the economic structures and cultural practices of music consumption (Radu et al., 2024).

MSPs do not directly compensate musicians for the use of their work. Rather, upon streaming a recording, they allocate the revenues through a network of intermediaries including various royalties holders such as labels, digital music distributors and composers (Tschmuck, 2024). Each intermediary retains a percentage before distributing the remaining funds to the musicians, known as the pro-rata model (Schmidt Sr., 2024). The transfer of these funds is the least transparent component of the distribution process (Stern, 2024). Under the pro-rata model, the revenue gained from subscriptions are divided up amongst the musicians based on their share of the total streams (Kobayashi, 2023). On average, musicians receive \$5.7 (USD) per 1,000 streams across the top MSPs (Duetti, 2024) (see: Table 1 in Appendix) with Spotify being the most inadequate, averaging \$3.0 per 1,000 streams. Moreover, research has shown that MSPs disproportionately promote a greater percentage of music that has been developed by those with major label backing (Prey & Lee, 2025) with a Rolling Stone report revealing the actuality in which the top 1% of musicians on the platform receive 90% of the revenue (Blake, 2020).

An important point is the structural integration between the MSPs and the major record labels. From its inception, Spotify intentionally designed a business model that aligned with the major industry stakeholders, maintaining the established power structures within the recording music industry (Aguiar et al., 2024; Hodgson, 2021; Lesser, 2018). As Liz Pelly, a

prominent music journalist and devoted critic of Spotify, signifies in their interview with the Atlantic (Shoup, 2025):

"Spotify is not a purely musical and technological endeavor. It's a business. And if there's been any lesson of the past 15 years, it is that multi-billion dollar multinational technology corporations cannot be viewed outside of that context. There are a lot of assumptions about the neutrality of technology baked into the idea that the patterns and data gleaned from such a system would provide an honest look at the world of music listening."

Beyond the primary MSPs, there are a variety of other avenues for musicians to monetize their music – including Bandcamp, Deezer and Soundcloud. However, the ability to generate substantial revenue from these platforms is similarly constrained to a small population of highly visible or already-established musicians (Tofalvy & Koltai, 2023).

Reminiscent of early internet utopianism, the emergence of digital music distribution was marketed as an opportunity to bring about a more democratic and connected ecosystem for musicians, fans, and independent record companies (Lam & Tan, 2001). However, in an unrestrained digital environment, reintermediation occurred as new actors – various retailers, aggregators, service providers – began inserting themselves between the musicians and fans, further reinforcing the gatekeeping dynamics that these new technologies were supposed to dismantle (Leyshon, 2014; Young & Collins, 2010).

#### **1.4 Rise of the Independent Music Entrepreneur**

By 2031, the global music industry is projected to amass over \$100 billion (USD) in revenue (Mulligan, 2024), while the average musician is still struggling to make ends meet (Andrews, 2023). With exacerbated living costs, lack of public and social infrastructure in the U.S., and increasingly extractive tactics by the dominant industry titans (Masnick, 2015;

Tsiouclas, 2024), working musicians are struggling to see a sustainable future in recorded music (Krukowski, 2024).

The broad digitization and digitalization of music – with advances in digital audio workstations and distribution mediums – has undeniably increased access to music production and distribution, allowing many to become cultural creators. The International Federation of Phonographic Industries (IFPI) once estimated that the traditional mode of producing and distributing a new album to the market (pre-streaming) could cost up to \$1 million for a new musician (IFPI, 2010). The emergence of platforms like iTunes reduced many barriers, allowing musicians to distribute a single track for as little as \$10. This wide accessibility has facilitated increased participation in cultural production, with some evidence signifying a rise in the diversity of artists in terms of demographic identities (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

As art and culture become more widely available in the digital landscape, Taylor (2014) highlights how this change has diminished our perspective of their value. For example, while MSPs offer unprecedented global access to music distribution for musicians, the issue of fair compensation remains contentious. Research indicates that streaming services often result in minimal payouts to musicians, particularly independent artists, which undermines the financial sustainability of their work (Mullen, 2023). Despite these concerns and efforts to address them such as the Justice at Spotify campaign (Richards, 2021), there is limited research on what alternatives musicians envision for the future of music distribution. This study aims to address some of the gaps and to give voice to a generation of creators who seek to challenge these systemic issues.

### **1.5 Gen Z's Impact on the Music Industry**

Generation Z, typically defined as those born between 1997 – 2012 (“Generation Z,” 2025), has emerged as a key demographic shaping the music industry. Frequently considered

*chronically online*, Gen Z are frequently plugged in (Borissova, 2023), spending most of their days consuming some form of music digitally (Leu, 2025).

Unlike previous generations, whose music discovery was largely shaped by radio, MTV or physical media (Bennett, 2000; Wall, 2003), Gen Z primarily finds new music through MSPs and social media platforms (Leu, 2025). In 2020, TikTok became the number one app globally (BBC, 2021), and the *TikTok to Spotify pipeline* quickly became popularized, wherein short-form viral content directly influences the streaming patterns of a specific track or artist (Mitchell-Hardt, 2022). In research by the Knit in 2021, 89% of the Gen Z participants stated they are primarily listening to playlists vs. full-length albums, reflecting a broader shift towards fragmented listening habits (Lebouef, 2021). Another major characteristic of Gen Z music taste is their orientation to *genre fluidity*. According to Azeez (2025), a significant portion of Gen Z listen to five or more distinct genres on a regular basis. While their preferences encompass a wide spectrum of genres – from hyperpop to trap to K-pop – there has also been a nostalgic resurgence of more traditional genres such as indie rock, punk rock, and grunge (Azeez, 2025).

One would assume that the digital nativity of Gen Z would coincide with a decline in in-person events. Nevertheless, live show attendance by Gen Z tell a different story. They are the most eager generation to support their favorite musicians by attending their concerts. They spend the highest monthly spending for live performances compared to other generations (Leu, 2025) – with some even undergoing financial ruin to experience their favorite musicians perform live (Rohman, 2025). In a survey of 1,000 Gen Z respondents conducted by Merge (2024), 86% of them acknowledged overspending on concerts.

In response to the restrictive and algorithmically curated nature in which MSPs operate, Gen Z users are increasingly seeking alternative ways to connect with their peers on music. For example, Obscurify, a platform where users can gauge how “obscure their music

taste is compared to the average listener” has gained traction among Gen Z listeners (Chandonnet, 2024). These developments signify a broader desire among Gen Z to personalize and socialize their music identities and experiences beyond the constraints of MSPs.

## **2. Research Objectives**

This research explores the perspectives of Gen Z musicians based in the U.S. on the future of music streaming by investigating how the current music streaming ecosystem has shaped their experience as musicians and what they envision for the future of music streaming platforms. Consequently, it evaluates how the structure of platform capitalism has directly impacted these cultural producers as well as their visioning of what they would like to imagine as an alternative streaming platform model.

## **3. Research Questions**

This study will discuss how the platform capitalism model utilized by the major music streaming companies leads musicians to perform certain aspects of digital labor, particularly in restricting their creative pursuits and economic outcomes. Related to this condition, the research pursues enriched understanding to the following questions:

RQ1: How has the current music streaming ecosystem shaped the experiences of U.S.-based Generation Z musicians, particularly regarding their labor practices, forms of compensation, and perceptions of agency and visibility within these platforms?

RQ2: What alternative platform models do U.S.-based Generation Z musicians envision, and how do these visions reflect their aspirations for a more equitable and empowering music streaming environment?

While there is existing literature on the criticisms of the current state of music streaming platforms and the impact on working musicians, the objective of RQ1 in this context is to

bring to light the specific lived experiences of the participants. This understanding will set the foundation for RQ2, which is the primary interest of this research. Additionally, Elinor Oström's contributions to the governance of commons resources (CPRIs) (Oström, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2009) will be applied as a general framework for discussing RQ2 findings.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of platform capitalism, which provides a lens to evaluate the broader system that music streaming platforms operate within and how these platforms operate as digital intermediaries between creators and consumers. Essential to this evaluation is how the *platformization of cultural production* has reconfigured the activities musicians must perform to exist and succeed in the music industry (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Drawing from previous works on digital labor (Jansson, 2023; Mühlbach & Arora, 2020; Nieborg & Poell, 2018), this paper explores the implications of streaming for musicians, particularly how the platforms' profit-driven incentives and the data-driven logic dictate both their compensation and labor practices. Lastly, this study incorporates Oström's theory of common pool resource institutions (Oström, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2009) as a conceptual outline for exploring alternative, more equitable models of online cultural consumption. This framework and other related scholarly work on the digital commons (Bergstrom, 2010; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Silberman, 2016; Terranova, 2022) informs the discussion of alternative platforms that aim to challenge dominant market structures and redistribute power within the music streaming ecosystem.

##### **4.1 Platform Capitalism**

Platforms are defined as “infrastructures that support the design and use of applications and connects various actors to communicate, interact, or sell their products/services” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 349). Through transitions in technological

advancements and societal shifts in consumption behavior, platform capitalism emerged as a new economic system (Srniczek, 2017b). The essence of platform capitalism is centering the platform as a “distinct mode of socio-technical intermediary and business arrangement” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 11). Many scholars argue platform capitalism affords a unique commodification of labor (Aloisi, 2015; Graham et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019) and cautioned of the potential misclassification of workers who are not afforded the traditional protections and rights afforded to employees (Aloisi, 2015). Additionally, platforms heavily promote *datafication* or the *systematic processing of user data*, contributing to a more demand and data-driven approach to production and distribution (Mühlbach & Arora, 2020). As data becomes a necessary resource for evolving market value, sectors that previously thrived regardless of platformization have embraced certain platform elements (Srniczek, 2017b, 2017a).

Since the early 2000s, digital platforms have provided new technologies for artists to produce, circulate, promote, and earn from their music. These platforms, mainly owned and operated by major technology corporations, are primarily focused on acquiring venture capital, monopolizing markets, and extracting value from interactions between these creators and consumers (Srniczek, 2017a). As key players in the broader platform capitalism system, these companies have become powerful forces in our society, shaping how people access resources, audiences, and compensation (Chalaby, 2024). As a result, these platforms reinforce many of the same disparities that have existed since the beginning of capitalism.

However, it would be imprudent to not recognize the evolving nature of labor activities, compensation, and the sense of visibility and control in the process of platformization. Plantin & Punathambekar (2019) appropriately describe it as a critical shift in media and communications. Van Dijck et al. (2018a) warned us of the repercussions as the platforms indoctrinate more societal sectors, the more power the industry’s key players will

accumulate. Recognizing the heavily negotiated ecosystem, van Dijck (2024) prompts us of the perpetual interchange between technology and society. With new modes of production and consumption emerging with technological innovations in the studies of information and communications, Liang et al. (2022) argues for the essential need to define the main tenets of platform capitalism. This paper attempts to do so in the context of music streaming with the following subsections.

#### ***4.1.1 Platforms as Intermediaries***

Platforms in the current ecosystem have become prevalent with their ability to “adapt to the novel ways in which value can be created and captured under the new technological circumstances” (Gawer, 2022, p. 110). Unlike the corporations born out of the Second Industrial Revolution (Chandler et al., 2009) where they primarily coordinated resources to create and distribute products and services, platform-based businesses work to locate and exploit complementarities across the various agents associated with the platform through the use of data and infrastructures (Gawer, 2022). The process of digitalization in our society has allowed for the development of the business as an intermediary – allowing companies to outsource innovations to individuals. Scholars Napoli and Caplan (2018) and Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) have underscored technology corporations’ involvement in the systematic shift of cultural production and consumption especially through their strategic maneuvering around regulatory structures that govern traditional media industries.

In contrast to legacy media corporations, platforms operate under business models based on connecting cultural producers and consumers (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Their core strategy is to accumulate as many resources and content on the platform as they can, which enables them to scale up rapidly and dominate specific cultural markets (Gawer, 2022). Through their centralization, they can facilitate interactions between the producers and the

users. This liaison role they perform allows them to intermediate all communication (or lack of). They are also able to collect an immense amount of behavioral data for all those active on their platforms and sell this information to external clients.

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the reliance on these platforms to mediate typically in-person interactions. Live venues and touring musicians suffered greatly during the height of the pandemic and never fully recovered to their original positions (Ta, 2024). At a societal level, consumers became much more dependent on these technologies, noted by the increase of music streaming subscriptions during this period (Hall, 2020).

#### ***4.1.2 Monopolistic Dynamics and Market Power***

Through a variety of sectors, these digital platforms share common characteristics in centralizing their operations to capture value (Gawer, 2022). According to Gawer (2022), their capacity to manipulate economies of scale and network effects create ripe environments for them to take monopolistic positions and captivate market power in their specific sectors. Nieborg & Poell (2018) criticize the lack of systematic engagement in scholarly research around the consolidation of media ownership and control by a few major platforms. They believe it necessary to recognize the monopolistic tendencies that are fundamental to the platform economy. To better analyze how platformization shapes cultural manifestation, they suggest we critically evaluate the changes in platform governance.

It is also critical to recognize the dominant players in the broader tech ecosystem. As Duffy et al. (2019a) highlight, GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft) are the dominant players actively shaping the entire process of how we interact with culture. These platforms together control a predominant share of the market leading to a winner-takes-all dynamic (Einhorn, 2021) where smaller platforms struggle to compete. This dynamic has been replicated in the music industry to just a few MSPs wielding tremendous influence.

### 4.1.3 *Gig Economy*

Poignantly, a critical component of platform capitalism is the concept of the gig economy, which was coined as a direct mention to the music industry from the early 1920s (Liang et al., 2022). Scholars have explored the gig economy in-depth especially in relation to self-employment or temporary gigs, dominant in other labor sectors (Durlauf, 2019; Huang et al., 2020; Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Cloonan & Williamson (2023) highlight the distinctions of musicians within the broader gig economy discourse – comparing aspects of musical labor with other gig economy roles: 1) musical work is talent-specific, limiting the scalability utilized by other gig work via platformization 2) aspects of gig-work in music is more historically embedded vs. technologically 3) music labor (e.g. performances) are often pre-scheduled vs. on-demand 4) musicians are generally able to exercise creative autonomy over their work. They contend the notable features of the gig economy – algorithmic management, on-demand schedules, commodification of ordinary labor – contrast with musical labor. With the evolution of the streaming economy, however, elements of the gig economy are nevertheless related to many musicians' labor activities, especially with the influence of algorithmic design.

### 4.1.4 *Data and Algorithm Control*

Bonini et al. (2021) suggest that MSPs are the new governors of an industry that was formerly governed by human agents. This gatekeeping activity is a form of *algoritorial power* that influences or sets the listening agendas of their consumers. Spotify's transition from being a “distributor to the producer of a unique service” (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 61) through their selection and curation of playlists has been the focus for many criticisms across recent research on algorithms in the music streaming space (Freeman et al., 2022; Maasø & Hagen, 2020; O'Dair & Fry, 2020; Prey, 2020). This infrastructure influences platform

stakeholders to strategically optimize their content to “game” the algorithm, utilizing a combination of “sonic optimization,” “data optimization,” and “infrastructural optimization,” which encompass the concept of *platform effects* (J. W. Morris, 2020). In his TEDx Talk, *Streaming Is Killing Music* (TEDx Talks, 2019), Alan Cross, an influential radio personality and music historian (Aprile, 2024) discusses how technology has dramatically changed not only the nature of music consumption but also how it is produced (Baym, 2018). For instance, over the past decade of MSPs’ dominance in the industry, the length of the average song in the U.S. has dwindled over time (Telica, 2021; Zandt, 2022). Furthermore, the ability to get paid on these platforms is reliant on the listener tuning into at least thirty seconds of a track (Childers, 2022), which has immensely influenced the way musicians and record labels produce music. For example, Billie Elish is revered as a successful icon in the streaming era for optimizing her music to have mass streaming appeal and partnering closely with MSPs (Disctopia, 2024; The Music Network, 2019). In Dada Drummer’s interview, Darius Van Arman, co-founder of Secretly Group, a profitable independent label, discusses this phenomenon (Krukowski, 2025):

“Monetization is shaped differently — it’s based on what gets repeat listens. It didn’t take long for artists and labels to make that connection. It’s not sustainable to put out challenging records. To be sustainable, you have put out records that are going to get repeat listens in coffee shops. That people are going to want to listen to over and over again, and that are going to be playlist friendly and easier on the ears.”

In the case of Spotify, there has been a shift in their business strategy over the years to prioritize features such as Discovery Mode and curated playlists (Thomas, 2018), which have all been shown to prioritize their algorithms and commercial deals with specific labels (Antal, 2021; Prey et al., 2022; Webster, 2020). Through their data infrastructures, MSPs are not only

able to dictate certain data processing activities but are also able to influence these producers to align their strategies to fit into the production model dictated by these platforms.

#### ***4.1.5 Platform-Mediated Labor***

In recent work around platforms operating as businesses, Duffy et al. (2019b) have argued that the platformization of artistic creation inherently affects the innerworkings of the practices of the people with its influence on the “strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creativity, labor, and citizenship.” Nieborg & Poell (2018) also accentuate the labor issues that are prevalent in cultural creation reliant on platforms and the minimal attention given to the transformation of cultural commodities.

Direct communication is predominantly disintegrated through these platforms (J. Morris & Powers, 2015; Prey, 2019). The producers and consumers on these platforms do not make up a close-knit community, but interact as a temporary gathering of strangers united by a shared, short-term interest (Özgün & Treske, 2021). MSPs build on this model by turning these fleeting social interactions into data-driven, algorithmically managed labor and consumption, constructing short-lived, transactional interactions between the producers and consumers.

#### ***4.1.6 Unsustainable Business Model***

Many scholars and activists have condemned the entire business model as not only exploitative, but also unsustainable. These platforms, while siphoning rent from the producers and fees from the consumers, are primarily unprofitable and only survive due to venture capital aid (Srnicsek, 2017a). The hypothesis is that the sharing economy will be a short-lived phenomenon (van Dijck et al., 2018b). As noted by Evans & Schmalensee (2016), these platforms are essentially just matchmakers.

Most of these businesses eventually go bankrupt, become acquired by bigger corporations or transition into different services altogether. While these platforms hold immense power in the exchange between the producers and consumers, Prey (2025) argues that this simple explanation does not account for the detrimental impact on our political and economic systems.

## 4.2 Digital Labor

With the transition to the Information Age, digital labor has been explained as part of the economic process of disintermediation, in which it has replaced the mediation in typical employee-employer chains (Duffy et al., 2019b). More optimistic theories around digital labor including the *long tail*, *cognitive surplus*, and *commons-based peer production* (Anderson, 2006; Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Shirky, 2010) examine the potential for democratization and ability to gain revenue as a laborer (typically those who have not previously had capacity to in previous contexts). Alternatively, many scholars have a more cynical perspective of digital labor. Terranova (2012)'s interpretation as *free labor* and thorough discussion on the exploitative practices highlight how digital labor has become a critical tool for profit and power gained by platform owners. Many scholars claim that the internet economy has altered our labor into a market economy of the few major platforms that have created superficial, intermediary transactions in almost every aspect of our lives. Moreover, from a cultural industries theory perspective, one may also argue cultural activities such as music should not be distributed with profit in mind.

Many scholars argue that all labor is becoming digital labor (Dyer-Witford, 2015; Fuchs, 2014; Terranova, 2012). Some warn that universalizing all digital interaction as labor can also flatten the distinctions between exploitation and leisure as well as various conditions of digital work globally (Doorn & Badger, 2020; Graham et al., 2017). As Gandini (2020)

suggests, the overutilization of digital labor as a concept amongst scholarly studies on platforms has de-emphasized critical aspects of its original intent. While Gandini concurs that platforms are fundamentally media infrastructures, they should be considered as a distinct player that supersedes the positions once held by traditional intermediaries.

Additionally, scholars have highlighted the *affective labor* of creative producers, who often enact performative engagements to build online personas (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Yalın, 2024). These activities include individuals investing significant time and labor for the potential of visibility and monetization. As Duffy (2017) contends, affective labor is signified as pursuing one's passions in the context of a precarious environment where only a small pool of creators achieves these success measures. Relatedly, Abidin (2018) explores how online influencers enact a commodified product of themselves, innately shaped by the platforms and their opaque algorithmic systems.

Considering these varied aspects of digital labor, this paper will highlight tensions between the musicians and their sense of autonomy, creativity, and compensation as dictated by the current music streaming infrastructure. The focus will be on activities within data management and processing as well as algorithmic optimization. Notably, the interviewed musicians are particularly induced to act as an entrepreneur as they all classify as independent musicians (those without label support). For example, independent musicians are often responsible with tasks such as uploading songs or updating profiles, primarily offloaded to label employees. While similar tasks existed within non-digital formats, the platform economy has made this ongoing maintenance central to their relevance (Terranova, 2012). Digital labor for cultural producers is ostensibly an eternal endeavor.

#### ***4.2.1 Invisible Labor: Data Management and Processing***

The labor of independent musicians extends beyond the creative domain of producing music and performing. They are often required to perform data management and processing, working with distributors to get their music onto MSPs as well as manage licensing and copyright processes, and more (Gandini, 2020). This also involves uploading content, managing metadata, coordinating licensing and copyright claims and attempting to optimize track visibility on the platforms. As Jansson (2023) accentuates, certain responsibilities have been shifted to the artists themselves with platforms effectively outsourcing key logistical and infrastructural tasks from record labels onto the musicians. These administrative tasks are necessary for the maintenance and growth of the platforms, inferring the musicians' contributions as free labor (Terranova, 2012).

Moreover, there is an increasing demand for strategic self-management, where musicians must analyze streaming analytics including fan engagement data and other platform-specific metrics. These forms of quantified self-monitoring (Andrejevic, 2011; Ritchey, 2019) reiterate the role of data analyst that the musicians must perform within the platform. In the streaming context, digital labor for these musicians is vastly about maintaining a platform-mediated interaction of surveillance and optimization.

#### ***4.2.2 Platform Visibility: Algorithm Optimization***

As streaming platforms collect and provide data about its users, musicians are also catering their music creation and distribution to prioritize users' behavior. One participant in Mühlbach & Arora's (2020) study points out, the need to adapt to the whims of the platforms is a constant tension. One of the participants questions the artistic position of these musicians:

“If you would use data from services like Spotify to change your creative product then you are not an artist anymore but a – I don't know – a craftsman?”

In relying on these platforms to showcase their work to a broad audience, musicians are at the whims of the algorithm – influencing their strategies and creative output, which is vital to achieving discoverability in a saturated setting.

Social media is difficult not to remark in this context. Independent musicians are forced to become content creators as engagement with fans become important to gain a critical following. The tasks of developing content, posting, liking and replying to comments all generate relevant data for these social media platforms and other intermediaries to utilize for calculating the “engagement-optimization-retention-acquisition” cycle (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). These practices align with what academics refer to as “affective and aspirational labor” (Duffy, 2017; Gill & Pratt, 2008).

### **4.3 Alternative Platform Economies**

With growing criticism on platform capitalism and its exploitation of its workers, producers, and consumers, the labor movement has been expanding. There is also a rising interest in alternative platform models and digital economies (Atanasova et al., 2025; Bunders & De Moor, 2024). This section will explore Elinor Oström's theory of common pool resource institutions (CPRIs) and how scholars have applied it in the context of the platform economy.

#### ***4.3.1 Digital Commons and Collective Ownership***

In her influential research, Elinor Oström proposed a paradigm-shifting idea: communities possess the capability to autonomously organize and establish regulations that enable them to proficiently oversee common-pool resources, steering clear of the potential *tragedy of the commons* as conceptualized by Garrett Hardin (Oström, 1990, 2000, 2002). Drawing from empirical case studies of how communities effectively governed shared physical resources such as forests and fisheries, Oström circulated a set of principles for the effective management of common-pool resources in various environments. While originally

developed in physical resource management, these principles have increasingly informed discussions about digital commons (Bollier, 2020; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Šestáková & Plichtová, 2019). Oström argues that successful organizations tend to follow a core set of design principles including clear expectations and boundaries, collective decision-making and accountability (Oström, 2002).

Oström's principles (Oström, 2002) empower scholars to study the function of support and mutuality in CPRIs. She stated that sustainability is reinforced where individuals have both ability and desires to outline their shared resources, boundaries, and guidelines for use. As an example, Mozilla Foundation also adopted these principles to their framework around data governance (Ruhaak et al., 2021) (see: Appendix).

Relatedly, Ridley-Duff & Bull (2021) further expanded on this framework by applying Oström's theory and its principles in the alignment of the *social solidarity economy* (SSE) as a novel way to design to distribute, exchange, and market. In their paper, they expand on the possibilities of how platforms can shape the commons in the SSE by evaluating six case studies. Their research substantiates how commoning activities have the potential to shift institutional practices for managing resources, labor, and finances. They emphasize that Oström's principles are not bound to a distinct legal structure but instead, can be implemented in a variety of formats such as non-profit, cooperative, public benefit corporations and social purpose organizations.

A concrete example exists in the Creative Commons (CC), which was developed in the U.S. by Lawrence Lessig, Hal Abelson, and Eric Eldred with support from the Center for the Public Domain (Creative Commons, 2011). With the rise of piracy and peer-to-peer exchange in music, some musicians turned to Jamendo, a platform that utilizes the CC licensing as a legal foundation for intellectual property rights (Bazen et al., 2015). This allowed the musicians to make their music available for free download but still hold the rights

to determine what it can be used for. Bazen et al. (2015) explored what motivated these musicians to provide their music on the platform with over 600 responses in their questionnaire. For the respondents, Jamendo represented a new possibility of sharing music. 67% of the respondents explained their core reason for participating on Jamendo is its utilization of the CC. Importantly, musicians between ages 20 and 40 highlighted the copyleft principles of CC as a core conviction. Additionally, 40% of the musicians are eager for increased visibility without the restrictions of the traditional streaming ecosystem. Jamendo's model also contrasts the winner-takes-all model that MSPs and record labels tend to perpetuate by instigating a competitive environment for musicians to succeed.

Within the Commons, the notion of *peer to peer* (P2P) is a standard theme across academia and industry (Bauwens et al., 2019; Bauwens & Pantazis, 2018; Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006). P2P is a form of communal associations in human systems, enabled by technological infrastructure, that allows the implementation of such dynamics at a network level (Bauwens et al., 2019). Thus, P2P facilitates an alternative pathway for production and a potential transition to a *commons-oriented* system (Resilience, 2019). Additionally, commons-based peer production is seen as a counter to the profit-driven peer-to-peer models prevalent in the current digital economy (Bauwens & Pantazis, 2018). Nonetheless, Bauwens & Pantazis (2018) emphasize that this appropriation of the commons and P2P by for-profit institutions is not necessarily a negative as it builds more awareness and application across fields.

Rooted in the ethos of free software (Stallman, 2002), Creative Commons is an example of the copyleft license, which allows broad consent to replicate and reproduce intellectual property (Friedman, 2025). Importantly, CC and the copyleft movement, while arguably with fair intentions, does not fundamentally eradicate the inequities of the current internet economies. For independent workers, the pressure to conform and contribute to

commons-based peer production can perpetuate exploitative practices, especially in the context of providing free labor to the cause (Scholz, 2012).

#### 4.3.2 *Platform Cooperatives*

Cooperatives are associations “association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (International Labour Organization, 2024). This model has deep historical roots, originating as a reaction to the economic precarity and exploitative labor conditions experienced by workers in the industrial era. Early proponents such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier (Leopold, 2011) – described as utopian socialists – promoted alternative systems and cooperative organizations based on democratic governance principles (Pitman, 2018). The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) describes it as an assembly of individuals achieving their shared goals through a “jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (ICA, 2023). A set of seven principles are principal to cooperatives across the globe: (1) free and open membership; (2) democratic decisions; (3) economic participation; (4) autonomy and independence; (5) education, training, and information; (6) cooperation among cooperatives; and (7) concern for the community (ICA, 2023).

A critical feature of cooperatives is the alignment of ownership and governance. As Betton (2021) argues, this feature provides worker-owners with a sense of autonomy and a material motivation to contribute efficiently and innovatively. Building on these principles, Scholz introduced the concept of *platform cooperativism* as an alternative to platform capitalism. For Scholz, platform cooperativism represents values of equity, transparency, collective ownership, and governance, guiding the foundations of a new *solidarity economy* (Scholz, 2019). He offers ten principles for platform cooperatives which act as a set of objectives and economic, political, and social values (Scholz, 2016):

1. Ownership (collectively owned platform coops governed by its member-owners)
2. Decent pay and income security
3. Transparency and data portability
4. Appreciation and acknowledgment
5. Co-determined work (i.e. involve workers in platform design)
6. A protective legal framework (that given platform coops a chance to compete on the market)
7. Portable worker protections and benefits
8. Protection against arbitrary behavior
9. Rejection of excessive workplace surveillance
10. The right to log off

Despite the passionate initiative to build an alternative form of platform-based work, many platform cooperatives face immense challenges in attracting sufficient funds and competing with major platform companies (Broves, 2022; Bunders & De Moor, 2023; Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). Relatedly, Van Doorn (2017) recaps three core challenges in which platform cooperatives have to effectively navigate to be successful: (1) self-government; (2) financing/resource acquisition; and (3) market competition/value proposition. These are important considerations in the complicated socio-political-economic context of the digital economy.

## **5. Methodology**

This research, conducted with ten interviewees to examine the perspectives and experiences of U.S.-based Gen Z musicians, aims to shed light on the challenges of being a cultural producer in the current streaming era as well as their ideas of alternative models they would like to see in the future of music streaming.

### **5.1 Research Design**

This research utilized a qualitative approach, using semi-structured one-on-one interviews with ten Gen Z musicians based in the U.S. Qualitative research allowed for deeper commitment to exploring the depths of the research, enabling the researcher to relate to the specific experiences of the participants (Lim, 2024). The design of the interview questions

considered the following type of questions: what, why, when, where, who, and how (otherwise known as the 5W1H) to unveil key insights (Jinks, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews provided an organized foundation for the interview, while allowing flexibility to explore nuanced perspectives and experiences (Lim, 2024). Additionally, a thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to labor activities, compensation, and sense of control and visibility within the platform(s). This process ensured that the findings were grounded in larger concepts. As the primary researcher, while analyzing and reviewing the interview data, I endeavored to consider the potential that my own biases may influence the interpretation of the themes.

The target participant group for the research was Generation Z, identified as anyone born within 1997 and 2012 (Eldridge, 2025). To qualify as a low-risk study, the focus was an adult population – necessitating the requirement age range to be 18 to 28. Participants were also required to have their music activities based primarily in the U.S. and have their music available on at least one of the major streaming platforms including Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, and YouTube Music. These platforms were chosen as they are the highest subscribed streaming platforms and have the defined attributes of a business within the platform capitalism ecosystem (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) as discussed in previous sections. For confidentiality, each musician was assigned a participant code. Table 2 (see: Appendix) summarizes their key attributes (excluding certain demographic identities) including: age (at the time of interview), years active as a musician, and genre(s) of their music project(s).

## **5.2 Data Collection**

Nine interviews of ten participants were conducted over a two-month period in May and June of 2025. One interview consisted of two individuals who were part of the same musical project. Every interview was conducted over Zoom, usually lasting 30-45 minutes each. All

interviews were recorded and transcribed with each participant's approval. An interview guide was utilized to ensure the consistency in topics covered throughout the interviews, while also allowing flexibility for an organic flow in the conversation. Below are some of the key questions proposed during the interviews:

- How important is streaming for your overall career as a musician? Which platforms do you use most frequently, and why those in particular?
- How do you feel about the revenue models of existing platforms? (e.g., per-stream payments, subscriptions)
- If you could design a revenue model that works for you, what would it look like? (e.g. a hybrid approach: streaming + subscriptions)
- Do you think alternative business models like platform cooperatives could be more sustainable? Why or why not? What would be some of the challenges of pursuing this model and getting people onboard?
- If you could redesign the system from scratch...what kind of tools or features would make those activities easier or more impactful for your music career?
- If your ideal streaming platform was an "offline place," what would that experience be like?

Additional enquiries explored related topics such as their use of other platforms such as Bandcamp, experience with touring and selling merch, insights on societal music consumption behaviors, and opinions on values motivating working musicians. The semi-structured format allowed the participants to bring up supplementary topics. For instance, several interviewees discussed personal experience with local music collectives, online communities, and their outlook on the future of the music industry.

### **5.3 Ethical Considerations**

The research abides by the principles outlined by University for Continuing Education Krems. The considerations for the research were informed consent, privacy in research and ethical use of data. A clear explanation of the research objectives, the participants' roles in the research and their right to withdraw participation at any time was communicated.

Additionally, the participants have been anonymized. Finally, the data collected has been used solely for academic work and is treated with confidentiality and respect. No external parties

have access unless specified in the consent process. The data is stored securely on password-protected devices and encrypted storage solutions. All digital data (e.g., interview recordings, transcripts) is stored on encrypted cloud storage services (Google Drive) that comply with GDPR and other relevant data protection regulations. Confidentiality, privacy, and security of research participants will be safeguarded throughout the process (Sanjari et al., 2014). The data will be stored for a maximum of 1 year, which allows for the completion of the study, analysis, and any necessary revisions or publications. After this period, all data will either be securely destroyed or anonymized if used for any further research purposes. Should the data be used for future research, explicit consent will be sought from participants, and any personal identifiers will be removed to ensure anonymity. Access to archived data will be restricted to only the primary researcher, and proper procedures will be followed to ensure participant confidentiality is always maintained.

#### **5.4 Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, an inductive thematic analysis was performed with the support of NVivo, a qualitative research data analysis tool. The transcripts of the interviews were loaded into NVivo and categorized into cases characterizing the individuality of each interview. This process also included reviewing the data numerous times to better understand the overall context, identifying preliminary ideas, and ensuring familiarity with the content (Wong, 2008). Following familiarization, the data was condensed to generate meaningful features of the data. This process was open-ended and exploratory, without preconceived categories or themes. Each piece of data that relates to a particular idea was labeled with a code, forming the foundation for theme development (Almusallam, 2021).

Once initial coding was completed, the codes were organized into potential themes. Through this process, patterns, connections, and relationships between different codes were

pursued. The themes generated were examined to determine the relevance to the research questions and ensure they accurately capture the musicians' experiences and perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Lastly, each theme was given concise labels that represented the essence of the data. Identified and inserted quotes capture the core themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2011). The findings aim to offer novel insights and actionable recommendations for stakeholders in the cultural industries in reimagining culture distribution models in the era of platform capitalism and streaming.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Navigating the Streaming Ecosystem

#### 6.1.1 *Streaming as a "Necessary Evil"*

The participants in the study overwhelmingly shared a sense of dependence on MSPs. These musicians feel forced to participate on these platforms – regardless of the lack of control over their compensation level, meaningful engagement, and how their music is represented. One interviewee reflected, *"I feel like I'd be shooting myself in the foot if I were to remove music from those services,"* while another noted *"Streaming is important for my overall career, because I don't feel like there's a choice."*

In the current complex ecosystem of music production and distribution, MSPs are the fundamental link between the producers and consumers. While many participants were critical of these platforms, some also acknowledged the advantages in making their music available to a seemingly infinite number of potential fans. One interviewee emphasized their desire for openness: *"I don't want it [my music] to be gatekept. I don't want it to be walled off,"* while another participant expressed enthusiasm over the ability to be *"readily available anywhere in the world."*

The platformization of music distribution has democratized access to both producers and consumers. For these producers, becoming a musician is a much more accessible opportunity today than in previous versions of the industry. From producing to distributing, everything is mediated through a variety of digital platforms. For consumers, there is an influx of music – available at any moment for us to consume.

This environment has allowed the emergence of so many musicians shaped by the internet garnering a fan-base and even gaining collaborative opportunities via communicative platforms such as Discord, Twitch (A., 2024; Twitch, 2025). However, this has coincided with increased competition as it has created an oversaturation of musicians who are trying to make it big or endure in the current economy as a working musician. Despite gaining online visibility and relevance among their communities, participants voice ambivalence about the platforms' roles – assessing their impact as both enabling and exploitative.

A big point of contention in the interviews was the disparity between the musicians and the owners of the platforms: *“the CEOs making more money than the artists. It just comes down to like greed.”* Interestingly, there is a sense of musician solidarity. While recognizing that the top musicians – often backed by the majors – pool in most of the artist revenue, they don't blame them: *“Even when you get to like bigger artists who are making more money, you have the large labels who really only care about profit taking most of that and leaving the artist with practically nothing.”* They also equate the platform as a *“double-edged”* artifact where *“it's your reputation, but not your income.”*

There is a sense of realization that these platforms are inherently evil or ill-natured through the intentional design by the owners of the platforms. However, to pursue their music careers, the musicians rely on these platforms for distribution of their music. In summary, MSPs, for these musicians, are widely perceived as essential for gaining an audience, yet

emblematic of a systemic issue that undermines cultural creativity and compensation for their output – consequently a “*necessary evil*.”

### **6.1.2 Rise of Exploitative Intermediaries**

Curated playlists available on the discovery scene of these platforms are extremely popular as they’re specifically designed for each user based on the data the platform has gathered about the individual’s music preferences and listening habits. Spotify CEO Daniel Ek noted the top playlists on the platform are more popular than most radio stations in the U.S. (Thomas, 2018). Appearing on these playlists can dramatically increase an artist’s monthly listeners (Pachali & Datta, 2025), although the specific mechanisms and algorithms behind playlist design remain purposefully hidden (Jansson, 2023; Prey, 2019, 2020). While streaming platforms have, in essence, increased the ability to reach new audiences on a global scale, the actual impact remains to be unknown.

While MSPs are effectively the last touchpoint before reaching the consumer, there are a variety of industry actors that impact the process of distribution and work to enhance one’s streamability. These companies, some of which position themselves as strategic consultants, offer services such as playlist optimization — often at significant cost. For instance, Submit Hub is a company designed to provide a path for musicians to promote their tracks (Peleg, 2020). To improve their odds of playlist placement, musicians must pay to utilize the service or provide labor in exchange for tokens on the platform. They connect independent musicians with playlist curators, bloggers, influencers and radio DJs – for a fee. “*This is one of the ways they’ve monetized aspirations of artists,*” one participant reflects on their experience partaking on this service. They also mention how most of the clientele are TikTok influencers and not record labels, as the platform originally marketed. Another summarizes this susceptibility many new musicians face in the current streaming ecosystem: “*there’s like a lot of people that*

*are just like trying to like take advantage of you because you want to make it or like because you want exposure.”*

There is an assembly of relationships amongst the major distributors and the MSPs. One participant discusses their search for a new music distributor: *“I’ve been trying to shop around for a different music distributor to DistroKid because I know Spotify owns a stake in that company and that’s a little... weird”* These intermediaries occupy a space between facilitation and extraction. On one hand, they offer tools to ease the burdensome administrative tasks to platform their music on MSPs. On the other hand, they monetize access to potentially enhanced discoverability, offering no guarantees but selling hopes to perform what Magalhães (2017) explores as *algorithmic visibility*. These expansions highlight a broader reintermediation within the music streaming economy, where new industry actors are reproducing exploitative dynamics under the facade of supporting music careers.

### **6.1.3 AI and the Threat to Creative Labor**

AI has emerged as a significant threat to producers across the cultural industries. AI-generated music has saturated these platforms, raising concern from many of the participants. Few participants were anxious over AI’s ability to replicate – and potentially, outperform – human produced music. One participant remarked, *“It’s discouraging... someone can push a button and make a song better than yours.”* Another participant detailed their experience providing labor for an intermediary service: *“They had a feature where you could get these credits for free if you would review other people’s music. So that’s how I was doing. I was just grinding the hell out of that, and seriously like half of that was AI.”*

Relatedly, a recent Bloomberg report unveiled the current negotiations between AI firms and the major labels to discuss and establish a structure for how they can strike

contracts on catalogue-training with AI (Shaw, 2025). Musicians have been clear about their stance around AI:

“You can imagine what the next step in this process will be. The further devaluation of music by flooding major label controlled MSPs with major label owned generative AI fodder fed by major label catalogue” – Sharooz Raofi (Price, 2025)

In an already precarious music industry, the potential for AI to displace human labor becomes a profoundly ethical and economical concern.

## 6.2 Platform Success and Creative Conformity

### 6.2.1 *Bound by the Algorithm*

Participants shared a strong perspective that streaming platforms tend to reward musical conformity, favoring artists whose work aligns more with current trends or algorithmic preferences. One explained the tension as a universal apprehension: “*I guess everybody has that like that the kind of like conflicting thoughts of like do I want to make what I want to make or do I want to appeal to my fans or like the people that listen to these similar genres?*” Several interviewees shared a resistance to this pressure, finding the whole process discouraging. One participant reflected on the importance of being a content creator in the ecosystem, “*it’s hard to make a livelihood from doing art in general so you have to turn into like a content farmer.*” This underscores the perceived burden to constantly create platform-optimized content, at times at the expense of artistic authenticity.

Despite their aim to de-center algorithmic influence in their artistic process and endeavors, a few participants admit to considering visibility when categorizing or tagging their music for distribution. A few participants recounted similar observations in their peers over the years. One participant deifying the algorithm, critiquing a band’s genre pivot as a response to algorithmic expectations, “*They’ve dropped the ska thing entirely...more leaning*

*towards what's popular...and I don't blame them for that but they shouldn't have to...appease whatever algorithm god there is."*

Another expressed a frustration with their efforts to promote their music amid the opaque mechanisms of the platforms: *"I think it's hard when... most of what streaming is, is the algorithm and trying to get into that algorithm, make sure your stuff is heard, make sure your stuff is seen. A lot of that, we don't really know how that works. And the only way to guarantee that you are seen is paying your way onto large playlists."*

Participants also criticized the algorithm's frequent mislabeling of their music. One participant explained, *"That's super frustrating to know that you can be pigeonholed despite you paying and tagging something correctly like it's this genre. They still just let the algorithm go. I've noticed it happened to like my friends too they make more like indie pop music and they keep getting placed on hardcore playlists and it's not really helping them."*

One participant accentuated the unavailability of the decision-makers on the platforms: *"it kind of makes it hard to like directly contact people like in terms of also like playlist curators."* These reflections underscore a fundamental tension – while the musicians recognize the importance of visibility and discoverability in today's streaming landscape, they are cautious of the coercive nature and inaccurate classifications imposed by these opaque algorithmic systems.

### **6.2.2 *DIY Everything: Demands of Entrepreneurship***

The logic of entrepreneurship has been firmly entrenched within the contemporary music industry, especially for independent and emerging artists. Drawing from the ethos from punk subcultures, where "do-it-yourself" (DIY) were expressions of resistance to corporate control (Griffin, 2015), the concept of entrepreneurship has shifted under a neoliberal reign of self-reliance and branding (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Leung, 2018) especially those of the

younger generations (Kelly, 2001). Activities originally encumbered by record labels and promotional companies have been primarily shifted onto the individual musicians. This reflects a broader cultural trend, wherein Gen Z are increasingly seeking influencer-type labor and entrepreneurial career paths (Garfinkle, 2023) signaling a gravitation towards hustle culture (Carter, 2016). Conflicting the original intent, DIY practices have become systematized expectations to become relevant, particularly within the platform economy. All participants expressed frustration with this expectation. One interviewee noted the lack of support from the labels: *“they’ve made it like, oh, we don’t even need to promote any of this... you have to build your own following before we’ll even give you any money to record a record.”* Independent musicians who seek a record label deal are often burdened with achieving a certain social media presence and pre-existing fanbase before they’re considered for label contracts. Although they recognize the obligation of maintaining visibility online, many viewed these activities as detracting from their creative pursuits. As one musician noted, the pressure to be *“marketable”* directly impacts their availability and ability to secure live gigs, sell merchandise, and ultimately sustain music as a career. In the era of streaming and being your own boss, these musicians feel a cyclical loop of pursuing activities that feel disconnected from their artistic value.

### **6.2.3 “What’s Your Stream Count?” and Metrics of Value**

When centering the experience of the participants on the platforms as cultural producers, they commonly expressed feelings of exhaustion and frustration. They also expressed extreme fatigue from juggling marketing, design, tour management and social media – labor activities that detract from their artistic creation and production processes. One participant expressed, *“Trying to navigate that is really hard when all you want to do is make music with your friends.”*

A focal frustration that emerged was around the reductive nature of streaming metrics as a market of success and value. Participants discussed how the numerical visibility – often signified by monthly listener counts – overshadowed the qualitative aspects of the artist. One participant commented, “*People will be like, oh, he only has like 10,000 monthly listeners. He fell off. But that's actually a lot. People don't actually have perspective for like if there were like 10,000 people in a room listening to your music, that would be crazy but like you don't actually get like the rewards for it.*” This statement reflects a larger critique of how the streaming economy has obscured the magnitude of fan engagement behind the abstraction of quantifiable metrics. To the participants, the streaming ecosystem has prioritized continuous growth over fostering deep connections.

### **6.3 Illusion of Streaming Revenue**

#### **6.3.1 Exposure Without Reward**

Many participants emphasized how misleading streaming numbers can be. As one participant expresses, “*it doesn't actually translate to that much revenue.*” While being featured on popular playlists can help boost a short-term number of streams, the hype is short-lived. Several musicians highlighted the passivity of most listeners, “*Most people just put it [the playlists] on the background...they don't really pay attention.*” Another participant notes, “*not many of those people actually convert to real fans.*”

These reflections emphasize a fundamental disconnect between platform-mediated exposure and meaningful community engagement as high stream counts or prominent playlist placements rarely build loyal fanbases. For many interviewees, the pursuit of playlist placement becomes increasingly meaningless.

### **6.3.2 *Financial Unsustainability of Streaming***

A pervasive thread of frustration across the interviews was with the insufficient financial compensation by the streaming platforms. As one interviewee remarks, *“I don’t know many people that actually are able to sustain themselves off streaming.”* Despite their music being widely accessible, most musicians noted the royalty payouts – especially from platforms such as Spotify – are extremely low and insufficient for them to sustain a livelihood on music alone. Ironically, one participant pointed out they probably pay more for Spotify as a listener than getting paid as a musician. This assessment showcases a widespread sentiment of exploitation in the streaming platform ecosystem, where the financial benefits disproportionately favor those who own the platforms over the cultural producers.

### **6.3.3 *Diversifying Income Through Alternative Avenues***

Another fundamental aspect of being a musician is performing live. While booking gigs may depend on certain streaming metrics, the actual shows can be extremely fruitful for the musicians. For many participants, live shows remain one of the few reliable means of producing revenue and building real connections with their fans. These musicians are aiming to shift their focus from streaming-based activities toward tasks that enhance their live performance capabilities. One musician reflects on the meaningful connections made after their performances: *“Those are the people that like buy my merch. Those are the people that like actually care about what I do.”*

## **6.4 Reimagining the Future of Streaming**

### **6.4.1 *Less Reliance on Streaming***

As mentioned throughout the findings, every interviewee mentioned their averseness but necessary presence on MSPs. They were adamant about keeping their dependence on these platforms limited and finding more meaningful activities outside of the platforms. Many

articulated an aspiration to minimize the reliance on these platforms and redirect their focus towards more meaningful activities. One participant reflected on this dynamic, *“Right now we have everything on there and I'm thinking about the idea of limiting what is on there, but I'm not entirely sure that that's the path that I want to go...Most artists make most of their money through touring through and merch sales so I don't know it's hard to say what the future of streaming will be.”*

The rules of the current streaming ecosystem are stacked against working musicians – and they know it. As one participant explains, *“It strikes me as entirely a black box. I have no fucking idea what is happening.”* Another expresses letting go of the pressure: *“Even when my friends would try and put out like stuff that's regimented in a genre and it's well produced even they found difficulty in kind of, like, finding any traction. So, after seeing that, I was like, maybe I should place less emphasis on having this as a factor in my mind when I'm making stuff and it makes living easier. I'm not thinking about another number.”*

#### **6.4.2 Transparent and Fair Compensation**

Every interviewee underscored the absolute need for reform in the compensation model. Many expressed hopes for a model grounded in transparency as one states: *“Yeah. I guess I would want to hope for more like a transparent pay model where it's like you actually understand where the money's coming from and like why you're getting paid that.”* Others discussed compensation features they prefer on other platforms: *“I like being able to pay artists directly to support them that I'm getting that out of the way first. I like that about Bandcamp. I like being able to pay people directly because at least I know where my money is going.”*

Another commented on the lack of awareness and support from the general population: *“But I know not a lot of people want to spend money directly [on the artists] when*

*they can just listen immediately [on MSPs without paying]*” Later in the conversation, they added on stating: *“I guess I’ll change my answer a little bit – of course people want to support the artists, but it’s kind of become a common normal that they just want to just listen to a song and not pay for something.”* This interviewee’s hesitation reflects an important behavioral pattern among listeners, one that complicates discussions around fair compensation for musicians.

#### **6.4.3 Government Regulations and Policies**

Several participants contended the need for meaningful reform sponsored by the government. Some framed this as an essential redistribution of power from corporations to the creators and consumers: *“If as an artist you had control over what is happening to your music and as a consumer, if you had more control over where your money’s going. Yeah, that could be... There just needs to be more power in the hands of the people as opposed to the, you know.”*

Other interviewees discussed explicitly the policies needed to regulate compensation across the industry: *“It is hard for me to imagine another way being possible to fairly compensate music artists for their work via streaming platforms, except to have governments regulate a flat rate per stream that an artist makes on the basis of those streams equal across the board for every artist as much as possible.”*

#### **6.4.4 Platform Preferences**

It was clear through the interviews; there was a clear favorite amongst the platforms. Bandcamp was overwhelmingly mentioned as a sort of ideal platform in the current ecosystem. One interviewee said concisely: *“Bandcamp that would just be...the way.”* Other participants shared Bandcamp as their default choice for releasing music: *“I think Bandcamp is always going to be my default for anything I do.”* Not only is the payout model

*“extremely fair”* says one participant, but the ability also to connect with fans is much more direct and connective: *“you can just send an old form style post out to them. And I think that’s really cute and nostalgic.”* The ability to make sales is also much more intuitive than other platforms: *“you can basically build your own website through there”* says one participant, *“things that I am selling on that platform, I think people would be more likely to see it and purchase if it’s right in front of them while they’re listening.”*

However, several musicians mentioned the limitations. As one musician noted, Bandcamp is framed as a platform for music enthusiasts: *“I feel like an average music listener does not have a problem with Spotify.... using a better streaming service or going direct to Bandcamp is like, that’s something as a very passionate music listener.”*

There were also some hesitations about the ownership aspect, particularly with Bandcamp’s recent acquisitions by Epic Games and Songtradr (Monroe, 2023), though these concerns did not outweigh the platform’s perceived advantages: *“I might jump ship if a better alternative comes around. But until then, I’m staying on the platform (Bandcamp) just for convenience sake.”*

#### **6.4.5 Alternative Streaming Models**

*“My ideal streaming service...I want it to be like a community, somewhere to connect.”*

When inquired about alternatives to these dominant streaming platforms, some participants struggled to share concrete ideas or models. However, once propositioned with the concept of platform cooperatives and non-profit platforms, most responded extremely positively and enthusiastically. While very few were aware of this idea in the music or cultural context, most were familiar with cooperatives in other sectors such as agriculture or groceries.

Some participants were extremely familiar with the model and spontaneously brought it up themselves with one even suggesting, *“this is a uniquely good use case for something like a co-op.”* Another referenced Nebula, a cooperative video streaming platform founded by YouTubers seeking ownership and creative autonomy (Wituschek, 2020). One musician further expanded on the applicability of the cooperative model by saying, *“because if it’s a cooperative and it’s a platform for musicians to be more paid than I’m assuming it’d be more local than global.”* Another participant suggested that a real shift may only occur in response to widespread disillusionment with the mainstream streaming platforms: *“something would have to happen to where people get so disillusioned – whether it’s like UI or advertising or sound quality wise – people get so fed up with that.”*

More broadly, many interviewees had experience with community-focused groups or collectives. One participant noted the success of Monstercat, a collective grounded in artistic and community support (Monstercat, 2025): *“Definitely...that kind of aspect, it can be a business model. I think MonsterChat's actually a really good example of that because they were built on a community built on being able to uh show artists unknown artists.”*

#### **6.4.6 Community Building On and Off Platforms**

When discussing specific features they’d like to see in an ideal platform, most interviewees highlighted their desire for deeper social connections. One participant explains, *“Spotify is extremely social for the listener. For the artists, not so much.”* The lack of mechanisms for musician-to-musician or musician-to-fan interaction may be deliberate – one that maintains platform control over the user base and interactions. Participants also noted alternative avenues that enhance social connections. One musician referenced the app Airbuds, which allows users to see what their friends are listening to and react (Airbuds Widget, 2025): *“I think they would engage with different music a lot more often, because they*

*can see their friends.*” These contemplations show a desire for platforms that prioritize transparency, community, and mutuality – moving beyond the constraints of algorithms towards relational-based platform models.

Offline social connections developed at live shows and local venues remain vital for these musicians. When asked about the experience of an “ideal platform” that existed in a physical context, the participants were enthusiastic. They described existing examples such as libraries, DIY venues in their local regions, and record shops. For many musicians, these in-person interactions are not only advantageously valuable serving as paths for collaboration, promotion, and creative exchange but also serve as emotionally nourishing connections.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Constraints on Creative Autonomy

The lived experiences of these Gen Z musicians with the current music streaming ecosystem reflect a clear manifestation of the concepts within platform capitalism and its implications for digital labor. It is clear the paradox of dependency these musicians are caught within – this coerced participation embodies the essence of platform capitalism. As participants share, not being active on these platforms would be “*basically shooting themselves in the foot*” – echoing Duffy’s (2017) concept of aspirational labor, in which cultural producers are required to consistently invest in avenues for potential exposure. These MSPs are essentially gatekeeping the ability to be discoverable.

Additionally, their reflections echo the unpaid or underpaid tasks performed on these platforms that is essential to the platform capitalistic value proposition (Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2012). These musicians continuously perform menial tasks to maintain their presence – such as curating descriptions, engaging fans, promoting content. This type of labor is largely uncompensated and finally presented through as a platform-mediated format. They feel a

sense of ambivalence – grateful for the global reach combined with a frustration of the exploitative and extractive practices of the platform dynamics. The emergence of third-party services that promote potential for greater streamability extends the commodification of visibility itself. They are exploitative intermediaries that charge fees or free labor in exchange for a chance at playlist placement. As one participant puts it, they “*monetize aspirations*,” transforming the desire of success and recognition into another revenue stream for platform capitalism.

The participants’ frustrations with the platform-bound aesthetics also highlights the well-studied tension between algorithms and artistry. Many are well-aware that the music promoted by MSPs are typically short tracks optimized for attention or ambient music suitable for passive consumption. As they navigate this environment, they are forced to consider the pursuit of artistry with the demands of the algorithm. This represents a profound transition in cultural production – where traditional gatekeepers in the industry such as radio or labels once controlled access to production and distribution, the algorithm has become the “new gatekeeper” (Bonini & Gandini, 2019). As one participant notes, a kind of “*algorithm god*” has become such a commanding force that musicians feel ultimately bound by its powers – whatever that is.

AI creates another layer of complication and instability for these musicians. Their fear about generative AI is a reflection across the cultural industries. As major labels enter negotiations with AI corporations to monetize from their catalogs (Shaw, 2025), the potential for pushing working musicians out becomes even more possible. Though, for them, the fear is not just about being replaced, but also about not getting credit for the art they work so hard to provide.

In addition to the algorithmic pressures, the musicians also accentuated the demands of the online environment as an entrepreneur. While DIY practices were once seen as punk or

anti-capitalist, the tech landscape has coopted the concept of DIY into neoliberal entrepreneurship. Cultural producers across mediums are expected to become online brands and storytellers, alongside the previously outsourced tasks of managing tours, selling merch, etc. Even securing a label's interest hinges on proving marketability through streaming and social media metrics. As one musician describes, the role of a musician nowadays is also of a "*content farmer*," where their creativity is disposed to an online format subjugating their artistry to the desires of visibility and engagement.

Some participants also expressed their opinions on the devaluation of music as success measures are often tied to quantifiable streaming metrics. In their perspective, monthly listeners have become the dominant mode of valuation, but as one musician points out, these numbers are profoundly contextless: "*10,000 listeners might seem insignificant, but that's a lot of people.*" This decontextualized metric contributes to a widespread devaluation of music and musicians, where success is restricted to platform-specific terms. This process reflects the criticism of platform-mediated instability (Srnicsek, 2017a) where musicians are made to internalize their own undervaluation, measuring themselves against nebulous standards dictated by the platforms. This creates an environment in which these cultural producers bear the labor of culture creation in a hedonic sequence striving to meet specific standards, while the platform owners continue to benefit. Additionally, the producers also become consumers of the platforms. As one participant notes, "*I probably pay more for Spotify as a listener than getting paid as a creator.*" This speaks to the perverse inversion of value creation, where artists bankroll their own exploitation. The compensation model of MSPs is a massive point of contention – every participant emphasized the pure inadequacy of the system, highlighting how even significant stream counts do not convert into meaningful revenue. While the music industry is thriving, only certain players hold the power (and the profits), offering musicians less and less.

## 7.2 Struggle for Fair Compensation

The compensation model of MSPs emerged as a massive point of contention among all participants. Every musician emphasized the pure failure of the system, highlighting how even significant stream counts do not convert into meaningful revenue. Despite achieving substantial stream counts, the participants reported receiving negligible payouts.

MSPs operate under an extremely controlled platform capitalistic environment in which the design, policies, and impact largely benefit the select few operating behind closed doors. As the interviewees noted, the “*black box*” of the MSPs with their opaque algorithms and non-transparent compensation models largely disempower and mystify musicians.

Correspondingly, there is a need for an increasing awareness of the consumers. Jem Cohen, Afghan-American filmmaker, calls for the “double anchor,” in which the interplay between the creators and consumers should be *mutually beneficial* (Taylor, 2024, pg. 167).

## 7.3 Reimagining Platform Futures

Redefining success as a musician was an important aspect for many participants. In a response to the structural tensions of the streaming ecosystem, they aim to create a more expansive and meaningful definition of success. Rather than aspiring solely for quantifiable “*success*,” they desire meaningful connections with fans and other musicians, freedom to explore their creative capacity, and enough economic maintenance to continue pursuing music. This reframing is a refreshing rhetoric in comparison with the neoliberal cultural landscape, which tends to accentuate success with popularity and profit (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

### 7.3.1 Commons in Music Streaming

Oström’s principles for governing the commons such as transparency and collective decision-making can be applied to what the participants want to see in a streaming platform. Oström’s eight design principles for managing shared resources sustainably including clearly

distinct limitations, mutual decision-making, and disagreement resolution methods can be applied directly in this context.

The centralization and democratization mediated through MSPs has in many ways benefitted musicians and fans. However, this directly violates one of Oström's core principles: individuals who are directly impacted should partake in designing and adapting them. Although most participants had not encountered the concept of platform cooperative, many responded positively at the idea. The notion of a streaming platform created by and for – and governed by – musicians with collective ownership, transparency in compensation, and democratic decision-making – deeply resonated with them. This moment where people are frustrated but also curious about alternative models illustrates what Oström would deem a *critical junction*: a recognition that current systems are failing and there is a need for imagining and developing alternative, more hopeful systems. The references to Nebula as a cooperative in the creator economy as a response to YouTube's capitalistic model as well as existing artist-run communities the participants are part of further illustrate how commons-based logics are already circulating in these spaces — even if not necessarily labeled as such.

Musicians yearn for more community-oriented features and deeper connections on and offline. This desire for relationality in platforms – where artists can collaborate with other artists, learn from each other, and be part of an ecosystem that prioritizes community over content. Their frustrations with MSP's one-way “*fan-centered*” design in comparison to their excitement for apps like Airbuds suggest that musicians don't just want to be listened to, but they also want to engage. Platforms, for them, should not just merely be a distribution tool but shared cultural environments. A perfect platform doesn't exist, but as one participant says, “*can't let perfect get in the way of good I suppose.*”

### 7.3.2 *Learnings from Other Platforms*

Overwhelmingly, for the interviewees, Bandcamp stood out as a clear favorite in the existing platform landscape. Bandcamp is introduced as an online marketplace and community where enthusiastic music listeners “discover, connect with, and directly support the artists they love” (Bandcamp, 2025a). Founded in 2008, Bandcamp launched around the same time as Spotify, by co-founders Shawn Grunberger and Ethan Diamond. After seeing a band he liked struggle to exchange their MP3s on their own website, Diamond decided to leverage the model of white label services for writers like Blogger to offer a platform for musicians to sell their music directly to fans (McDermott, 2020). Bandcamp's emphasis is on bridging the online and offline – with half of the sales on the platform for physical purchases like vinyl, cassettes, CDs, merch (Krukowski, 2024).

At the pinnacle of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bandcamp announced its fundraiser initiative – acquiring over \$4 million worth of music and merch – for its artists (Pemberton, 2020). As showcase on their homepage, Bandcamp has produced around \$1.5 billion for musicians since its establishment (Bandcamp, 2025b). In contrast, Spotify launched their “Covid-19 Music Relief” project, which merely suggested specific organizations that can offer monetary support to musicians most in need (Spotify, 2020). They also added a feature allowing fans to tip musicians directly for their work.

Though Bandcamp is much loved by many, critics state that the love for Bandcamp is not necessarily about its strengths but the shortcomings of streaming overall (Roberts, 2020). In 2022, Bandcamp was officially acquired by Epic Games, a U.S. based video game corporation – well-known for the popular game Fortnite – valued at over \$28 billion as of March 2022 (Ruiz, 2022). In Diamond's (2022) blog post announcing the news, he assured the Bandcamp community that the core operations will stay the same and Bandcamp will continue their original mission – to “help spread the healing power of music.” He highlighted

the shared values and visions of Bandcamp and Epic Games' new partnership stating, "we share a vision of building the most open, artist-friendly ecosystem in the world, and together we'll be able to create even more opportunities for artists to be compensated fairly for their work." Just a year later, Epic sold Bandcamp to Songtradr exclusive of its employees (C. Harrington, 2023). Regardless of its ownership transitions, Bandcamp showed the participants what is possible in terms of compensation and connection with fans.

Alternative to the hierarchical and corporate structure of Bandcamp, Resonate launched in 2016 as a music streaming platform cooperative. Its service was based on a multi-stakeholder cooperative model and blockchain technology (Hu, 2016). Their financial model largely relied on increasing payments for a song (0.002 cents for the first stream; 0.004 cents for the second, etc.) until the user owned the song outright. For the musicians, the stream-to-own model would potentially pay out over 2.5 times the average Spotify payout. Additionally, their governance model centered around the inclusivity of the platform's employees, musicians and consumers alike. Resonate's Manifesto (Resonate, 2025) (see Appendix) also highlights principles similar to those of CRPIs and platform cooperatives emphasizing values around democratic ownership and intentional cultural consumption.

While initiating much excitement in various music, tech, and cooperative communities, Resonate faced internal difficulties around governance causing its slowdown over the years. In 2023, a volunteer developer publicly announced frustrations with the institutional issues and weak cooperative engagement processes: "*Even when there are obvious technical solutions, there are often no decision-making structures that make it possible...*" (Resonate, 2023). Their early vision emphasized equitable profit distribution and community-based decision-making processes. However, sustaining cooperative dynamics with a for-profit structure proved to be challenging.

Lastly, we'll explore Subvert, a collectively owned Bandcamp alternative. With Bandcamp's acquisitions the past few years, much of its community felt betrayed and anxious about the platform's future. Hailed as a "Mondragon of Music," Subvert aims to create a two-part organization: one with a cooperative entity and the other with a cooperative-owned corporation to own the intangible entities and achieve funding (Hecker, 2024). Recently, Subvert officially announced three representatives in varied segmentations (artist, label, and supporter) for their board, signaling their progress in their governance model (Subvert, 2025).

These alternative platforms are not without weaknesses – some are in their infancy, many have struggled with scalability, reach, and funding – but they offer crucial examples where democratic values can be practiced in our digital spaces and refined in real time. By allowing individuals to participate in collective decision-making processes, co-designing community policies and platform features, these platforms can help us practice democratic principles in a meaningful way.

### **7.3.3 Government Interventions**

While alternative imaginaries on what music consumption could be is critical, we cannot negate the critical role of government intervention and oversight. Several participants shared this sentiment. Their calls are consistent with the broader criticism of the digital landscape and lack of government interventions. The U.S. government has largely ceded to private tech corporations under the guise of innovation and optimization (Milano, 2019). This inability and inaction of the government has allowed platforms like Spotify to amass disproportionate power not only shaping our access to music but also further exploiting the labor of musicians and manipulating our collective expectation of music. One participant stated directly: "*It is hard for me to imagine another way being possible to fairly compensate*

*music artists...except to have governments regulate a flat rate per stream... equal across the board for every artist.”*

In this circumstance, we can draw from cultural democracy framework which addresses the concerns of the cultural industries theory (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2012; Hesmondhalgh, 2013) and contends that the arts should be public goods and that the government has a responsibility to ensure their production and distribution is operated fairly (McGuigan, 2004). For example, across Europe, a flat per-stream payout and transparency of AI tools utilized on platforms have gained traction in policy discussions (Krivade, 2024). In France, there is a policy that safeguards cultural goods from the reigns of the free-market (Frau-Meigs, 2002). In Canada, there is funding for public digital platforms that aim to protect cultural labor (Baldini et al., 2021). Some of these proposals have not yet been widely adopted, but there is a mounting amount of evidence that showcase the potential impact of government-mandated policies and restructured payment models including a United Nations report concluding that streaming economics is detrimental to the future of music and needs to be reexamined and restructured (UMAW, 2021).

Despite an overwhelming amount of scholarly and industry evidence for the claims discussed and musicians' clear calls for change through various activism initiatives (Hesmondhalgh & Sun, 2024; Ruiz, 2020), there is a gap between policy discourse and the lived experience of the participants. Very few of them were aware of specific legislative proposals and political initiatives addressing these concerns, which indicates not only a low awareness of ongoing policy efforts but also as a general disempowerment from civic practices. There is a need for more capacity building efforts within the cultural communities – in relation to labor and collective organizing as well as coalitional policy work across disciplines.

When it comes to licensing, copyright and copyleft advocates should not dominate conversations about access – given that both agendas can perpetuate inequities. As Taylor (2024, p. 173) contends, these movements are ideologically siloed and often exclude cultural producers out of the discussions. She argues that the dismantling of copyright practices could theoretically equalize opportunity, but such a vision fails to address the diverse social, economic, and material experiences in which people create and experience culture. Equal opportunity to resources and access is, therefore, structurally impractical with both ends of the licensing ideological spectrums.

### **8. Implications of the Research**

This study contributes to an increasing body of work that critically analyzes the intersection of digital platforms and cultural industries, particularly in relation to labor. Key themes including tensions between the algorithm and artistic authenticity and limitations of current compensation models underscore the complex challenges Gen Z musicians face today.

First, there is a need to broaden the geographical focus of this topic. Much of the research on streaming platforms and its impact on cultural producers are focused on the Global North and/or Western contexts. A focus on Davis and Xiao's (2021) demand to de-westernize platform studies is pertinent. Expanding on this research to include perspectives from the diasporic communities and underrepresented regions would not only diversify the empirical base but also confront prevailing narratives about entrepreneurship and digital cultural industries.

Second, the insights point to the need for more interdisciplinary and participatory approaches to the studies of digital labor. Musicians are often forced to become data workers and digital entrepreneurs to remain relevant on these platforms. Future research and initiatives

should actively seek engagement with these musicians as co-designers and analysts while also connecting them to experts in various fields to better inform artists of systemic perspectives.

Lastly, this research raises important paradigms of what alternative digital futures could look like. Participants were enthusiastic for community-driven, solidarity-economics of music distribution. There is an immense appetite for collective ownership and governance across industries – and platforms can serve as an influential example.

Overall, this research aims to not only resurface critical tensions within the music streaming ecosystem but also hopes to contribute to the imagining and developing of more inclusive digital infrastructures.

## **9. Future Research**

As musicians cope with inadequate compensation, there is an increasing demand in investigating policy interventions and collective organizing efforts. Future research could explore the role of unionization, advocacy groups, and policies specific to the music streaming ecosystem. Utilizing successful examples from other regions and other sectors, future research can explore the applicability of these interventions in the music industry and/or U.S. context.

Additionally, future studies can explore the intersectionality of platform-mediated labor and demographic identities. For example, do queer and non-white artists experience certain barriers to discoverability and monetization? How do they envision future models that address these specific concerns? There are specific individual experiences based on the musician's specific identity and position in society. These elements are important for more nuanced conversations and research.

The material reality of the internet should also not be dismissed in this discussion. While platforms are what we interact with to consume art and culture, these platforms run on

massive systems of infrastructure and labor – predominantly on those most marginalized in our global landscape (Mosebo, 2024; Simet, 2025; Wangari & Vaidyanathan, 2025). A study from the University of Glasgow showcased the increase in streaming has a direct impact on damaging effects on the environment (Kim, 2019). These harms cannot be neglected in these discussions as we need to build more societal awareness of these elements in how our online actions impact the offline realities of our global communities.

Finally, given the core mission of this research – there is a clear need and growing interest for alternative platform models and government actions. Future research should examine previous, current, and emerging alternative frameworks such as platform cooperatives, decentralized networks, open-source technologies in the context of the cultural industries and collective ownership. Case studies of platforms mentioned in the discussion such as Resonate, Nebula, Subvert – could help assess their viability, challenges, and impact in the overall cultural landscape. Localized networks exploring decentralization and open access to culture should also be considered. Supplemented with government regulations and investments, it is possible to envision a future system where platforms are operated with artists and their livelihoods in mind. With further lines of inquiry, future studies can contribute to a greater theoretical and practical understanding of digital cultural labor and systems.

## **10. Conclusion**

This paper highlights the complex and often precarious realities of independent musicians navigating today's music streaming ecosystem. While music streaming platforms offer unparalleled access and potential for visibility, they also impose limitations that compromise artistic autonomy, compensation, and career sustainability. Interviews with ten musicians in the U.S. explored key insights on transitioning to a more equitable music

streaming ecosystem – rooted in fairer compensation models, robust government policy, and alternative platform models. Importantly, Gen Z musicians need to be part of the imagination and creation of a more transparent and equitable music ecosystem.

We are all eager for a space to access and express our cultural identities. Streaming platforms have capitalized on this integral human need and produced a model in which financial, labor, and emotional exploitation of cultural producers have become normalized. It is critical that policy specialists, academic experts, digital activists, cultural producers and consumers alike prioritize efforts aimed at combating the manipulative tactics employed by the corporations that benefit in the current streaming ecosystem.

The internet, for better or worse, has become a permanent facet of modern life. As such, it is critical to center the perspectives of digital natives to critically explore the systems they navigate as both cultural producers and consumers – especially in discussing alternative imaginaries that enable more meaningful interactions and equitable society. By giving voice to this key demographic, I hope to inform the ongoing conversation about the need for more equitable and transparent music distribution models.

As a scholar who is both critical and cautiously optimistic, I find myself deeply troubled at the structural inequities embedded in our systems – both online and offline. The current landscape gives us a lot to be disheartened about, but I contest this feeling with my contributions in research and practice around building sustainable futures. To conclude, here is a quote from Astra Taylor's *The People's Platform* (p. 215) that embraces my sentiment –

“We are embedded beings who create work in a social context, toiling shared soil in the hopes that our labor bears fruit. It is up to all of us whether this soil is enriched or depleted, whether it nurtures diverse and vital produce or allows predictable crops to take root and run rampant. The notion of sustainable culture forces us to recognize that

the digital has not rendered all previously existing institutions obsolete. It also challenges us to figure out how to improve them.”

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APPENDIX

**Mozilla’s Data Governance Framework (Ruhaak et al., 2021)**

1. **Clearly defined boundaries.** Individuals or households who have rights to withdraw resource units from the common-pool resource (CPR) must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself.
2. **Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions.** Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money.
3. **Collective-choice arrangements.** Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules.
4. **Monitoring.** Monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.
5. **Graduated sanctions.** Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or by both.
6. **Conflict-resolution mechanisms.** Appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low-cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials.
7. **Minimal recognition of rights to organize.** The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.
8. **Nested enterprises** (for CPRs that are parts of larger systems). Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises.

**Table 1: U.S. Dollars Earned for 1,000 Streams (Duetti, 2024):**

<b>MSP</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>
Amazon	9.1	8.9	8.9	8.8
Apple	6.6	6.3	6.4	6.2
YouTube*	4.8	4.4	4.3	4.8
Spotify	3.2	3.1	3.0	3.0

\*YouTube rates vary significantly across artists depending on underlying revenue source; the selected rate represents an average across independent artists in our study.

Note: All figures represent global payout rates. We restated historical figures versus our 2023 report due to a significantly greater data set (particularly for additional revenue streams for YouTube).

**Table 2: Interview Participants**

Participant #	Age*	Years Active**	Genre(s)
1	28	5-10	Black Metal, Hardcore, Metalcore
2	22	1-5	Cloud Rap, Electronic
3	22	1-5	Experimental hip-hop
4	N/A	5-10	Math Punk, Pop Punk, Experimental
5	N/A	5-10	N/A
6	26	5-10	Genredeath
7	N/A	5-10	Crack rock steady/anti-ska (mix of d-beat, grindcore, crust punk, and ska)
8	N/A	5-10	Many genres — depending on the release!
9	27	5-10	Indie Rock, Folk
10	N/A	5-10	EDM, Dubstep, House, Ambient, Lofi

*\*Age during the time of the interview; publicized only with direct approval*

*\*\*Years active (as a musician) was defined in ranges via research recruitment form*

#### **Full Manifesto from Resonate (Resonate, 2025):**

1. Music is art, not content: Creativity should be in the hands of its creators, not those looking to extract or exploit its value.
2. We believe that co-ops are the future of a more egalitarian internet and society: Technology must benefit all involved by weaving communities into thriving, sustainable networks that address the diverse needs of people by providing them with their life essentials. Building a worldwide network of co-operatives is a key part of rejecting the destructive power of Capitalism and Colonialism within our societies, fostering a world built on co-operation, communal control of the commons, and the equality of unequals.
3. We are the stewards of our artists' creativity: We have a duty of care to the artists, music and other works that we host on Resonate. Our goal is that artists are able to thrive, and that the work entrusted to us is respected and protected.
4. The music "industry" is broken: Its extractive and exploitative hierarchies have never truly served artists. Power has been consolidated in the hands of a small number of technology companies and dominant major labels. We are building a new ecosystem founded on principles of fairness, transparency and co-operation.

5. Artists should be able to build and maintain sustainable careers on their own terms, without exploitation: We should build systems that support and enable their creativity, and human value, and honor their social contributions.
6. Everyone should own their platform, own their data, and their own network: Co-operation and community are key, not marketing schemes for VC-funded Platform Capitalists.
7. Platforms, technology companies and corporations should not dictate the terms of distribution: Artists should retain all ownership and rights, be able to decide what, when and how they make their art available to the public, and the value of their art.
8. Privacy, inclusivity and ethics are not after-thoughts: They must be built-in by design, considered from the start and actively sought at every stage of development.
9. Culture > Profit: Value cannot be reduced to numbers, follower counts, clicks or other metrics. Value is not just measured in public success or monetary worth. Art has a value to society and humanity that cannot be quantified and commodified.
10. Active engagement in culture should be incentivized over passive consumption: Respect for artists should be built by giving them agency, as well as building real community and mutual strength together with their listeners and fans.
11. We reject the historical basis of property in divine right and human supremacy in ecological relations: This “divine right” over property has led to the commodification and extraction of most of the Earth’s life support systems, and also the commodification of human beings. To redress the harms of colonisation, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the genocide of Indigenous Peoples, the creation of ‘under-developed peoples,’ persecution of the LGBTQIA+ community and many others, we must engage and align with all dispossessed communities. We realise that these historical harms were fundamental to the expansion and apparent success of Capitalism. By democratising, decentralising, and diversifying economic activity we can lessen consumption, and redistribute resources and power. Co-operation enables us to move forward in mutualism with one another, and this planet, constructing an economy both visionary and life-affirming.