The Stream Of Consciousness:
Rethinking a Music Streaming Platform Artist-Centered and Community Driven

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Abstract:

In the current disrupted ecosystem, capitalism-driven market pressures imposed by the intermediaries have irreversibly transformed the music industry, fostering an exploitative regime rooted in power asymmetries and systemic platform dependence. The promised payoff of cultural democratization and optimization has, in contrast, led to the devaluation of creative content into a contingent commodity. By exercising an unequal gatekeeping function, these powerful middlemen exploit and manipulate artists while extracting a new source of profit through users' datafication driven by algorithmic infrastructure and digital surveillance-driven mechanisms. Considering these deeply embedded inequalities, this thesis aims to address the following research question:

How can a hybrid music streaming platform be rethought to balance the needs of artists and users through innovative, ethical, and community-driven

While previous research has typically addressed this displacement through limited methodological approaches considering the multiple affected agents, this study intentionally combines Participatory Action Research (PAR) with a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach. By applying the lens of this robust methodology to an in-depth case study, it aims to challenge and dismantle the current exploitative, entrenched structures. More specifically, the researcher's choice draws upon the urgency to co-design both practical and sustainable solutions for the industry by placing the human factor and the creative content at its core. By empowering practitioners involved in the development of sustainable streaming alternatives as co-researchers, the discussion generated through the conceptual mapping of findings serves to further validate the patterns that emerged from expert interviews. This technique anchors the conceptual framework in their lived experiences, enhancing its significance through the field-based insights of individuals directly involved in the ecosystem. Therefore, the main scope moves beyond a mere descriptive analysis toward the collaborative construction of theoretical and actionable frameworks, a tangible future transformation. Ultimately, this methodological blend is uniquely suited to the aim of this thesis: to conceptualize the conditions and values necessary for ethical, artist-centered music platform design, while contributing to tangible innovations capable of challenging the extractive capitalist dynamics that currently shape the industry.

Through the thematic analysis of primary and secondary data, a clear picture of the inequalities affecting the digital music industry is created, the foundation for systemic and structural restoration. Autonomy, agency, and creative ownership result as mandatory principles to diminish the unequal authority held by the platform monopoly and its algorithmic governance. Core themes to drive the creation of a future hybrid music streaming platform, one that is both artist-centered and community-

driven, were identified through the research, including value co-creation, editorial and narrative framing to enrich music consumption, co-ownership models, ethical values shaping user engagement, user-centric revenue distribution, and transparency aimed at re-empowering curators. Together, these counter-capitalist movements reflect diverse yet interconnected dimensions of a shared vision: to reorient the music industry and its power structures around its two irreplaceable pillars: the artists who create and the listeners who give meaning to music.

Keywords: Platform Capitalism, Datafication, Music Streaming, Contingent Commodity, Power Asymmetries

Preface:

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To myself

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1. Introduction

As platformization accelerates across the creative industries, the music sector is undergoing a profound transformation (Nordgård, 2018, p. 6; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). The dematerialization of cultural content into a digital commodity (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 1), driven by the proliferation of open-access models (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50) and solidified by their monopolistic dominance (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6; Parker et al., 2016, p. 14), is irreversibly redefining music as contingent commodity (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Drott, 2018a, p. 9; Morris, 2020, p. 2). Hence, the current multi-sided platform economy (Parker et al., 2016, p. 5) constrains its stakeholders into "stacked" infrastructures (Bratton, 2015, p. 4; Parker et al., 2016, p. 14), wherein their disempowerment is positively correlated with increasing platform dependence (Comor, 2010, p. 451; Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Cutolo & Kenney, 2019, p. 2). As a result, platforms serve as both intermediaries and gatekeepers (Poell et al., 2022, p. 6), converting conventional supply chains into interactive, data-driven ecosystems regulated by 'algo-torial' feedback loops that enhance their dominance (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14; Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 6; Morris, 2020, p. 2; Hesmondhalgh, 2021, p. 9). Correspondingly, artists are forced to adapt to platform governance by attempting to decipher algorithmic selection logics at the expense of their autonomy and creative agency (Morris, 2020, p. 1). Exacerbating their subordination, the monetization of the royalties relies on inequitable revenue models crafted to enrich the intermediaries instead of valuing the cultural product (Dimont, 2018, p. 678; Alaei et al., 2022, p. 8699). The so-called democratization of culture reclaimed by open-access models has proven to be the facade behind which platforms centralize extractive logics through surveillance-based governance (Zuboff, 2019; Siciliano, 2021, p. 230) fueled by users' datafication (Drott, 2018a, p. 9).

Given the urgency of the matter, this thesis interrogates how the migration to open-access models alters power dynamics in the music industry, marginalizes creative labor (Fleischer, 2012, pp. 76–103), and commodifies cultural value (Terranova, 2000, p. 48). A systematic deconstruction of the ecosystem reveals inherent conflicts of interest among platform providers, content creators, and users. Therefore, the aim of this research explore how artist-centered and community-driven alternatives might offer ethical and sustainable frameworks to challenge this profit-driven system, aiming to restore autonomy to cultural producers and align platform governance with genuine participatory values (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 258; Jenkins, 2006, p. 6).

1.2 Reconfiguring Platform Power in the Music Industry

As cultural production migrated to "stacked" digital systems (Eisenmann et al., 2011; Bratton, 2015, p. 4; Cusumano et al., 2019, Ch. 1), power dynamics in the music industry are being reconfigured, intensifying existing hierarchies. The central question to address concerns the kind of progress new technological systems are truly fostering (Marx, 1997, p. 563), revealing a form of

digital advancement that prioritizes efficiency and remuneration over genuine support for the industry (Monahan, 2010, p. 92). This unfair asymmetry is further deepened by the establishment of platform-dependent relationships, wherein artists are exploited to produce commodified content, while users become prosumers by generating value while consuming streamed music (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863). In response, artist-centered models, rooted in direct-to-fan systems (Siciliano, 2021, p. 231), community-based platforms (Jenkins, 2006, p. 258), and ethical revenue-sharing frameworks (Dimont, 2018, p. 694), seek to reclaim a fair redistribution of value and power among the exploited stakeholders.

Building on the disrupted dynamics previously discussed, this thesis frames its central inquiry around the following research question:

How can a hybrid music streaming platform be rethought to balance the needs of artists and consumers through innovative, ethical, and community-driven approaches?

A thorough investigation to extract viable solutions requires disentangling its underlying theoretical frameworks and incorporating key industry perspectives. Therefore, to establish a robust foundation for developing a fairer music streaming model, this study is further broken down into three interrelated sub-questions:

SQ1: What are the key economic and political power dynamics driving the transformation of the music industry through its platformization?

Through their evolution into multisided ecosystems (Eisenmann et al., 2011), platforms skillfully leverage network effects (Cennamo & Santaló, 2013: p. 1331) to strengthen their market position. Their dominance results legitimized by the appropriation of the gatekeeping role, now mediated by algorithmic recommendation systems (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 3), which further entrench structural market asymmetries (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p. 1002). The capitalist logic has supplanted the former role of music

Framed through the lens of power-dependence theory (Emerson, 1962, p. 33; Cook et al., 1983, p. 301), this thesis investigates how platforms structurally dominate the industry by exerting control over key market levers, namely visibility, accessibility, and revenue distribution. The subordination of artist and user autonomy, agency, and ownership under the economic regime of algo-torial governance (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14) and its underlying datafication mechanisms (Drott, 2018a, p. 9) inextricably impacts all stakeholders involved, underscoring the urgent need for intervention, a concern articulated in the following sub-question:

SQ2: How have consumer behaviors, including those of artists, users, and community-driven

contexts, been redefined by the commodification of music within the platformized digital ecosystem?

Under the platform ecosystem constraint, both artists and users have become overly dependent on their intermediaries (Comor, 2010, p. 451; Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Cutolo & Kenney, 2019, p. 2), with relentless market pressure turning music into a secondary commodity (Marsden & Laumann, 1977, p. 217; Cook et al., 1983, p. 301). At the same time, the rise of prosumption (Toffler, 1980; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863) has positioned users as key value creators by monetizing their digital interactions through unavoidable algorithmic curation (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 6), which can deepen exploitative dynamics (Srnicek, 2017, p. 57; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4281; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, pp. 9-10). An additional consequence of industry reorganization is that recommendation systems are reshaping listeners' 'musical identity' (Prey, 2016, p. 13), encouraging passive background listening and significantly reducing content diversity (Siciliano, 2021, p. 231). In this context, theories of participatory culture (Howard, 2004, p. 41; Jenkins, 2006), value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 9), and collective agency (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) are crucial for envisioning a more equitable digital ecosystem. These frameworks provide essential insights into developing fairer revenue-sharing models (Dimont, 2018, p. 678; Alaei et al., 2022, p. 8699), which form the basis of the following sub-question: (Comor, 2010, p. 451; Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Cutolo & Kenney, 2019, p. 2), wherein relentless market pressure has turned music into a contingent commodity (Marsden & Laumann, 1977, p. 217; Cook et al., 1983, p. 301). Simultaneously, the rise of prosumption (Toffler, 1980; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863) centered the users as a source of value-creation by monetizing their digital interactions through an inescapable algorithmic curation (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 6) able to further entrench exploitative dynamics (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, pp. 9-10; Srnicek, 2017, p. 57; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4281). An additional consequence of the industry reconfiguration is that it draws upon how recommendation systems are reshaping listeners' 'musical identity' (Prey, 2016, p. 13), fostering passive engagement through background listening and thereby significantly undermining content diversity (Siciliano, 2021, p. 231). In this context, theories of participatory culture (Howard, 2004, p. 41; Jenkins, 2006), value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 9), and collective agency (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) become essential for reimagining a more equitable digital ecosystem. These frameworks offer critical insights into the development of fairer revenue-sharing models (Dimont, 2018, p. 678; Alaei et al., 2022, p. 8699), which inform the foundation of the following sub-question:

SQ3: What ethical revenue distribution models can be implemented to ensure fairness for artists while maintaining user satisfaction?

Building on the previously examined political economy and cultural dimensions, this sub-

question addresses the critical issue of fair compensation within a disrupted music economy, where monetization and revenue-sharing models play a central role in shaping artists' main sources of income. The findings are extrapolated from a thoughtful cross-case comparison that reveals the pro-rata model (Dimont, 2018, p. 678) disproportionately favors high-streaming artists, thereby marginalizing niche and independent creators. In contrast, alternative frameworks such as user-centric models (Dimont, 2018, p. 694; Alaei et al., 2022, p. 8699) aim to better align revenue with listener intent, meaningful engagement, and artistic value. Enriched by broader concepts like participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016), and collective agency (Tapscott & Williams, 2006), these models suggest that ethical revenue distribution must be grounded in community-driven and artist-centered principles.

1.2 Societal & Academic Relevance

Considering the insatiable platform ecosystem currently exacerbating the music industry and its stakeholders, the societal relevance and urgency of this thesis become evident. While existing research has extensively explored systemic inequalities, often providing scattered theoretical responses, this thesis aims to move beyond abstraction by proposing a cohesive, actionable, and ethically grounded framework. By reimagining a platform design where the profit-driven mechanisms are healed through artist-centered and community-driven structural alternatives, this study employs a multi-method data collection approach, bridging pressing theoretical concerns with practical application by critically engaging with platform developers who are actively working toward sustainable alternatives to face dominant music consumption models. Consequently, by translating these insights into actionable strategies, this research enhances the societal relevance of the results achieved and demonstrates their effective potential to foster a more equitable and accountable digital music ecosystem. From an academic perspective, this study addresses a notable gap in the literature by integrating critical political economy with participatory and action research methods, generating both conceptual clarity and practical insight. While existing studies address algorithmic governance (Napoli, 2014, p. 63), value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 6), and cultural platformization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276), few have systematically examined how ethical innovation can be practically embedded in platform ecosystems to counter extractive logics and rebalance power asymmetries beyond their solely theoretical explanation. By integrating Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with Action Research (Lewin, 1946), resulting in a Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) methodological approach (Israel et al., 2005, p. 6), this thesis foregrounds practitioner perspectives and advances concrete countermeasures, offering comprehensive insights that reflect the lived realities and indispensable value of the music community, contributing meaningfully to both academic discourse and industry practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the key theories and debates surrounding platform capitalism, digital governance, and the transformation of cultural production through the disrupted lens of the current digital music industry. By cross-connecting academic discussions on platform governance, algorithmic power, commodification, value co-creation, and blurred ethical boundaries, this chapter constructs a solid conceptual framework that anchors the supporting literature into a fertile ground for developing critical findings. Cohesively, critical political economy, digital ethics, and participatory culture converge to thoughtfully examine how streaming platforms have shaped artist autonomy, community dynamics, and the value structures of cultural consumption.

2.1 The Roots of Platformisation.

The digital revolution has profoundly disrupted cultural production, ushering in an era where the illusion of democracy promoted by the Internet masks new forms of control. As Rheingold (1993, p. 293) observed, this shift embeds a state that exerts control through the media-assisted manipulation of desire, wherein cultural producers are compelled to adapt to a system that increasingly renumerates the medium rather than the mediated content produced (McLuhan, 1964; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

In turn, the audience is growing a sense of awareness towards the crude capitalist regime that permeates the creative industry (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, p. 9). Centering the focus on the music sector, this thesis began the analysis with the definition provided by Hirsch (1990, pp. 132-133), which depicts the music industry as a production line where creative inputs are processed and channeled by gatekeepers to a passive audience. He further critiqued this system by depicting it as a top-down approach that leaves both artists and audiences passively dependent on corporate decisions (Hirsch, 1990, pp. 132-133). By leveraging a historically embedded unfair dynamic, music streaming platforms have assumed the gatekeeping role previously held by record labels, becoming the primary industry profit-makers while creating new forms of monetization in the relationship between creators and consumers (Hirsch, 1990, p. 133; Nordgård, 2018, p. 6). Consequently, digital platforms have supplanted record labels by collapsing the traditional value chain into seamless, one-click services able to gatekeep music industry accessibility and visibility. Therefore, cultural production has long been shaped by the capitalist logics of intermediaries, who influence both creative labor and consumer preferences to maximize profit and produce content for mass markets (Negus, 1999, p. 45; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006, p. 49; Nordgård, 2018, p. 9).

Accordingly, the “optimization of culture” has become increasingly contingent on a few dominant intermediaries, provoking crescent demonetization and devaluation of its content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4280; Morris, 2020, p. 2). While entrenching an inequitable distribution of value between intermediaries and creators (Sinnreich, 2010, p. 88), the power of music under these market

dynamics becomes increasingly eroded alongside the role of the industry's key stakeholders (Srnicek, 2017, p. 57; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4281). This raises a fundamental question: does music streaming still fulfil genuine cultural desires, or merely reflect consumer trends shaped by algorithmic governance? (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, pp. 9–10). Grounded in the goal of reimagining an artist-centered, community-driven, and sustainable streaming model, the next subchapter examines the structural dynamics and power asymmetries shaping the platform economy.

2.2 Governance of the Music Industry in the Platform Economy

The first step in understanding how the platform economy has transformed the delivery of cultural products is through the disintermediation of distribution. Parker et al. (2016, p. 50) described this as "the elimination of middlemen, or intermediate layers," where platforms create direct connections between producers and consumers, replacing previously "non-scalable and inefficient agent intermediaries." These digital infrastructures now deliver not only products but also value-adding services for both creators and consumers. With the rise of the Internet era, the traditional gatekeeping role once held by record labels has been replaced by a networked "cloud" ecosystem (Parker et al., 2016, pp. 50-52). This change has been validated by the promise of unlimited, on-demand access to extensive digital libraries, fostering an illusion of cultural democratization (Rheingold, 1993, p. 293). However, it has also compromised the autonomy and economic sustainability of music producers, channeling cultural content into a "stacked" ecosystem (Bratton, 2015, p. 4; Parker et al., 2016, p. 5), where production, promotion, distribution, and consumption all converge within a single interactive space driven by user-generated data (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14).

Consequently, the process of commodification no longer simply involves the marketization of cultural production, but fundamentally redefines the content promoted (Fleischer, 2012, pp. 76–103), now contingent on platform logics: "modular, flexible, frequently updated, and easily monetizable, driven by the extraction of user data" (Parker et al., 2016, pp. 28–29).

Industry revolution that Srnicek (2017, p. 57) conceptualized as "platform capitalism", which drives the "platformization of cultural production" and enables new forms of profit extraction (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4281). Its foundation relies on the value generated by the "network effect", translated as the increasing user participation positively correlated to the platform's utility (Parker et al., 2016, p. 30). This relationship is encoded into feedback loops that entail market concentration, leading to a monopolistic dominance denoted as platform governance (Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4287).

As a result, music has been reduced to a subscription-based service, reshaping both its cultural and economic value. Meanwhile, users, once mere listeners, have become active drivers of value creation. Within this context, it becomes crucial to critically reassess how participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), once hailed as an emancipatory force, has been reconfigured by the extractive logic of

platform capitalism.

2.3 The Participatory Culture in the Age of Platform Capitalism

Jenkins (2006) predicted that the "digital revolution paradigm" would lead to the convergence of previously distinct media, a process now reflected in the multifunctional and multiservice architecture of today's streaming platforms (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6). As previously discussed, platforms, being the primary facilitators of participatory culture, constrain the genuine motivations behind users' participation by imposing their capitalist authority. Therefore, what was seen as an opportunity to enable social values and loyalties through the digital ecosystem turned out to be a mere mechanism to leverage users' commodification (Jenkins et al., 2013, xi).

However, as this research investigates how ethical business models can arise nonetheless the market pressures, it reclaims the effectiveness of "collective intelligence" in shaping the intent behind music consumption (Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006, p. 258). In essence, by reversing the perspective, the system itself becomes contingent upon the digital presence of its users. Moreover, considering participation a foundation of consumer-based models, the first step towards this "realizable utopia" is to activate our individual and collective agency (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 256-258). Consequently, users are no longer passive data, but rather empowered members of a networked community challenging the systemic inequalities. Only through collective action can the music community drive meaningful change toward agency, fairness, and a more equitable future.

2.3.1 Collaborative Culture and Co-creation

Building on this foundation, the concepts of collaborative culture and co-creation (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) offer a vital perspective for understanding how user empowerment can develop into actionable, systemic change. In this emerging paradigm, participatory culture and collective agency are seen as drivers capable of shaping the future of music consumption, encouraging cooperation, shared governance, and ethical innovation. Consequently, peer production models embody a democratic, decentralized alternative to traditional business structures by promoting transparency and empowering citizens through their transformative economic impact (Monahan, 2010, pp. 92-93). Therefore, the deliberate engagement of a networked community can foster innovation while challenging corporate monopolies over creativity (Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 859). This vibrant cultural environment provides a foundation for the hybrid music streaming model proposed in this thesis, advocating for a transformative relationship between platform and user that disrupts existing structures and restores power and ownership to artists (Jenkins, 2006, p. 261; Van Dijck, 2009, p. 48; Mosco, 2009, p. 122).

In conclusion, while addressing economic inequality remains a theoretical goal, the increasing

monopolistic power of streaming platforms is clear. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for envisioning fairer futures for both artists and users (Srnicek, 2017, p. 70), with the core of this vision being the recognition of users as active contributors to value creation (Toffler, 1980; Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863).

2.4 Prosumers and the Commodification of Participation

A key component of the ongoing disruption in the music industry is the collapse of traditional boundaries between production and consumption. Today, consumers actively shape products from the outset (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 6). This shift is captured by the term "prosumption," coined by Toffler (1980), and has become a focal point in contemporary debates surrounding platform economies and participatory culture. Accordingly, value creation is transitioning from product-centered models to user-integrated systems, where users become active agents within production processes (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863). Tapscott and Williams (2006, p. 43) emphasize it by identifying digital contributors as "the very lifeblood of contemporary business models". Audience engagement, once minimal, now represents the intentional production of value (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 865), particularly through user-generated content (Luis, 2021, p. 4), which platforms monetize by aligning users through algorithmic recommendation systems (Parker et al., 2016, p.3; Wei & Lin, 2017, p.430).

Applying Emerson's power-dependence theory (1964, p. 33), digital intermediaries leverage the user-platform relationship, exerting structural control and deepening power imbalances (Comor, 2010, p. 451; Cutolo & Kenney, 2019, p. 2). To illustrate further, Spotify's large user base increases its value to both creators and advertisers, thereby reinforcing platform dependence (Mei, 2024, p. 319). In contrast, Bandcamp promotes community-oriented networks and artist independence (Baym, 2018, p. 166). However, both platforms still operate within the logics of data extraction and algorithmic personalization (Napoli, 2014, p. 63; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, pp. 9-10).

This convergence of co-creation and surveillance results in what Terranova (2000, p. 48) calls "free labor", as user data is transformed into platform profit. The celebratory rhetoric of digital liberation often masks new forms of exploitation (Hardt & Negri, 2000), where creativity and social interaction are subsumed into capitalist production (Terranova, 2000, p. 33). Users become both producers and products, active agents whose participation feeds the system. The appeal of open-source culture, freely modifiable and widely accessible, may further entrench user integration into exploitative structures (Leonard, 1999, p. 140; Terranova, 2000, p. 49).

Thus, critical concerns arise about whether prosumption can truly foster innovation and autonomy. As Bauman (2007, p. 12) observed, "no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity," underscoring the link between identity and commodification. From an economic perspective, a commodity serves to satisfy human needs while extracting capitalist exchange (Marx,

1867, p. 13). Therefore, platform capitalism constitutes a hybrid of gift economies and extractive logic, wherein prosumption reinforces systemic inequalities (Terranova, 2000, p. 51) while forcing users to reproduce by their own alienation through increasing dependence on digital interfaces (Comor, 2010, p. 451). In Fromm's (1955, p. 115) terms, creators lose ownership of their outputs under platforms' commodification (Comor, 2010, pp. 442–451). However, prosumption can hold subversive potential: only when creative contributors truly reclaim their rightful empowerment and ownership of their submission will it evolve into collective resistance (MacPherson, 1962, p. 3; Comor, 2010, p. 452).

The following section explores how platform logics further shape user power, particularly by examining who controls content, data, and the core interactions driving the digital economy.

2.5 Power and Ownership in the New Digital Landscape

"The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which enlightenment […]. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (Adorno, 1975, pp. 18-19).

From a broader perspective, the platformization of the music industry marks a transition from traditional two-sided markets to complex multisided infrastructures. Power is concentrated around a few dominant digital presences able to monopolize the market by leveraging the network effect and its "winner-takes-all" logic of competition (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005, p. 28). While this concentration of corporate ownership marginalizes smaller rivals, it further worsens the already existing systemic inequalities by limiting the economic and cultural freedom for both artists and listeners.

Therefore, the marketization of creativity (Hesmondhalgh 2019, p. 135) has led to artists' powerlessness in terms of autonomy, agency, and ownership (Wasko et al. 2011, p. 4). Unfair conditions are further affected by the evolution of creative content into contingent commodities (Terranova, 2000, p. 48; Comor, 2010, pp. 442-451; Parker et al., 2016, pp. 28–29; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, pp. 7–8). Hence, the conglomerate of platforms dictates full control over the cultural production and its producers, dismantling all obstacles to enable their complete empowerment (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276).

The illusory promise of global visibility and accessibility has exposed the authoritarian nature of open-access models, which function as gatekeepers by privileging content that aligns with their commercial interests. Accordingly, they monetize unpaid or underpaid creative labor under the guise of opportunity, sacrificing creative agency and autonomy, while reinforcing a selective model of cultural production driven by algorithmic recommendation systems (Cunningham and Craig, 2019, p. 15). These mechanisms reinforce the division between those designing creative labor processes and those merely carrying them out (Siciliano, 2021, pp. 190-192). This pronounced stratification is also

evident in the gap between a small elite of successful creators and a vast majority of participants never attained the desired degree of digital popularity (Fraser, 2003, p. 168; Siciliano, 2021, p. 207). As previously discussed, this results in a paradoxical form of alienation, in which the intrinsic rewards of creative expression are diminished by a loss of autonomy over the purpose behind the creation, ultimately affecting "the most human of the cognitive faculties" (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 223–224). Moreover, as Hesmondhalgh (2019, p. 11) explains, streaming has shifted music consumption from ownership to temporary access via subscription models, fundamentally altering the industry's dynamics. This transition raises concerns about evolving listening habits, with streaming fostering a new class of "lean back listeners" who passively consume music through algorithmic recommendations (Hesmondhalgh, 2021, p. 9).

Given these conditions, it is crucial to reclaim the value of creative labor by advocating for fairer revenue distribution and stronger infrastructure to support cultural producers. Direct-to-artist systems offer a pathway to reclaim ownership and autonomy by bypassing exploitative intermediaries (Siciliano, 2021, p. 231). This shift is particularly crucial considering the irreversible impact algorithmic recommendation systems have had on the music industry, main topic of the next paragraph.

2.6 The Irreversible Impact of Algorithmic Recommendations on the Music Industry

2.6.1 Algorithmic Gatekeepers in Music Streaming

The integration of algorithmic recommendation systems into digital platforms represents a pivotal component affecting the transformation of the music industry. As digital services scale, ongoing data collection enhances user profiling and refines algorithmic matching, progressively replacing manual curation with automated, feedback-driven recommendations (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14; Morris, 2020, p. 2; Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1). Once user participation reaches a "critical mass", platforms trigger a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement and growth, ultimately solidifying their market dominance (Parker et al., 2016, p. 48). According to Morris (2015, p. 449), an intermediary should be interpreted as a legitimate context-specific entity that shapes interactions between cultural products and viewers. Today, what persists as a form of pseudo-cultural legitimacy is user-generated content (UGC), amplified by algorithmic feedback loops. Music recommendation systems have become dominant gatekeepers, extending their intermediary power far beyond the reach of traditional industry middlemen. Their algorithmic reach combined with its data-driven precision enables an unprecedented influence over music discovery, audience formation, and cultural visibility (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50). Consequently, user profiling serves as a fundamental step in the process of commodification, a model based on "technologically-aided information exchanges" that exceeds mere

music consumption. By conveying a tailored music experience, algorithms turn users into the "commercialized representatives" of their listening habits (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 67). This workflow is underpinned by a powerful form of surveillance (Zuboff, 2019), which further consolidates the dominance of a few major tech companies (Drott, 2018a, p. 9; Prey, 2018, p. 1094). Consequently, a song's success on platforms like Spotify crucially depends on algorithmic assessments of digital "relevance", content selection inherently shaped by non-neutral criteria (Morris, 2015, p. 452). This asymmetry demands a critical reassessment of how digital infrastructures influence cultural access and whose interests they prioritize.

2.6.2 Discoverability and Visibility

Expanding on this dynamic, algorithmic music curation plays a decisive role in determining a track's visibility and discoverability, establishing recommendation systems as a central locus of power within streaming platforms (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1). As the primary determinants of artistic success migrate into the non-neutral realm of automated systems, creators are increasingly deprived of control over their content. Considering the streaming landscape and the conflict of interests affecting its stakeholders, fairness embodies a multifaceted urgency, demanding diversity and equitable representation in data-driven design and platform governance (Zhang et al., 2012, p. 14; Biega et al., 2018, p. 404). Conversely, engaging in autoplay features and algorithmic playlists (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14; Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 3) fosters a linear content flow that diminishes user agency and reinforces filter bubbles, narrowing cultural exposure through crafted personalization (Pariser, 2011, p. 24). Therefore, a growing lack of diversity is restricting the range of music recommended by streaming platforms, raising concerns about content homogenization and structural limitations on artists' discoverability; to address this, platforms must not only prioritize user satisfaction but also design recommendation architectures that promote underrepresented niche content, fostering a healthier balance between consumer preferences and supplier visibility.

2.6.3 The Power of the Playlist

A pivotal element that bolsters platforms' gatekeeping authority is the playlist, which is commonly acknowledged, considering the actual digital ecosystem, as a primary catalyst for music discoverability, visibility, and market accessibility (Prey, 2019, p. 4; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023, p. 17*)*. Curated playlists, frequently assembled by individuals supported by automated technologies, tend to deliver standardized content. In contrast, algorithmic playlists, such as Spotify's *Discover Weekly,* employ user behavior data and machine learning to generate personalized recommendations (Bonini & Gandini, 2020, p. 3). Regardless of whether human curation or algorithmic code is at play, playlists serve as a central component in reconfiguring music into a contingent, platform-dependent commodity

(Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Morris, 2020, p. 2). According to Morris et al. (2021, p. 165), the creation of a playlist relies on the recycling of older tracks while combining them with new releases, extending the commercial lifespan of digital music. Since the emergence of the "curatorial turn", music streaming platforms like Spotify have increased their focus on curating and endorsing (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 61). In turn, user agency is filtered by social and psychological constraints, subtly undergoing a "subjectification process" (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 40; Pendersen, 2020, p. 86). As algorithmic capitalism proliferates, artists may, consciously or not, adapt their creations to maximize visibility in an oversaturated market, often at the expense of their artistic individuality (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023, p. 30). From music as the industry's core value to the profit-driven prioritization of user-generated content, the datafication of listening habits is irremediably eroding every aspect of this cultural sector. Therefore, streaming platforms construct inferred listener profiles, shaping both user behavior and the valuation of music (Negus 2019, p. 12). Kassabian (2013a, p. 61) conceptualized this method of consumption as "ubiquitous listening", with music serving as a "functional" mood regulator over cultural and emotional engagement (Pedersen, 2020, p. 73). Consequently, while all users navigate content via intentional searches or algorithmic recommendations, their agency or dependence on these pathways differs significantly.

2.6.4 Active and Passive Listeners

Expanding upon the prior analysis, the following section examines how these dynamics extend into the realm of consumption, reshaping listeners' "musical identity" and modes of engagement (Prey, 2016, p. 13). Under this logic, listener agency has become increasingly constrained, contributing to a bifurcation of the streaming audience into "specialist" and "generalist" listeners (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 6), commonly referred to as active and passive consumers. Active consumers deliberately participate in music discovery, adopting multiple channels to guide their selections and boost their experience. Their intentional involvement demonstrates a sense of self-efficacy, defined by Bandura as the belief in one's capacity to execute actions that yield particular results (Bandura,1982, p. 122), Passive, or "inert" consumers, in contrast, have poor self-efficacy and favor low-effort consumption by preferring the use of curated or algorithmic playlists rather than engaging in purposeful exploratory behaviors (Bandura, 1982, p. 123). Aligning with the thesis's objective, active consumers play a key role in shaping algorithmic recommendations. By interacting with diverse content and personalizing their content curation, they contribute to recalibrating algorithmic outputs toward broader cultural representation. Therefore, understanding these interactions is essential to re-empower the user experience and to develop satisfaction metrics that foster diversity, equity, and greater fairness within the digital music ecosystem (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1). What Hansen et al. (2021, pp. 1-2) define as "intent modeling": the identification of user purpose to obtain personalized content considering tastes, knowledge, and cultural background. Diversity-oriented engagement allows algorithms to be positively

influenced, promoting broader cultural exposure through more inclusive recommendations (Hansen et al., 2021, pp. 4-5). Yet, cultural diversity alone is insufficient. The core issue remains the unequal distribution of value in streaming, as recommendation systems prioritize engagement and data extraction over fair remuneration, underscoring the need for systemic reform.

2.7 Rethinking Fairness in Music Streaming Revenue Allocation

"As it turns out, you're doing it wrong if you want to make money in music by being a musician." (Peter Filimore in Pauli, 2013, p. 1).

This structural imbalance becomes even more pressing when considering the central role streaming platforms now play in the industry, accounting for over 69% of global recorded music income and surpassing 700 million paid members globally (Statista, 2025). The core function of this ecosystem is algorithms, whose impact on listening behavior is directly linked to the distribution of revenue throughout the industry (Ramesh, 2024, p. 1). By acting as gatekeepers (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50; Morris, 2020, p. 1; Poell et al., 2022, p. 6), they shape listener habits in ways that directly affect artist monetization, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities within the platform economy (Ramesh, 2024, pp. 6–7). Consequently, the commercial value of artists and their work has tremendously diminished in the current era of "hyper-intermediation" (Scherzinger, 2016, p. 13; Wikström, 2016, p. 14 in Scherzinger, 2016). The shift from ownership to access-based models has fundamentally disrupted traditional notions of creator compensation (Dimont, 2018, p. 678). As Cook (2019, p. 22) observed, "it's not that people stopped making money from music, but that the established industry lost control over it". In turn, two-sided music streaming platforms generate revenue primarily through subscriptions and then compensate artists via revenue-sharing models, where users pay a flat fee and royalties are distributed on a per-stream basis (Dimont, 2018, pp. 677–678; Alaei et al., 2022, p. 2). This misalignment led to what Dimont (2018, p. 677) describes as "cross-subsidization": users who stream less still have their fees allocated according to total streaming volume, disproportionately benefiting high-streamed mainstream artists (Alaei et al., 2021, p. 3). Consequently, even when users primarily support niche or independent musicians, their financial contributions tend to subsidize dominant performers. The allocation of subscription-based profits among artists has become a central issue in the economics of digital music distribution, prompting scholars to call for alternative payment models (Lazzarato, 1996; Jensen, 2023, p. 443; Ramesh, 2024, p. 7). The two most adopted revenue-sharing systems, known as pro-rata and user-centric, are both reliant on aggregated listening data, yet vary in their valuation of individual streams. The pro-rata model distributes an artist's royalties according to the proportion of total platform streams, frequently disadvantaging those with smaller or less consistent audiences (Alaei et al., 2021, p. 4; Moreau et al., 2024, p. 2). Conversely, the user-centric model allocates each user's membership cost exclusively among the artists that the user has streamed, attributing equal significance to users' preferences. This discrepancy affects the assessment

of artist value, particularly in reconciling overall listening duration with the number of unique listeners (Laguana, 2014; Dimont, 2018, p. 694). Proponents argue that the user-centric model more accurately reflects diverse listening behaviors and rectifies the inherent deficiencies of the pro-rata system, asserting that artists should be compensated based on their fan base rather than the frequency of song streams (Dimont, 2018, p. 694; Alaei et al., 2021, p. 2). The discussion encompasses extensive revenue-sharing frameworks predicated on weighted aggregations of user data, with weights representing user engagement and behaviors (Bergantiños & Moreno-Ternero, 2023, p. 13). However, despite these advances, a tangible solution to ensure fair and transparent revenue distribution has yet to be adopted.

2.8 Ethical Concerns in Hybrid Music Streaming Platforms

As previously outlined, platforms dominate the music streaming realm through the extensive collection of users' data and behavioral tracking, raising ethical concerns that include privacy, autonomy, and power asymmetry, alongside fears of financial fairness. In today's digital music landscape, these ethical imperatives are overshadowed by extractive capitalist logics, having user privacy increasingly compromised by pervasive surveillance (Wasko et al. 2011, p. 4). Overall, a central question emerges: do platforms genuinely democratize access to content, or do they replicate hierarchical models of pre-digital cultural economies? Empirical studies suggest the latter, as recommendation algorithms often concentrate visibility on already popular artists, reinforcing what Rosen (1981, p. 845) called the "superstar economy" and narrowing content diversity (Anderson et al., 2020; Ferraro et al., 2021, p. 3). This undermines the perceived neutrality of algorithms and highlights their role as invisible, unequal mediators of cultural production. Drawing on critical political economy, platforms emerge as corporate actors embedded in systems of economic and symbolic power. By maximizing engagement and behavioral data extraction, they can shape the digital ecosystem. Intrinsic dynamics conceptualized by Zuboff (2019) as "surveillance capitalism", wherein human experience is mined as raw material for prediction and profit. Values such as fairness, diversity, and democratic accountability are seldom integrated into algorithmic logics, which are often designed to reinforce profound asymmetries of knowledge and power. (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 83).

To promote a more ethical and egalitarian model, platforms must be rigorously scrutinized not only in their technological design but also in the political-economic frameworks and value systems that influence their governance. From a digital ethical standpoint, this entails incorporating concepts such as openness, inclusion, and accountability into algorithmic design. From a critical political economy perspective, it necessitates contesting profit-oriented incentives and reclaiming cultural space for users and producers as engaged stakeholders. Reconciling these two viewpoints facilitates a platform society in which innovation fosters not only efficiency but also social justice, cultural diversity, and personal autonomy.

3. Method

3.1 Method Description and Justification

To address the central research question, this thesis adopts a multi-method comparative case analysis, suited to capturing the complex subjective experiences of industry actors that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative data alone. As Brennen (2021, p. 5) notes, qualitative research often integrates multiple methodologies depending on the research question (Brennen, 2021, p. 5). Therefore, given the multilayered nature of this research, the comparative case study emerges as the most appropriate methodological approach. According to Yin (2018, pp. 43-44), case studies are appropriate when the researcher cannot control the outcomes, allowing the convergence of empirical data and theory (Zartman, 2011, p. 1).

Accordingly, this thesis adopts a holistic case study design to comprehensively analyze different platform designs and their systemic dynamics, aiming to advance the development of emerging ethical models while depicting the structural inequalities of the current digital industry (Yin, 2018, p. 96). By combining primary data collected from and secondary data collected through the document analysis of key platforms (Spotify, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, Subvert, Nina Protocol, Tone), their triangulation enables a deeper understanding of industry practices, challenges, and opportunities. In-depth interviews with field experts add critical depth, surfacing perspectives not accessible through other methods (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 35). This two-phase method supports the nuanced analysis of an industry transformed by irreversible platformization (Gautam, 2023, p. 150), while their triangulation amplifies validity and reliability by converging multiple data sources toward a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon (Azulai, 2021, p. 5; Dick, 2007, p. 5).

3.1.1 Case Selection Rationale

This thesis adopts a sequential multiple-case design (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 3), enabling systematic comparison across distinct music streaming platforms. Drawing on Gerring (2004, p. 45) and Duff (2008, p. 22) considerations, a case is conceptualized as a bounded, contextually embedded unit that can yield insight into broader structural patterns such as the logics of platform governance, artists and users' agency, and ethical innovation required in the current music economy. This framework supports both analytical depth and practical relevance while considering the multitude of streaming platforms currently shaping the digital landscape.

The case selection followed a theory-generative orientation (Hirschl, 2005, p. 33), applying the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and comparative principles (Collier, 1991, p. 10). Strategies such as "most different cases" and "prototypical cases" were employed to maximize analytical contrast (Collier, 1991, p. 10; Hirschl, 2005, pp. 130–133). The initial cases (Spotify, SoundCloud, and Bandcamp) were selected to show the diverse platform designs currently competing

in the digital music industry: from dominant commercial actors (Spotify) to creator-driven communities (SoundCloud), to artist-friendly models (Bandcamp) (APPENDIX A). These cases differ in platform mission, business models, and revenue structures, enabling broader comparative insights into the relevant topics of this thesis.

In parallel, a multi-sited ethnography approach (Marcus, 1995) was applied to the expert selection, combining representatives from each platform (e.g., product managers, data analysts, founders) with key music stakeholders such as independent artists, label owners, and both active and passive users (APPENDIX C). Following the first round of expert interviews, the research was iteratively expanded to include three additional cases beyond the prior selection: Subvert, Nina Protocol, and Tone, as platforms explicitly designed to challenge exploitative models through artist-centered, community-driven, and decentralized practices (APPENDIX A). This integrated methodological approach combines Action Research (Lewin, 1946), Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and CBPAR (Israel et al., 2005), also termed as Grounded Action Research by Baskerville & Pries-Heje (1999, p. 1). Their convergence enhances theoretical rigor and participatory validity, particularly well-suited to an evolving field like the music platform transformation (Dick, 2007, p. 5; Azulai, 2021, p. 5). While AR emphasizes iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection (Lewin, 1946, p. 48; Bradbury, 2015, p. 1), GT provides a robust framework for constructing theory grounded in participant experiences (Mills et al., 2006, p. 26; Charmaz, 2014, cap.. 2). This expansion foregrounds community-defined priorities and collaborative knowledge production (Israel et al., 2005, p. 6). Integrating CBPAR further strengthens the participatory dimension by ensuring that research questions and emerging solutions were co-created with practitioners (Subvert, Tone, Nina Protocol). As Dick (2007, p. 7) noted, this method fosters “mutual education”, a concept that closely aligns with the thesis’s ethos and aim: by empowering the practitioners as co-researchers, their field expertise allows the definition of actionable outcomes to counter the current exploitative models. Ultimately, CBPAR’s focus on community-defined issues, capacity building, and shared ownership of knowledge (Israel et al., 2012) resonates with the thesis’s goal of reimagining streaming through the lens of the lived experiences of the most exploited actors, namely artists and users (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 3). By adopting a transformational grounded theory method (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017, p. 2), the study moves beyond the mere application of descriptive analysis by incorporating iterative feedback loops between emerging findings and their validation through critical engagement with field practitioners, enabling the co-construction of actionable frameworks. Platforms as units of analysis were selected based on their functional diversity and alignment with practitioner-defined priorities, allowing this study to serve as a site of praxis rather than mere observation. Therefore, the six cases serve as active participants in redefining platform governance within the creative industries, contributing to both grounded theoretical insight and tangible pathways toward a more equitable, artist-centered music streaming future

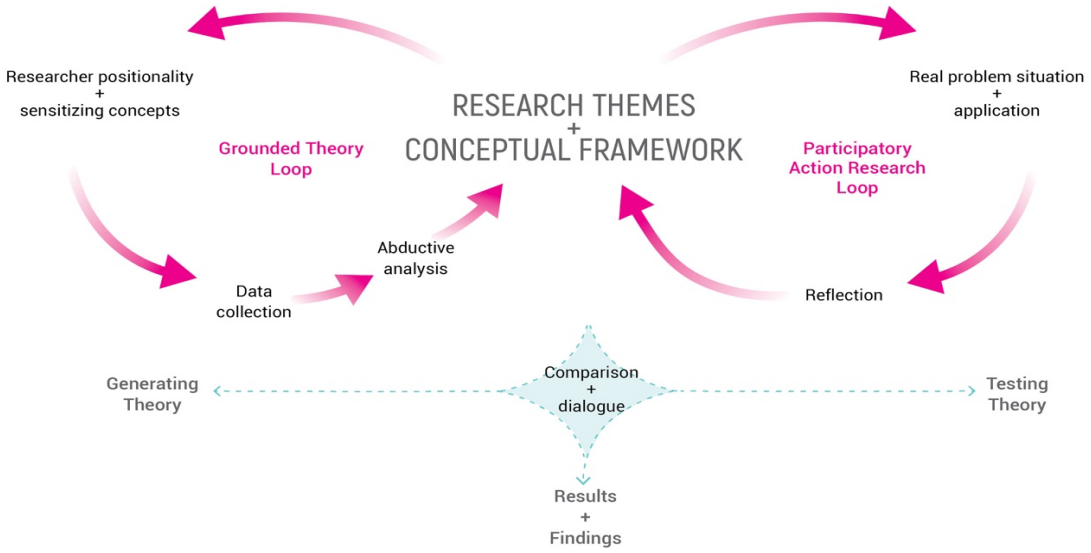


Figure 1: Methodological dialogue between constructivist grounded theory and participatory action (Cole, 2022)

3.1.2 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to gather a multitude of perspectives, experiences, and contextual perceptions from experts in the digital music sector, thereby putting them "in perspective" (Yin, 2018, p. 183). Since reality must be considered socially constructed, this qualitative method of analysis allows the researcher to depict how the experts and users "make sense of" the ecosystem under examination (Flick, 2018, p. 334), considering research-relevant person is familiar with problems that are established in his or her field (Schütz, 1964). Therefore, interviews were conducted with participants directly affected by digital disruption dynamics, investigating their subjective, context-oriented understandings of how the platformization has impacted the music industry. This method is favored over others because it enables the acquisition of empirical knowledge through meaningful conversations with individuals who are particularly well-positioned to shed light on the topic debated, providing "specific knowledge" (Van Audenhove, 2007, p. 5). Expert interviews are distinguished by participants who possess extensive networks within the field and demonstrate a strong motivation to contribute, grounded in the subjective nature of expert insight (Van Audenhove, 2007, p. 13). Furthermore, it was also effective when participants had limited awareness of specific subject aspects or when the discussion encompassed topics that participants were not usually accustomed to discussing (Kallio, 2016, p. 9), facilitating the expression of a varied array of perceptions and experiences (Kallio, 2016, p. 6).

The interview questions were pre-formulated and organized according to an interview guide (Kallio, 2016, p. 6), created to guarantee that the key topics of the study were uniformly covered throughout the interviews, accordingly, drafted after systematic literature review to gain specific knowledge (APPENDIX B) (Kallio, 2016, p. 12). Nonetheless, the guide was designed to function as a flexible framework rather than a strict script to achieve a "depth" of understanding of that knowledge,

allowing the creation of arena of discursive negotiation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 35); hence, the interviewer should be prepared to adapt the questionnaire considering the flexibility of the interview design.

3.1.2 Document analysis

To offer a nuanced and sustainable industry-grounded solution, this study requires a complex, multi-layered dataset to achieve data saturation. To that end, empirical observations were collected through documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, and physical artefacts (Yin, 2009), as a complementary method alongside the semi-structured in-depth interviews (Bowen, 2009, p. 29) able to generate supplementary insights that enriched and contextualized their core knowledge base (Goldstein & Reiboldt, 2004, p. 246). Similarly, Bryman (2004, p. 370) emphasizes that such materials should be intended as dynamic components of the social world "out there" to be analyzed, a method built on "data selection instead of data collection" (Bowen, 2009, p. 31).

As a result, platform websites, press releases, and promotional materials were analyzed as curated public interfaces that strategically frame value propositions, artist-facing features, and user expectations through design and rhetoric. The documents were collected through non-probability purposive sampling, whereas their selection was based on their source, relevance of topics, and content suitability to address the objectives of this study (Babbie, 2008). Integrating these materials into the findings gathered from the thematic analysis enables their triangulation with expert interviews, broadening their analytical depth by revealing alignments, discrepancies, and contradictions between public narratives and lived experiences (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). The reliability of this thesis's results is strengthened and enriched by this intentional combination, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of platform dynamics, power asymmetries, and ethical innovation. A total of 21 documents were used for the secondary data analysis, as reported in APPENDIX D.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

3.2.1 Sampling criteria and technique

This research employs a non-probability purposive sampling strategy, widely applied in qualitative studies where the main objective is the development of in-depth understanding and contextual validity (Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). Purposive sampling relies on the rigorous selection of participants, considering expertise and relevance to the research topic as primary selection criteria. The pool of experts involved can offer valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the richness of qualitative inquiry (Palinkas et al., 2015, pp. 534-535). Additional attention was paid to achieve a balance between participants with extensive insider knowledge of the digital music industry and those who could contribute with diverse and critical perspectives, such as active and passive users. This calibration of points of view is essential to frame

the nuanced and multidimensional nature of the current music streaming industry. Moreover, by ensuring diversity during the recruitment of the experts, the data set thus confirms its validity and thematic saturation (Roscoe, 2021, p. 71).

To ensure a relevant and representative pool of experts, a mapping of the digital music industry was undertaken (Flick, 2014, Chapter 1). This involved identifying key stakeholders across various domains (artists, platform developers, label owners, data analysts, music writers, and users) while also critically acknowledging the monopoly-like influence exerted by major streaming platforms. This strategic sampling process was designed to provide the study with a deep, critical, and varied understanding of platform dynamics, artist autonomy, and user participation within the evolving digital music economy. Through non-probability purposive sampling, sixteen experts were recruited by following the methodological guidelines provided by Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication (ESHCC).

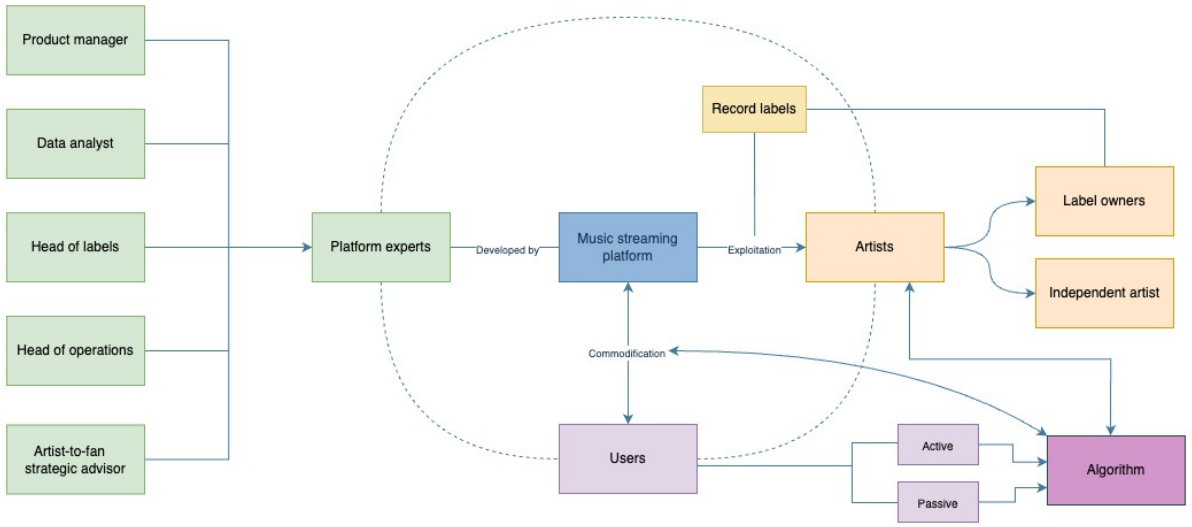


Figure 2: Mapping of the Digital Music Industry

3.2.2 Data Collection

Recruitment was conducted through LinkedIn and further supported by the researcher's own embedded position within the cultural and music sectors, drawing on over six years of experience in artistic direction for various international music festivals. These personal and professional connections not only facilitated access to high-profile participants but also ensured a level of trust and shared language that enriched the interview dynamics and fostered deeper, more reflective conversations.

The selection focused on individuals occupying strategic roles across the music industry, chosen for their ability to provide both specialized insight and reflective critique on platform dynamics impacting the music industry. The sample size was considered appropriate as it fulfilled the principle of theoretical saturation without being so large as to compromise the depth and richness of analysis. In qualitative research, saturation is achieved when no new insights or themes emerge from additional

data, allowing for a focused and in-depth interpretation (Flick, 2014, chapter 3). This indicates that the data collected is both sufficient and diverse enough to offer a meaningful understanding of the research topic (Bryman, 2012, p. 12). The selection criteria for the interviewees draws upon the inclusion criteria: substantial experience or current position within the digital music sector, interaction with alternative frameworks or expressed relevant critique of current streaming services, interviewee's willingness to participate in at least one in-depth session (virtual or in person).

As a result of this process of selection, the heterogeneity of the experts' professional backgrounds and career trajectories provided a broad and holistic view of the platform dynamics under investigation while ensuring the diversity of the sample (Allmark, 2004, p. 185). Therefore, although the final sample exceeds the minimum required by the methodological guidelines, it was intentionally expanded to capture a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective. Accordingly, additional attention is given to their background, including cultural and disciplinary perspectives that define their role within the music industry. A complete list of expert participants is available in Appendix C.

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the media experts, with durations ranging from approximately 35-40 minutes to one and a half hours. In total, 16 interviews were conducted across multiple countries between Europe and the US, ranging from the 19th of April to the 30th of May. The data collection occurred over four weeks via face-to-face sessions (4), the "gold standard" of interviewing (Bogner & Menz, 2018, p. 15); however, most of them were conducted via digital formats, such as phone calls or Microsoft Teams (12). In-person interviews were recorded using the Voice Memos application on an Apple iPhone, whereas online interviews were recorded through Microsoft Teams. All recordings were transcribed verbatim using the transcription software Turboscribe.ai. Before participation, each expert received a standardized consent form (as per ESHCC guidelines) via email, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and participant rights (APPENDIX F). Additionally, at the beginning of each interview, verbal consent to record was obtained from all participants. This rigorous approach to data handling contributes to the overall transparency of the research process, enabling the audience to evaluate not only the robustness of the research design but also the researcher's reflexivity, conscientiousness, and potential biases throughout the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 30). During each interview, the researcher plays a crucial role by practicing "double attention" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 194): balancing open, participant-led dialogue with a focused alignment to the study's core objectives. Although interviews were conducted to dynamically adapt to each participant's background and expertise, they were guided by a predefined set of core questions (APPENDIX B). The next section outlines how these themes were translated into interview prompts consistent with the research aims

3.3 Operationalization

The operationalization was executed using a hybrid methodological approach that used

deductive and inductive methods. The theoretical framework influenced the interview themes, whilst the data collection process was receptive to emerging codes. According to Belcher et al. (2024), three main themes were identified: platform power dynamics, user roles and community dynamics, and revenue distribution models. A detailed operationalization table is provided in APPENDIX E, guaranteeing traceability between conceptual objectives and empirical investigation.

3.4. Processing and Analysis of Data

3.4.1. Thematic Analysis (TA)

Subsequently, an organic thematic analysis will be applied to the interview transcripts to extrapolate the findings. Thematic analysis (TA) identifies, analyzes, and interprets patterns of meaning in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). TA offers organizational processes for creating codes and themes from qualitative data. Coding processes must be established, rigorous, and consistent to meet the validity and reliability standards of qualitative research (William & Moser, 2019, p. 46). Hence, it involves three steps, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, and by their progress and dynamic function, themes and trends are “identified, codified and interpreted in the service of a research study’s focus” (William & Moser, 2019, p. 47). Open coding is the initial level of coding. During open coding, researchers uncover distinct concepts and topics to categorize. To maximize the effectiveness of open coding, it is crucial to organize themes and concepts uncovered during data collection (William & Moser, 2019, p. 48). Axial coding is the second level of code that identifies links between open codes to produce core codes (William & Moser, 2019, p. 50). This paradigm promotes categorization by providing critical viewpoints for further organizing and categorizing data through "causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariance, and conditions" (Larossa, 2005, p. 98). The third level of coding is selective coding, a hard phase of data collecting in research design since it influences the reception of findings by interpreting their meanings. Using selective coding allows researchers to create compelling case stories that accurately reflect the progressive coding process (William & Moser, 2019, p. 54). As a result of this iterative process, themes were “actively crafted” (Braun and Clarke, 2016, p. 740), unifying the multitude of perspectives into meaningful patterns. The coding framework can be found in APPENDIX E, contributing to the contextualization and relevance of the extracted themes

3.5 Reliability and validity

For this research to be both meaningful and impactful, it must be open to critical evaluation regarding the “soundness” of its methods, the accuracy of its findings, and the integrity of its conclusions (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 31). These foundational concerns are addressed here through methodological transparency and analytical consistency (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 245; Brink, 1993, p. 35).

3.5.1 Reliability

Reliability is achieved through the consistency of data collection, which encompasses both primary and secondary data (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 31). Furthermore, this study employed a systematic and traceable methodology: interviews were conducted using a standardized semi-structured guide (APPENDIX B), while the coding and analysis of the interviews followed a clearly documented thematic analysis process (APPENDIX E) (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 46). Additionally, to provide an accountable report of the sampling and coding procedures, supplementary materials such as the coding manual (APPENDIX E), along with full interview transcripts and audio recordings, offer clear insight into the analytical steps taken, reinforcing the study's credibility and traceability. The expert sampling procedure followed a rigorous purposive logic (Patton, 2002, p. 230; Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534), ensuring relevance and thematic saturation (Bryman, 2012, p. 12; Roscoe, 2021, p. 71). Similarly, this study adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.21) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, guided by their 15-point checklist, ensuring analytical depth and methodological rigor. Codes were repeatedly reviewed and refined through multiple rounds of close reading and annotation within ATLAS.ti, allowing for a robust and well-substantiated identification of themes while maintaining transparency during this structured approach.

3.5.2 Validity and Triangulation

Validity, defined as the accuracy and integrity of the findings concerning the collected data (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 31), was supported through several complementary strategies. Following Yin (2009, p. 42), this study strengthened construct validity by employing multiple sources of evidence: expert interviews, document analysis, and platform self-representations. This enabled the implementation of "within method" triangulation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012, p. 2), conceptualized here as both methodological triangulation (Azulai & Rankin, 2012, p. 125) and data triangulation (Campbell & Fiske, 1959, p. 81; Denzin, 1978, p. 297), enriching the credibility of the findings by their alignment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Internal validity is achieved with cross-case comparisons (Yin, 2009, p. 140) and iterative theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Furthermore, participants were previously informed about the research context, encouraging authentic contributions (Brink, 1993, p. 36). External validity was addressed through a focus on the study's transferability, achieved by data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Moreover, by applying the core principles of the CBPAR, this framework allowed iterative theory building grounded in both empirical data and collaborative reflection with participants, producing meaningful and actionable outcomes and enriched by the "multivocality" of the sample (Dick, 2007, p. 5; Tracy, 2010, p. 6; Azulai, 2021, p. 5) This participatory process facilitated ongoing validation of findings, aligning them with both practitioner realities and theoretical insight (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, the inclusion of expert triangulation provided an additional layer of validation that

extended beyond traditional data triangulation (Baškarada, 2014, p. 6), demonstrating a strong commitment to methodological rigor while producing findings relevant to ongoing efforts to rethink ethical music platform design.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study is conducted with ethical integrity as a guiding principle. All participants were fully informed of the research objectives and procedures and received a consent form aligned with ESHCC guidelines (APPENDIX F). Oral consent was obtained before any data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and interviewees were reminded of their right to withdraw or skip questions at any time without consequence. All responses are anonymized and treated with strict confidentiality, with recordings stored solely for research purposes. Explicit consent was obtained before including any names or professional details in the expert list. Additionally, participants were offered the opportunity to receive a summary of the research findings in recognition of their intellectual contributions. Care was taken when addressing potentially sensitive topics, such as concerns about job displacement or organizational attitudes regarding the revenue-sharing systems adopted by the different music streaming platforms involved. This ensured that all participants were treated with respect throughout the research process (Tracy, 2010, p. 11).

4. Results

The analysis synthesizes cross-case thematic patterns into a cohesive framework, integrating multiple data sources and perspectives to holistically address the inquiries. By deconstructing unequal structural mechanisms eroding the industry, the first selective code foregrounds key systemic challenges while outlining potential sustainable solutions that cross-connect the experts involved.

The following section examines perceived power dynamics, encompassing digitalization, gatekeeping, platform governance, and algorithmic influence to fully depict how the process of platformization has transformed the music industry as well as the roles and behaviors of its principal stakeholders, namely artists and users.

The final theme focuses on evolving revenue models and rising demand for ethics-driven service. Driven by CBPAR as a method of investigation and analysis, the results embedded a collaborative process with the participants to obtain concrete, community-driven solutions.

4.1 Platform Power Dynamics

The first main theme centers on platform power dynamics, directly addressing the first sub-question:

What are the key economic and political power dynamics driving the transformation of the music industry through its platformization?

This theme draws from the conceptual framework of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), wherein market-driven logics have reshaped the music sector by embedding it within platform infrastructures that centralize control over cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). As outlined by the supportive literature, this disruptive shift from traditional media logics to stacked digital systems (Bratton, 2015, p. 4; Cusumano et al., 2019) is reconfiguring power relations across the industry. In these multi-sided ecosystems (Evans et al., 2006; Eisenmann et al., 2011), platforms exploit positive network effects and winner-take-all dynamics (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005, p. 28), consolidating power through new forms of gatekeeping (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 3) and exacerbating market asymmetries (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p. 1002).

Platforms further leverage digital surveillance (Drott, 2018a, p. 9), algorithmic curation (Morris, 2020, p. 2), and data-driven feedback loops (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14; Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1), profit-driven (Srnicek, 2017, p. 57), embedding extractive dynamics into the very fabric of the digital music ecosystem. Drawing on power-dependence theory (Emerson, 1962, p. 33), this study interrogates how platform power derives from control over critical resources such as visibility, audience access, and data, while viable alternative infrastructures remain scarce. The often-invoked myth of cultural democratization further masks the commodification of creative labor (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; pp. 11–12), leaving artists increasingly trapped in platform-dependent ecosystems (Comor, 2010, p. 451). The processes of datafication (Drott, 2018a, p.9) and algo-torial governance (Parker et

al., 2016, p. 14) further entrench this dependency, transforming users into prosumers (Toffler, 1980; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863). This system fosters passive listening habits, shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems (Hesmondhalgh, 2021, p. 9), while revenue remains concentrated within a small elite (Fraser, 2003, p. 168). As a result, this ecosystem demands urgent intervention to restore agency to creators and to reclaim the cultural value of music production.

4.1.1 Pre-Platform Capitalism

Under the forceful digitalization of the market economy during the 21st century, Srnicek (2017) defined "platform capitalism" as an irreversible societal shift that has restructured consumption and distribution, positioning platforms as both intermediaries and new formats of cultural availability. Traditional gatekeepers as record labels, have been supplanted by streaming platforms, while the music content, after its dematerialization, has migrated to the "cloud", an unlimited, accessible digital space (Rheingold, 1993, p. 293). Interviewees consistently recalled how pre-platform music consumption largely revolved around CDs, complemented by widespread use of piracy to access desired content. Emily White (ex-Spotify product manager) reflected:

> *"I remember being excited to buy my first CD. But very quickly, it became clear that it wasn't necessary to access the music I wanted. It was easily accessible through other means."*

Pre-platform music discovery was often peer-to-peer, rooted in intentional, community-driven sharing. Music held both material and affective value through acts like purchasing and exchanging CDs, as Grand River (independent artist, label-owner) noted:

> *"I gave value to that music, because I bought maybe one or two CDs a week."*

This thoughtful engagement fostered what Veronica Fanzio (active user) described as *"the golden age of music engagement."*. As is historically known, during the era of physical media and radio broadcasting, music access was constrained. For Elisa Batti (independent artist, sound engineer, and label-owner), this limitation was also shaped by geography factors, as *"the access to music was way more limited, way more regional, really depending on where you were living"*. The frictionless way of consuming music underscored the need for a scalable, democratized alternative among the listeners.

Therefore, music streaming platforms, by filling the technological gap required to allow unlimited accessibility, replaced "non-scalable and inefficient agent intermediaries" (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50). Thereafter, music consumption underwent a fundamental and permanent transformation in its structure and practices.

Osterwalder & Pigneur (2010) conceptualize accessibility as an organizational effort to make products and services usable by customer segments. In this context, the unlimited accessibility afforded by cloud-based "stacked" ecosystems (Bratton, 2015, p. 4; Parker et al., 2016, p. 5) represented a winning business model that transformed the music market. The longstanding gap

between supply and demand was bridged by offering consumers vast music libraries through affordable subscriptions (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, pp. 9-10).

This transformation was widely acknowledged by interviewees. As one Interviewer 13 noted, *"one major positive is that access to music is extraordinarily high"*. Similarly, Cal Hickox (Head of Music, Nina Protocol) described platforms as *"revolutionary"* not just in terms of worldwide accessibility, but also for *"a product that keeps people listening and discovering music".*

This enhanced accessibility, initially, was felt as a form of empowerment by the artists: *"It's important that artists are more findable nowadays,"* affirmed Jacopo Severitano (independent artist, label-owner of Midgar Records). Similarly, Nabil El Ayane (active user, music writer) denoted that art, by its meaning, has to be accessible to everyone This early optimism surrounding music digitalization strongly emerged as a pattern, as many felt that infrastructural and personal barriers were being replaced by new possibilities; Elisa described it as if *"the universe opened up"*, "*the biggest change in consuming music*" (Bram Kuijper, industry professional, active user),

A common feeling described as if *"everything was possible, everything was available"* (Francesca Bono, passive user). From the artistic perspective of Pascal Terstappen (independent artist, label-owner), platforms somehow imposed a restraint on piracy abuse of those years:

"I'm happy these guys are out there. They found a way that the average person who was illegally downloading from Napster is now paying."

Similarly, Coloray (independent artist, label-owner) saw early platforms as "*instigators of new success",* recalling that between 2008–2009, *"people benefited from social media platforms and DSPs internationally to get their music heard."*

In sum, although today's platform economy is critiqued for power concentration and algorithmic governance (Srnicek, 2017; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276) respondents embraced the initial digital revolution as a moment of liberation from the traditional recording industry and piracy issues, a diffused early optimism regarding the "optimization of culture" (Morris, 2020, p. 20). The transition from to open-access models (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 11–12), whose accessibility was given by the payment of a monthly fixed price call subscription (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50), caused the beginning of the degradation of artistic ownership, blurring this core value under the vastitude of the cloud. As platformization intensified, the democratic aspirations encountered new tensions rooted in corporate consolidation, ownership concentration, and algorithmic governance, setting the framework for the critical dynamics explored in the following sections.

4.1.2 Platform Ownership & Market Monopolies

4.1.2.1 The Platform Capitalism

Following an initial round of reflections on past consumption practices and perceptions of digitalization, the interviews shifted toward examining the contemporary music platform ecosystem

and its entrenchment within the dynamics of platform capitalism. Expert by expert, the "illusion of democracy" was unmasked, revealing a disrupted industry where capitalist extraction has profoundly reshaped both cultural production and consumption (Rheingold, 1993, p. 293). Under this model, platforms operate as market intermediaries and data extractors, generating value through mediation, named network effects, and market monopolization (Parker et al., 2016, pp. 30–31; Srnicek, 2017, pp. 48–49). Given the heterogeneity of the experts' backgrounds, presenting this system without grounding it in critical literature would be. To ensure clarity, key dynamics are outlined through themes drawn from their insights.

The first dominant pattern was the perception of what, in the theoretical framework, has been defined as a platform monopoly, highlighting the strong inequalities of the current ecosystem (Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Srnicek, 2017, p. 57; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4287). As Bram observed:

> *"It's an industry that has this romantic image, but at the end is super capitalized […] driven by money held by a few big players, big companies."*

Similarly, Coloray amplified this concept by how the new market pressure led to creative labor exploitation:

> *"If we're talking ethics in music streaming platforms, I honestly don't think any of them are ethical right now. There are some new platforms in development that aim to be more ethical, but in reality, when you examine what being an artist involves, you quickly realize the work itself isn't treated ethically. Artists put in an immense number of hours, and the return from a single song is minimal, that's just not ethical. Also, the constant pressure to perform and produce content for free is just too much."*

This quote vividly reflects Terranova's (2000, p. 33) concept of "free labor," where artists are forced to conform to the accelerated temporalities of platform economies (Srnicek, 2017, p. 65). Furthermore, even from the marginal experience of a passive user like Veronica, companies like Spotify will always be *"just"* companies. Consequently, they can try to *"sugarcoat it as much as they want […] But, at the end of the day, they follow the money"*. Her precise analysis reflects on Bratton's (2015, p. 4) notion of stacked infrastructures, where corporate ownership (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 35) shapes platform architecture to serve capital accumulation rather than cultural democratization (Rheingold, 1993, p. 293). The theoretical translation of this affirmation can be seen as the predominant network effect (Parker et al., 2016, pp. 30–31) and the inherent logic of "winner-take-all" competition, resulting in market concentration (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005, p. 28; Srnicek, 2017, p. 57), thus reinforcing platform monopolies (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4287). This shared sense of exploitation, expressed by both artists and users, is further illuminated by Emily, who exposed how such dynamics are embedded in the structural design of platforms:

> *"I think that creative people will always create, even for free, and I think that capitalism and platforms are designed to exploit; all streaming DSPs are for profit."*

Her professional insight underscores that these extractive logics are not accidental but a core feature

of platform architecture (Srnicek, 2017, p. 65) since *"In traditional corporate logic, profit-maximizing is the default"* (Austin Robey, founder of Tone).

This research reveals that all participants, regardless of their background or formal knowledge of platform capitalism, demonstrated a clear and critical awareness of the economic and political forces shaping today's music industry. Their reflections consistently aligned with existing academic critiques, highlighting the pervasive market logic and exploitative dynamics embedded in the digital music ecosystem (Srnicek, 2017, p. 65). Moreover, their accounts confirm that the initial optimism surrounding open-access frameworks (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50) and participatory culture (Rheingold, 1993, p. 293; Jenkins, 2006, p. 6) has evolved into a more pragmatic, often disillusioned, understanding of the power imbalances inherent in platform capitalism (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p. 1002).

Building on these insights, the next sub-theme explores how platform logics shape market ownership and governance, influencing music production and consumption and deepening the commodification of music, audiences, and creative labor.

4.1.2.2 User Commodification

For this section, specific interview questions were designed to explore how targeted participants, framed as both active and passive consumers, perceive their role within the platformized music industry. The goal was to critically examine how participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6) has been transformed under platform capitalism, and how users experienced this shift. In today's ecosystem, consumers are no longer merely end-users of finished products; instead, they actively contribute to the development and distribution of music content (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 6). Emily White, whose extensive industry experience, including her work at Spotify, offered a sharp understanding of value extraction by design, underlined how *"They're incentivized to keep you scrolling*", embedding in the terms "incentivized" and "scrolling" how the feedback-loop of the algorithms is fueled by users' engagement and retention on the platform (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14; Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1). Hence, the activation of users is a deliberate goal: platforms foster continuous participation while simultaneously extracting data value from every interaction (Terranova, 2000, p.49; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 863). An exploitative system that Bram easily recognized as *"what they want to do is keep me actively involved, so I keep my subscription."* These words refer to how users shift from being consumers to becoming producers of products themselves, thereby becoming prosumers (Toffler, 1980; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, pp. 863-865). A striking element that connects all the users recruited is the shared awareness of datafication behind the user-friendly interfaces they consume.

> *"I really think about myself as the product of something... I feel I'm not in power... I feel I'm just something they need... they are giving me access to music because of their interest."* (Francesca)

This quote promptly highlighted the user functionality in the profit-driven logic system as a component of the "social factory" (Terranova, 2000, p. 33), where listening patterns generate value while the related "online actions are going to be brain-cogitated and capitalized" (Veronica).

These reflections resonate with Marx's (1867, p. 13) notion of the commodity as an object that fulfills human desire while simultaneously embodying exchange value for the purpose of capital accumulation. Rather than fostering genuine co-production, prosumption now serves to reinforce the extractive infrastructure of the platform economy, with users participating in and reproducing their alienation by fostering platform dependence (Terranova, 2000, p. 51; Comor, 2010, p. 451; Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 35).

This recurring sense of subordination emerged across interviews: participants, regardless of user type, acknowledged that platforms, especially Spotify, extract significant value from the datafication of their listening habits.

4.1.2.3 Artist Exploitation

A crucial dynamic that emerges alongside intensified user value extraction is a deeper general condition of platform dependence that the artists and the content produced (Comor, 2010, p. 451; Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Cutolo & Kenney, 2019, p. 2). Under the platform capitalism regime (Srnicek, 2017, p. 65), artists' creative labor is increasingly subordinated to platform logics. Drawing on Emerson's (1964, p. 33) power-dependence theory, the relationship between platforms (supply) and users/artists (demand) is marked by profound asymmetry: creators and consumers alike rely on platforms for access, visibility, and economic viability (Parker et al., 2016, p. 31; Cutolo & Kenney, 2019, p. 2). Simultaneously, the marketization of creativity (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 135–174) continues to erode artists' autonomy, agency, and ownership (Wasko et al., 2011, p. 4), deepening their subordination to an exploitative system (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4287). This imbalance was sharply recognized by Veronica, who, even from her position as a *"privileged"* listener, acknowledged the severity of artist exploitation:

> *"I think that so much is wrong with the digital environment we are in... we are all exploited to a very great extent. I'm not an artist, so my exploitation is different... but imagine if you have to live with this."*

All the independent artists and label owners involved during the semi-structured interviews sadly echoed this systemic inequality; Coloray depicted it as a process that *"is basically in a grander scale abusing the artists"*, while Grand River underscored the pervasive sense of powerlessness as it follows:

> *"Other people are making money on my behalf with content that is mine […] We cannot really change anything, the system is broken*."

This systematic exploitation was further denoted by Frank Klick (Independent artist, music producer):

> *"We produced a high-value video, something we truly considered a work of art, but the label's focus was entirely on getting views on Instagram, rather than streams on YouTube or elsewhere. In the end […] the thinking was solely about chasing views. I invested around a thousand euros to make it happen, and yet, within this system, it just disappears, reduced to a few likes. It's frustrating to see something meaningful treated so superficially."*

Therefore, significant investments in strategic content production often yield only superficial returns and fleeting visibility. Hence, platforms promise exposure, but retain ultimate control over commodification and recommendation flows, reinforcing a gatekeeping dynamic (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 3–15). In response, artists are pressured to maintain a constant digital presence, as Pascal pragmatically advised:

> *"Today, if you're an independent artist or label, you really need to have your music available everywhere. But, beyond that, it's about focus and consistency. I'd rather release 10 tracks spread across the year than bundle everything into one drop. Timing matters: choosing different moments to release helps keep the momentum going".*

This captures what capitalist logic demands of artists in practice: only through constant production can they hope to gain visibility by feeding the algorithm. Perspective further supported by Scott Munro (Head of Labels of Tone), confirming that overall:

> *"The algorithm has a huge say in what gets fed to you on Spotify. It favors active artists [...] It's really about this "content creator" model, producing singles every month or two."*

Same market strategy as Coloray, who confirmed that *"making music isn't enough anymore. You have to constantly present, brand, narrate, perform, just to stay visible"*.

This quote highlights the intertwined exploitation of artists and the growing devaluation of their creative output, reinforced by the observation that *"Music is still undervalued, and streaming is too affordable,"* making it clear that *"it's all about activity and engagement"* (Scott). Nowadays, visibility demands a constant digital presence, a reflection of an industry increasingly shaped by external, non-artistic pressures. These dynamics illustrate how both the structure and value of music as a cultural product have been fundamentally transformed, shifting away from artistic expression toward a commodified role within a profit-driven platform economy (Negus, 2019, p. 12; Fleischer, 2017, p. 146). These crucial insights reveal how the illusion of democratization provided by open-access models became a double-edged sword: while platforms offer artists the chance to reach audiences, this often comes at the cost of creative autonomy and economic exploitation (Parker et al., 2016, p. 50). Accordingly, the monetization of unpaid or underpaid creative labor follows under the guise of providing exposure, while sacrificing creative agency and reinforcing a selected culture driven by algorithmic recommendation systems (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 3–15; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p. 1002). In an ecosystem where exposure influences artist viability, algorithmic governance of

recommendations has emerged as a principal source of platform authority (Zhang et al., 2012, p. 14; Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1).

In sum, despite the rhetoric of democratization, artists' testimonies reveal ongoing exploitation, where user data fuels extraction and algorithms dictate visibility and monetization. The next section will delve deeper into these dynamics, examining who controls the content, data, and interactions that now define the economic and cultural fabric of digital platforms (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276; Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 5).

4.1.3 The Algo-Torial Power

A clear understanding of platform power must recognize algorithms as central to industry asymmetries. Far from neutral, they are engineered to serve market logic, operating through feedback loops that shape both user demand and content supply. This ability to simultaneously target audiences and shape production has elevated algorithms into new gatekeepers of the creative economy (Van Dijck & Poell, 2018; Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 3). As Gillespie (2014, p. 2) defines, they are "encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output", manifesting as personalized music recommendations. Yet, as Francesca critically noted, these outputs are *"more driven by economic reasons"*. These so-called "public relevance algorithms" prioritize content deemed profitable by platform designers, systematically filtering out other material (Gillespie, 2014, p. 3). Moreover, since platforms closely guard the inner workings of their algorithms, this system often appears opaque and unpredictable, which some artists perceive as *"sheer luck"* (Frank). Similarly, Greta De Zani (passive user) observed that artists can *"become super big without putting this much. […] maybe is one chance in a million, but it could happen."*. Thus, whether chance-based or not, the impact of algorithmic recommendations on an artist's career trajectory is undeniable:

> "*Spotify gives you recommendations and results based on certain criteria that are not necessarily empowering by design. […] it also means that it's hiding a lot of like other artists or like musical genres and so forth."* (Veronica)

This tacit negotiation reflects how artists adapt their practices to align with algorithmic systems they believe can boost visibility, reflecting a broader, more organic process in which creators shape content to become more recognizable by the algorithm. Algorithmic gatekeeping increasingly shapes offline opportunities, as stream counts have become *"a necessary part of the toolkit for getting bookings"* (Interviewer 13). In turn, algorithms often reinforce traditional industry hierarchies, favoring major label artists and those aligned with powerful platforms, as Coloray noted:

> *"The artists that are assigned to major labels and the artists that are working with bigger platforms."*

Similarly, Jacopo affirmed:

> *"If you compare something like the number of monthly listeners that different artists*

get, it's striking to see the huge differences […] Some have 100,000 monthly listeners, and you wonder, because in your mind, they're on the same level as other artists […] But a lot of it comes down to the marketing behind the artist. If an artist manages to break into that category, one of those playlists, it's often not just about the music but more about how well they are positioned and promoted".

Accordingly, the disparity in monthly listeners often reflects not artistic merit alone, but the ability to enter a curated ecosystem where algorithmic and editorial playlists play a decisive role in amplifying reach and establishing perceived legitimacy.

4.1.4 The Playlist Effect

Building on this, another critical outcome of algorithmic curation is the rising influence of playlists as key drivers of streams, visibility, and profit (Prey, 2019, p. 4; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023, p. 17). Playlists have become powerful gatekeepers, shaping not only what is heard but also who succeeds in the platform economy. As a result, artists often face unfair practices, such as playlist extortion as Frank explained:

"If you know the right people or you're already popular, you'll get pushed into certain spaces. But there are also paid routes, some artists grow massive followings on Spotify through playlists. You can literally message the curators, and they'll say, 'pay me 50 euros and I'll add you to the list.'"

The position of a song on a playlist "contingently" affected visibility, largely affecting the artists' and their digital presence (Bonini & Gandini, 2018, p. 9). On the other hand, the possibility to personalize your digital space by shaping the degree of agency over the algorithmic power is what Veronica depicted as *"familiarization"* by creating "*an environment that is mine".* By adopting this approach, rather than eliminating human agency, it encourages leveraging human choices alongside algorithmic strengths to enhance performance. Therefore, to some extent, *"you can construct your own algorithm"* (Nabil) by leveraging a self-learning system and enhancing "counter-hegemonic practices" (Mouffe, 2011, p. 8; Just & Latzer, 2017, p. 8). This statement validates what Hansen et al. (2021, pp. 4-5) refer to as "intent modeling": active consumption patterns can become a strategic tool for promoting diversity and expanding the visibility of underrepresented content within platform ecosystems, Similarly, Brunton & Nissenbaum (2011, p. 2) denoted how users have developed tactics to "obfuscate" the algorithm profiling.

By applying the inductive lens developed in this thesis, a co-creation or co-evolution logic appears foundational to systems that foster diversity through intentional user-algorithm interaction. This dynamic allows for more varied recommendations, shaped by active engagement. Veronica described personalized playlists as *"experience-based",* though she noted it takes effort to *"stop Spotify from giving me stupid recommendations"*. Bram, likewise, emphasized the potential of active

user agency in shaping outcomes:

> *"The algorithm knows me really well. But I also think I know how to use the algorithm. […] I'm practicing a sort of art when I'm looking for specific music, by creating a new playlist."*

However, this active user behavior contrasts sharply with passive consumption, which dominates much platform use. Passive listeners engage in "functional" listening (Kassabian, 2013b, p. 90), enhancing algorithmic data extraction and reinforcing default recommendations. What Coloray explained as *"backward-listening",* or *"lazy"* (Elisa), consumption behavior as a deliberate choice to avoid active engagement dictated by a common lack of awareness, since *"We live in a world where people are not aware of things."* (Grand River).

In conclusion, the continuous feedback gathered from user interactions enables an ongoing reconfiguration of cultural experiences and platform agency (Parker et al., 2016, p. 14; Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1). Within this dynamic, algorithmic targeting fosters new forms of listener identity (Prey, 2016, p. 13) through which, by empowering their agency, users can be the ones who have control over the algo-torial mechanism and foster diversity within the ecosystem. However, the expert interviews suggest that consumers are not merely the product of datafication, but also behaviorally modified by algorithms, subtly shifting toward passivity and platform dependence (Bandura, 1982, p. 122; Goldberg, n.d., pp. 43–48).

Due to the inherent homogeneity of features in this category of goods and services, a commodity is typically interchangeable across producers. By turning cultural experience into a commodity, it inevitably leads to a homogenization of user opportunities, often failing to meaningfully reflect users' preferences. Greta captures this counter-effect by describing algorithmic homogenization as "*very boring"* since "*feel that everybody could listen to the same things".* This statement reflects a broader sense of cultural loss, as automated systems increasingly choose users. Another participant expanded on this discontent:

> *"When you start to lose that human touch, it starts to feel like you're being funneled down an impersonal path of discovery. People may find it too convenient to leave, or perhaps more will choose to jump ship".* (Interviewee 13)

The erosion of human curation, though still marginally present in today's recommendation systems, has contributed to the devaluation of music, reducing it to a platform-driven commodity. In response, a countermovement is emerging: many users seek experiences that restore music's role as an irreplaceable cultural vehicle, deeply connected to human emotion and shared meaning. A key manifestation of this movement is a growing demand for narrative and contextual framing around music as it emerges from the interviewees, an increasing desire to reconnect *"unique voice"* (Interviewee 13) that music represents, and a powerful vehicle for self-expression. The audience reclaims the need for a *"micro-blog community"*, as *"it provides a simple way for people to share out their taste in a very human way"* (Interviewee 13). Similarly, Emily emphasized this demand:

"A big one for me is context and storytelling around music. So, to have a platform that puts more of that context and storytelling front and center as a means of driving artist discovery, I think that's a huge one for me."

The value for a multidisciplinary approach in further stressed by Nabil as accounted:

"I think articles that explore the scene, the music, its evolution, and cultural background are really important […] It's not just about listening, I'm also enriching my knowledge and cultural understanding."

These perspectives collectively show that algorithmic homogenization has triggered a growing demand for platforms to reintegrate human meaning. Storytelling, curation, and contextual richness are increasingly seen as ways to restore depth to the music experience and foster cultural value beyond purely algorithmic recommendations.

4.2 Users' Roles & Community Dynamics

After examining power imbalances in a profit-oriented music industry, it is essential to redirect attention to the human elements, such as culture, emotion, and collective experience, that have historically characterized music. Therefore, a portion of the interviews specifically explored how market forces have influenced the roles of platform users and altered their position within the digital space. However, passion and community involvement persist and, in many ways, are strengthened, reflecting a resistance against the algorithmic regime. The following paragraph examines how autonomy, agency, and ownership have been significantly eroded by the new music industry infrastructure, to amplify the voices of those who have been unfairly exploited. Moreover, in framing a solution that addresses the needs of cultural content, artists, listeners, and their communities, this theme directly answers the next sub-question:

"How have consumer behaviors, framed into those of artists and users, and community-driven contexts been redefined by the commodification of music within the platformized digital ecosystem?"

4.2.1 Conditional Autonomy, Agency, and Empowerment

The very essence of the cultural industries, creativity, is increasingly pushed to the background, unable to be fully explored or meaningfully integrated into the current production process (Amabile, 1996; Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 15). Capitalist market pressures impact both main stakeholders in the industry, artists and users, affecting their autonomy, agency, and empowerment. Although these concepts are separate, they are analyzed here as a unified theme, reflecting a methodological choice aligned with the thesis's overall goal. In a system where creative values are being replaced by capitalist logics. (Srnicek, 2017; Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276), they become

interdependent, shaping both individual experience and collective resistance. This section examines the relationship between action and consequence, illustrating how artists and users, regarded as co-creators (Tapscott & Williams, 2006), can promote sustainable practices and contest prevailing platform structures through reciprocal support.

Autonomy in cultural production has long been associated with freedom from the constraints of the commercial world. An artist is considered autonomous when they can freely create and exercise agency, the power to act within a given context, driven by their creative intent (Banks, 2010, p. 10). However, Adorno (1991, p. 99) warned that the industrialization of culture transforms creative forms into commodities. In today's platform-driven music industry, the illusion of freedom masks growing restrictions, as artists' independence is shaped by platform gatekeeping. The promise of cultural democratization has instead created new limits on power and agency. (Banks, 2010, p. 6).

Among the interviewees, this sense of lost freedom and the pressures to adapt to platform logic emerged as a central common theme. Yet, artists responded differently to these conditions. Coloray described his creative strategy as a force to create something that *"is not yet being done. […] combined with something authentic."*, reflecting the effort to maintain artistic emancipation through the creation of unique content. He also acknowledged that while autonomy is essential, it can come at a cost, *"risking not having a career as a result",* as the pursuit of authenticity is often shaped and constrained by market pressures. Ultimately, Coloray described the evolving industry dynamic as *"the battle of expression and authenticity versus curation and entertainment"*, a struggle that, according to Interviewee 13, reflects a steady *"de-prioritization"* of the artist. In contrast, Emily considers diversity as artistic autonomy still consistent; nonetheless, the current capitalist regime, where the *"nicheification"* of the mainstream music genres, such as pop music, still finds "*a lot of success".* A conditional autonomy and empowerment that, according to Grand River, is *"surrendered by the systems"* and, simultaneously, *"also needs a system to support it.".* Thus, creativity and artistic autonomy still find space to persist within the current disruptive ecosystem, a view shared by many independent artists who see inequality not only as a challenge but also as a catalyst for powerful creative expression.

> "*You're limited to certain things [...]that's only good because you have to think outside of the box."* (Pascal).

Action and reaction forces always act on the same straight line and in opposite directions, also for Frank Klick, denoting his resistance as follows:

> "*I love when things fall apart: this happens because you can reinvent yourself. […] I think being an artist is all about reinventing yourself. If you stay the same all the time, then nothing's going to change. So, what I strongly feel is that being an artist for me is like going like at a slow pace every year. […]. You must stay true to yourself."*

Building on this mindset, Frank is actively taking concrete steps to reclaim his role within the industry:

> *"I'm making a website with unique content. I'm really turning it around at the moment. And if it doesn't work, I don't care, I'll just do something else. I deleted Instagram from my phone just to get out of a bubble and create my own bubble. And people can come in if they want."*

This demonstrates how artistic independence allows resistance to platform pressures, embracing self-owned spaces to reclaim digital identity and creative control. Elisa shared a similar perspective, explaining her decision to keep music production as a side income, separating her art from commercial pressures to *"still have the independence".* A comparable dynamic arises among the users, wherein experiences of autonomy and agency differ. Bram, for instance, noted:

> *"The individual doesn't make a difference. My 50 plays are not going to help my friend become famous."*

Reflecting a strong sense of disempowerment. In contrast, Nabil chose to leave Spotify entirely to *"maintain your ideological values",* exemplifying Jennes et al.'s (2014, p. 14) concept of audience empowerment, where digital tools enable meaningful user agency.

In conclusion, Powell's (1996) concept of complementarity offers a valuable lens to understand how co-participation between consumers and producers can counterbalance platform capitalism. even without direct economic benefits, users gain cultural value through deeper engagement with producers. To promote such multidimensional collaboration and move toward a more holistic cultural experience, creative producers are increasingly encouraged to expand the boundaries of their environment, building relational structures that go beyond traditional market sectors (Calcagno et al., 2019, p. 20). In this context, users and cultural agents can form synergistic relationships, shaping cultural products that reflect community needs rather than economic goals (Smorodinskaya et al., 2017, p. 5249). By embracing value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 6), users can collaboratively shape the cultural experience (Calcagno et al., 2019, p. 26).

4.2.2 Ethics as Resistance

Building on this, Foucault's concept of the "ethics of the self" or "technology of the self" (Martin et al., 2014, p. 14) offers a compelling lens to understand how artists and users resist the normalizing pressures of platform capitalism. Rather than treating the self as fixed, Foucault (1984) saw subjectivity as produced through biopolitical subjectivation, governed by disciplinary power and broader systems of governmentality. The ethics of the self thus emerges as a conscious, ongoing practice of reclaiming autonomy and agency to counter the current power structures. In the context of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), platform architectures operate as modern forms of governmentality (Poell et al., 2022, p. 6), subtly shaping how individuals create, consume, and value cultural content. Through algorithmic governance, platforms influence not only markets but also

subjectivities. From a Grounded Theory perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), expert interviews show that artists and users are not entirely passive. Many enact agency through reflexive, everyday practices that constitute forms of ethical resistance, such as rejecting dominant platforms or building self-owned alternatives (e.g., Nabil, Frank, Pascal), acts that arise from lived experience rather than external ideology.

Ultimately, this study finds that both users and artists are engaged in a Foucauldian ethics of the self: a collective and individual negotiation to preserve authenticity, autonomy, and freedom in the face of algorithmic control and extractive digital infrastructures. It becomes essential to rethink music as a "technology of the self" (Foucault, 1954-1984, p. 292), particularly in how musical engagement can act as a bridge back to 'normal' cultural participation. Music, in this sense, can act as a forward-looking tool of agency, offering individuals a way to reshape their digital relationship and better support the surrounding community.

4.2.3 Community Values

Building on the previous discussion of value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 6) as a strategic response to platform-driven power asymmetries, the role of community emerges as a crucial factor in fostering an environment conducive to innovation. Within this framework, as articulated by Powell (1996), artists and users become collaborative agents, dissolving sectoral divisions and contributing to participatory cultural models (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6; Parker et al., 2016, p. 50). In this setting, the formation of community, rooted in a shared sense of belonging and mutual support, holds significant potential to reshape both the value and the experience of cultural production. Moreover, synergistic collaboration among actors is a vital driver of innovation, which can only be achieved through collaborative structures that inherently foster a sense of community. (Bramwell et al., 2016, p. 4). This dynamic was reflected in the expert interviews, where participants were asked about the value and form of community in the music industry. Their responses revealed a widespread perception of mutual connection between artists and users, manifest both in music discovery and in the social value of peer-driven exchange. By prioritizing community-based recommendations over algorithmic curation (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 3), users like Francesca and Nabil exercise a form of agency that mitigates the influence of platform logics, echoing themes of ethical resistance. Bram, likewise, emphasized the importance of collective agency (Jenkins, 2006, p. 258) within music communities and their potential to influence future platform designs:

> *"I think there is a movement going on and, maybe, I'm living in this utopian world […] But I think there will be a revolution in the social sense of society."*

To some extent reflecting Lévy's (1997) concept of a "realizable utopia" built upon the power of a collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006, p. 258). Similarly, Interviewee 13 highlighted how communitarian awareness regarding music consumption is starting to spread around:

> *"I think there is more of like, there's more knowledge about how maybe aspects of it are affecting the way we consume. I think that that's a step in the direction of more understanding, potentially."*

A dynamic that further aligns with what Francesca denoted:

> *"I think that nowadays people are getting more and more aware of all those topics that we talked about, the more ethical part. […] Definitely this change can happen, but it really needs the support of consumers first."*

From the artists' perspective, Coloray stressed that *"building community around an artist or label is crucial,"* especially for the independent artists who don't have any other form of power against gatekeeping forces. Meanwhile, Emily noted that present platforms *"underserved space for streaming platforms is direct connection both between artists and fans, but also fan-to-fan"*, privileging just monetizable interactions.

Collectively, these observations demonstrate that the value of community within the music ecosystem is driven by two intertwined forces. First, the community serves as a cultural signifier, where the shared act of music discovery and exchange fosters social connection and collective meaning-making. Therefore, music sharing is not merely transactional, but a passion-driven practice that unites fans and artists through a common sense of belonging. Second, the resurgence of community-building reflects a countermovement against the distance imposed by platform capitalism, where algorithmic governance increasingly mediates and fragments the fan-artist and fan-to-fan relationship (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 3; Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 11). Community-driven spaces provide a vital counterpoint to the individualistic consumption patterns reinforced by algorithmic recommendation systems (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, p. 9; Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 3). In fostering participatory cultural production (Jenkins, 2006, p. 6), a sense of belonging and collective agency (Jenkins, 2006, p. 258) are prioritized over passive consumption, supporting a model where users and artists actively shape the cultural experience rather than being subordinated by profit-driven automated choices.

4.3 Revenue Distribution Models

4.3.1 Revenue Asymmetries within the Platform Economy

The final theme is an essential aspect for imagining an artist-focused, community-oriented music streaming platform. It draws on multi-method triangulation, combining case analysis of Spotify, Bandcamp, and SoundCloud, document reviews, and expert interviews across the digital music ecosystem. This approach aligns with the thesis's methodological rationale grounded CBPAR (Israel et al., 2005), moved by the aim to foster iterative theory building through collaborative discussion-

reflection (Azulai, 2021, p. 5; Dick, 2007, p. 5), and to co-design as practical as ethical models (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017, p. 2).

The cross-case comparison of Spotify, Bandcamp, and SoundCloud, grounded in their structural and mission-driven differences, provides insight into diverse revenue paradigms in the platform economy. This analysis is enriched by expert insights, foregrounding the lived experiences of those most affected by the industry's power asymmetries (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276), complementing the previous concepts of fairness, equity, and ethics are explored through a comparison of pro-rata and user-centric revenue models (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, p. 9). In both themes, expert reflections ensure that the analysis remains grounded in practitioner realities, beyond abstract technical debates. Further, expert triangulation through iterative discussions with practitioners adds a layer of validation (Baškarada, 2014, p. 6), consistent with the transformational aims of Grounded Action Research (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999, p. 1). Therefore, the findings contribute both to theoretical amplification and the development of actionable alternatives capable of addressing the inequitable dynamics of the current music streaming landscape. Against this background and in alignment with the broader mission of this thesis, the third theme seeks to answer the following sub-question:

What ethical revenue distribution models can be implemented to ensure fairness for artists while maintaining consumer satisfaction?

4.3.1.1 Case Study Comparison: Revenue Share Systems

This case study examines the monetization mechanisms and revenue models of three leading music streaming platforms - Spotify, Bandcamp, and SoundCloud - purposefully selected to identify more sustainable solutions for both artists and consumers. As previously stated, this section integrates primary and secondary data, supported by existing literature, to provide a nuanced perspective on how these models are perceived and experienced. For a detailed empirical explanation of the cross-comparison run with the units of analysis selected, see APPENDIX G.

4.3.1.1.2 Case 1: Spotify

Spotify operates a pro-rata revenue model, where royalties are distributed according to an artist's share of total streams on the platform, denominated "stream pool". The net revenue is calculated by deducting taxes, processing fees, and other costs from gross subscription and ad revenue (Spotify, 2023). Therefore, the final per-stream value varies, estimated between €0.003 and €0.005, depending on total platform activity (Mucenieks, 2023). According to the literature previously discussed, the pro-rata model disproportionately disadvantages artists with smaller but loyal audiences by prioritizing streaming volume over quality of engagement (Laguana, 2014; Dimont, 2018, pp. 678-

679; Jensen, 2023, p. 444). This inequality is reflected by multiple expert insights, as Nabil observed that Spotify *"does not pay the artist based on real listening."*. Similarly, Austin noted how the system privileges platform intermediaries, where *"just this minority stake in a platform that aggregates music is more valuable than the highest-earning musician",* echoing critiques of platform capitalism and stacked infrastructures (Bratton, 2015, p. 4; Parker et al., 2016, p. 5). The model not only delivers low returns but also lacks transparency, obscuring the effective per-stream valuation. Recognizing these limitations, Emily reflected on her efforts (from within Spotify) to diversify artist income:

> *"How could we enable artists and their teams to earn a living off Spotify beyond just streaming revenue? What are supplementary sources of income that the platform could support, merchandise, concert tickets, new types of digital goods and experiences? This is why I always come back to the fan and the consumer with the purpose of making it cool and fun from a consumer perspective."*

Her reflections acknowledge the structural inequality of the current model: streaming alone is insufficient for artist sustainability. Without reform, this dynamic undermines shared cultural values and erodes the creative ecosystem that streaming was initially meant to support (Fleischer, 2017, pp. 149-150; Lucian Grainge in Aswad, 2023). Further deepening these inequalities, Spotify's recent introduction of a minimum threshold of 1,000 annual streams per track (Pitchfork, 2025) risks excluding niche and emerging artists by erecting new barriers to its accessibility.

Moreover, expert interviews' findings also underscored the persistent power of major labels as dominant intermediaries:

> *"Fundamentally, the players haven't really changed […]. What is different is the scale."* (Coloray)

This profound unfair *"deal"* between streaming platforms and labels is further explained by Elisa, considering that, within the Spotify ecosystem, *"the label gets all the revenues until they cover all the costs, and, after that, you share 50-50".* Even the users recruited who consciously support independent or niche artists find that their financial contributions largely benefit mainstream, high-streaming performers. The pro-rata model prioritizes volume over engagement and disregards actual listening habits and perceived value (Laguana, 2014; Dimont, 2018, pp. 678-679; Jensen, 2023, p. 444).

In conclusion, Spotify embodies the case study representing the extractive pressures and consequent asymmetries that are affecting the digital music industry under platform capitalism.

4.3.1.1.2 Case 2: Bandcamp

In contrast, Bandcamp exemplifies a direct-to-fan sales model, positioning itself as an artist-centric platform where creators retain substantial control over their work. It operates on a transparent revenue-share model, taking a 15% commission on digital sales and 10% on physical goods, applied to net revenue after payment processing fees, typically 4-6% (Bandcamp, 2025). All the artists involved agree upon the fact *"The best is always Bandcamp at the moment"* (Jacopo) since it's the most

consistent source of revenue, whereby selling music artists *"gain is everything except the taxes"* (Elisa). This artist-centered approach is further enhanced by allocating 85-90% of direct sales revenue to the artists, with the higher share considered the platform's units of analysis. Bandcamp's artist-centric mission serves as both a foundational value and a strategic self-promotion, helping it retain a niche in the digital music market, as stated on its website:

> *"Bandcamp is an online record store and music community where passionate fans discover, connect with, and directly support the artists they love."*
>
> (Bandcamp for Artists, 2024)

Accordingly, Bandcamp fundamentally empowers artist autonomy by providing complete pricing control, pay-what-you-want alternatives, and direct-to-fan sales, free from algorithmic gatekeeping. Initiatives such as Bandcamp Friday strengthen the relationship between artists and fans. Alongside it, Bandcamp for Artists improves transparency through clear revenue tracking, safeguarding artists' data sovereignty from intermediary influence (Bandcamp for Artists, 2024). Unlike Spotify's opaque and restrictive model, Bandcamp provides an open, community-oriented alternative that fosters equitable remuneration and collective cultural principles.

4.3.1.1.3 Case 3: Soundcloud

Lastly, SoundCloud operates a hybrid monetization model based on fan-powered royalties, a system more closely aligned with user-centric principles compared to Spotify's pro-rata model. Here, royalties are distributed based on individual fan engagement: an artist's share depends on the percentage of a fan's listening dedicated to that artist, the volume of ads consumed, whether the fan holds a paid SoundCloud Go/Go+/DJ subscription, and the platform's retained share of subscription and ad revenue (SoundCloud, 2023). This model provides a partial counter to the extractive logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) by tying revenue to actual listening behavior and encouraging fairer distribution, though it remains contingent on fan engagement and platform monetization. SoundCloud is valued by both artists and users for its community-driven culture and content diversity, where discovery often happens through DJ sets and artist recommendations. Hence, Pascal, an independent artist, affirmed:

> *"Back then, SoundCloud was really cool, especially for electronic music and self-releasing artists […] There was a real sense of community. Artists would just upload their music directly, and people shared it organically."*

Therefore, SoundCloud occupies a hybrid position within the music streaming landscape: its fan-driven approach presents a more equitable alternative to Spotify's pro-rata structure, while its efficacy remains contingent upon fan involvement and subscription rates (SoundCloud, 2023). What emerges from this cross-cases comparison is how independent artists must continuously navigate trade-offs among reach, control, profits, and transparency when choosing where exercising their content digital presence.

4.3.1.1.4 Hybrid Revenue Sharing System

Building on the previous analysis, the urgency for a hybrid revenue model arises from the triangulation of expert interviews, document analysis and critical literature review, reflecting on how no single model (whether pro-rata, user-centric, or direct-to-fan) fully resolves the structural inequalities of the current music streaming ecosystem (Dimont, 2018, pp. 678-679; Alaei et al., 2021, p. 4; Moreau et al., 2024, p. 2). The hybrid solution of this thesis aims to offer a more adaptable and sustainable pathway by combining the strengths of different models while mitigating their limitations. As outlined by the previous literature, user-centric models better align compensation with listener intent and artist value (Laguana, 2014; Dimont, 2018, p. 694), whereas direct-to-fan platforms such as Bandcamp demonstrate how transparent, artist-centered systems foster autonomy and equitable payouts (Baym, 2018, p. 166). Conversely, pro-rata models, despite their unequal redistribution, offer scalability and global reach (Alaei et al., 2021), a mandatory feature in the competitive landscape of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017). A hybrid revenue model may integrate user-centric payment mechanisms for core subscription services, ensuring that individual listening habits drive a fairer share of royalties (Dimont, 2018, p. 696), with direct fan-to-artist features that broaden monetization beyond streaming (Baym, 2018; Jenkins, 2006, p. 258), direction already explored by Spotify for Artists (Emily White). When integrated with algorithmic improvements that enhance equity and diversity in music discovery (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 1; Biega et al., 2018, p. 404), such a model could mitigate the consolidation consequences of the prevailing playlist culture (Prey, 2019, p. 4; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023, p. 17). This integrated model embraces the participatory ethos of Jenkins (2006) and Tapscott & Williams (2006), viewing users empowered as co-creators of value while consuming music (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 6), critically responding to risks of individual alienation and algorithmic subordination (Zuboff, 2019; Terranova, 2000). Moreover, it effectively fosters artist autonomy and community agency in the digital realm, embedding into direct fan-to-artist monetization the unique source of profit (Comor, 2010; Wasko et al., 2011). By merging scalability and participatory ethics, a hybrid revenue model could ultimately promote fairness, transparency, and sustainability, while redirecting value to the hands of cultural producers.

4.3.2 Ethical Revenue Model

Building on this, it becomes evident that a future artist-centered, community-driven streaming ecosystem must rest on a foundation of ethical principles. Across both the literature (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p. 1002; Dimont, 2018, pp. 678-679; Wasko et al., 2011, p. 4) and the insights gathered from expert interviews, themes as transparency, fairness and data sovereignty consistently emerged by discussing the perceived legitimacy of revenue-sharing systems. However, what is deemed "ethical" is far from universally defined: artists and users bring distinct, though overlapping, perspectives shaped by their positions within the streaming platform economy. For many artists, transparency is not only about accessing data, whereas exercising power and agency over them. Accordingly, Emily affirmed:

> *"Spotify for Artists was about giving transparency and access to data. […] We have to move beyond that, providing actions that artists can take based on that data."*

Highlighting how actionable outcomes are derived from a passive datafication, hence explaining why current intermediated structures often hinder their producers. As Jacopo pointed out, even where data seems available, artists must *"trust"* opaque intermediaries, while what they truly require is a tool for building a direct *"fan base"* (Interviewee 13). For consumers, ethical participation frequently relies on the capacity to support artists within frameworks that elevate smaller, independent voices.

Accordingly, experts underscored the necessity for radical openness in revenue flows, advocating for explicit data on artist revenues per stream rather than mere dashboards, enabling listeners to make informed and consequential decisions. As Emily put it:

> *"It's about identifying that product or experience that a person will pay for and that they find valuable for the artists they love."*

Artists and users' needs, once again, align in their call for greater transparency, fair compensation, and platform designs that prioritize community over profit extraction (Smorodinskaya et al., 2017, p. 5249). Crucially, data sovereignty emerges as a key lever for enabling artists to reclaim control and generate sustainable income. While no existing platform fully embodies these principles, this study emphasizes a foundational step toward repositioning creators as essential stakeholders and decision-makers, rather than mere content providers, in matters ranging from royalty regimes to data transparency.

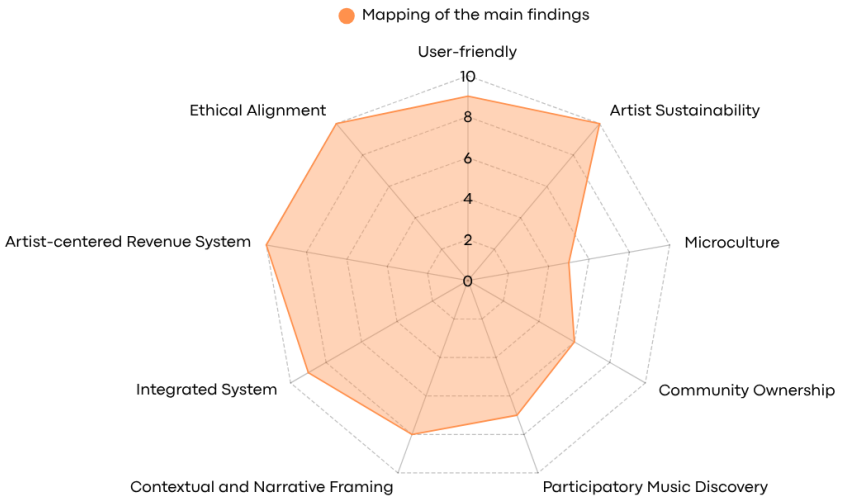
5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This final phase involved a second round of interviews with founders and developers of emerging fair and sustainable streaming alternatives - Nina Protocol, Subvert, and Tone - moved by the research aim to critically engage with the practitioners and their expertise and collaboratively develop actionable outcomes. Framed as a mode of systematic inquiry, CBPAR (Israel et al., 2012) advances social change by fostering collaborative engagement between researcher and participants, simultaneously promoting capacity building and collective empowerment through a process that integrates education with critical social investigation. The practitioners, by becoming co-researchers, substantially deepened the normative dimension of the research, strengthening the previous findings while largely enriching the foundational values and competitive framework, indispensable to envisioning a sustainable paradigm for the music industry.

Following Dick's (2007, p. 21) model of "mutual education", this collaborative process based on iterative cycles of reflection and discussion enabled knowledge generation while triggering collective action. An iterative sampling strategy was employed, with the mapping of findings from the prior 13 expert interviews serving as the conceptual framework for the discussion with co-researchers; a visually impactful radar graph emerged as the most effective tool for engaging practitioners critically with prior findings, while also guiding the articulation of concrete directions for reimagining the digital music industry.

Figure 3: Mapping of the findings based on the first round of semi-structured interviews



The critical discussions with the representative of Nina Protocol, Subvert and Tone didn't generate new knowledge, crafting themes and patterns divergent from the collected findings. However, drawing on field-based expertise in designing sustainable interventions within the music streaming industry, they reinforced and enriched the thematic landscape established through the expert interviews. As

illustrated in the following section, this convergence significantly reinforces the credibility of the findings and their alignment with the thesis's central research question.

5.1.1 Value Co-Creation and Collective Agency: Subvert

Subvert offers a compelling blueprint for reimagining the ownership and governance structures of music platforms, key leverage points for building a future hybrid, artist-centered and community-driven ecosystem. Rather than focusing on incremental feature improvements, Subvert foregrounds structural change, embedding collective ownership and democratic governance at the core of its platform model.

As founder Austin Robey argues, the value of platforms like Spotify is fundamentally derived from the art created by artists, yet under current platform capitalism, ownership and control remain concentrated in the hands of investors and corporate executives (Srnicek, 2017). This dynamic reinforces the extractive asymmetries critiqued throughout this thesis, where artists are positioned as content suppliers and users as data commodities (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). Subvert directly counters this logic by operationalizing participatory governance and community ownership, a concrete application of Powell's complementarity (1996), which reposition artists and listeners as strategic stakeholders in platform development. This approach reflects key principles of value co-creation (Ranjan & Read, 2016) and collective agency (Jenkins, 2006), enabling a more equitable redistribution of value and decision-making power. Furthermore, Robey highlighted a core limitation of current *"direct support"* illusionary narratives: as long as platform ownership remains external to the community, intermediaries will continue to extract value from both artists and users. Subvert's cooperative architecture aims to resolve this contradiction by structurally aligning platform incentives with community interests, a crucial dynamic for any future hybrid platform that seeks to reclaim artist autonomy, user empowerment, and fair revenue models.

Finally, Subvert's design aligns with systemic co-design principles (Cole, 2022, p. 4), recognizing that transforming entrenched platform dynamics requires collaborative innovation, power-sharing, and resilience at the governance level. In this sense, Subvert embodies many of the core ethical imperatives identified throughout this research, offering a model for how a future hybrid platform could move beyond extractive platform capitalism toward a truly community-driven and ethically grounded music ecosystem.

5.1.2 Narrative Framing and Editorial Care: Nina Protocol

The case of Nina Protocol represents another critical exemplar within this study, illustrating how an alternative platform logic can operationalize the core principles of cultural sustainability, artist autonomy, and community engagement outlined in this thesis. As Cal Hickox, Head of Music Operations at Nina Protocol, emphasized, *"music is a cultural vehicle full of meaning, and editorial*

work highlights that", strategically choosing to create a cultural digital space instead of algorithmic-driven entertainment engine (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Goldeberg, n.d., pp. 43-48; Hansen et al., 2021, p. 4). Nina Protocol foregrounds editorial care and narrative framing as core foundations to foster cultural depth and active listening practices and attract a selected, passionate audience. As Hickox further explained:

> *"Many companies mistakenly lead with technology and product features. But in music, trust is hard to earn, and artists already have too many platforms to navigate. They're not seeking out new platforms unless they feel a genuine sense of belonging and purpose."*

This insight reinforces earlier findings on resistance to the music industry's devaluation and the need for a protected niche shielded from platform capitalism's pressures. Nina's consistent editorial practices re-empower the *"cultural foundation"* of music content as a form of legitimization of the platform itself. Through daily curations of articles and artist features, it directly addresses the widespread desire for more meaningful engagement, countering the passive consumption habits reinforced by algorithmic recommendations.

Importantly, Nina Protocol's model of artist autonomy also influences its revenue system, as Hickox explains:

> *"It's a one-sided marketplace: the artist or label sets a price, and users can purchase releases at that price. It's not really different from Bandcamp in that sense, though it runs on different technological infrastructure. We experimented early on with Web3 concepts like limited releases and resale markets, but we found that music fans don't want music to become a stock market. Supporting artists isn't about trying to profit from reselling their work; it's about direct support. We didn't want to turn Nina against its own mission."*

This model repositions the artist not as a subordinated content provider, but as a main cultural agent and co-creator of value with the direct support of its fanbase (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 6).

As a result, Nina Protocol substantiates how the future of digital music depends on reconstructing cultural meaning, community trust, and collaborative agency as value-driven elements to avoid further technological disruption and depersonalization.

5.1.3 Transparency, Data Sovereignty, and Royalty Clarity: Tone and Nina Protocol

The emergence of Tone represents a meaningful case driven by mandatory artist-centric transparency and accountability. As Scott Munro, Head of Labels at Tone, explains, *"Tone is a brand-new company. Its mission is to empower artists by making royalties very transparent and clear"*. This commitment positions Tone not merely as a royalty management tool, but as an intervention into the longstanding opacity that characterizes music rights management and artist remuneration (Marshall,

2015; Baym, 2018).

In an industry where even *"the simplest deals are overly complicated"*, the centrality of user experience in Tone's design, both for artists and labels, marks a departure from legacy systems that have traditionally privileged gatekeepers. Munro further elaborates:

> *"We've developed a lot of tools to help artists navigate their royalty statements and dive into the analytics surrounding their earnings. For artists, it's all about transparency: helping them interpret their statements and giving them analytical tools that previously only labels would have had access to."*

This signals a significant redistribution of power, enabling artists to engage with their data proactively rather than passively receiving shady, often delayed summaries of activity and income. This emphasis on data sovereignty aligns with previous academic discourse upon the importance of self-determination in digital cultural labor (Foucault, 1984; Zuboff, 2019). By equipping artists with tools traditionally reserved for industry intermediaries, Tone addresses the technical complexity of royalty distribution by repositioning artists as main stakeholders in the economic life of their music, reinforcing their accountability.

In sum, Tone demonstrates how transparent-driven infrastructures, when developed from within the cultural field, are both possible and practicable solutions to offer a viable model for equitable platform governance, functioning as empowering tools rather than surveillance instruments.

5.2 Conclusion: A Framework for Transformation

This thesis argues that addressing the exploitative dynamics of platform capitalism in music streaming requires a fundamental realignment of value structures and stakeholder intentions. Using an integrated, community-based methodology, it proposes a framework for implementing ethically grounded and culturally relevant alternatives to current platform models that have undermined autonomy and agency for both creators and listeners, while also revealing viable paths for digital resistance and innovation. By synthesizing literature, empirical insights, and emerging platform examples, such as Nina Protocol, Subvert, and Tone, the research illustrates how artist-centered, transparent, and participatory models can foster a more equitable ecosystem. Voices from artists, users, and innovators reaffirm that the current capitalist system is neither fixed nor inevitable. The common urgency to rightfully restore autonomy, agency, and ownership can be addressed by the alignment of their actors toward participatory governance (Subvert), human-curated narrative framing against algo-torial gatekeeping (Nina Protocol), mandatory transparency, and data sovereignty over platform surveillance and datafication (Tone). By positioning the community as a cultural anchor, this thesis foregrounds a co-designed model rooted in collective agency emerging through music as "the universal language of mankind" (Longfellow, 1835), rather than reducing it to a commodified contingency. Ultimately, this thesis presents a living framework for ethical innovation, rooted in

collective agency and cultural values, offering a pathway to a more just, community-driven future in music streaming.

5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theoretical discourse at the intersection of critical political economy and digital ethics by deepening our understanding of how platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) reshapes not only market structures but also subjectivity and cultural production. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of biopolitical subjectivation (Foucault, 1984) and platform governance (Poell et al., 2022), it illustrates how algorithmic power actively modulates the behaviors of both creators and consumers.

Therefore, this research emphasizes how these stakeholders can regain empowerment through value co-creation. (Ranjan & Read, 2016) and collective agency (Jenkins, 2006). It argues that only by reinvesting in collectivism and human-centeredness can participatory governance offer meaningful reform in an increasingly digital, individualistic, and algorithm-driven industry.
Therefore, it reframes the tension between audience commodification and user empowerment (Napoli, 2011; Jennes & Pierson, 2012) as dynamic and coexisting, rather than oppositional, within the evolving platform ecosystem. Methodologically, the integration of CBPAR (Israel et al., 2005) embeds co-creation not only as a theoretical lens but as a practice, centering the lived experiences of artists, users, and platform practitioners as co-researchers, critically enriching the shared knowledge generated with the scope to guide real societal transformations.

Ultimately, this participatory orientation strengthens the case that ethical transformation in digital cultural economies must emerge from collaborative, community-driven praxis, extending critical debates into socially embedded, actionable models of cultural governance.

5.2.2 Limitations & Future Research

While this study offers an in-depth analysis of the platformized music industry and proposes ethical innovations, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the qualitative approach, based on expert interviews and participatory methods, limits the generalizability of findings across the global music ecosystem by reflecting the insights of a selected, therefore limited, group of stakeholders, despite aligning with CBPAR (Israel et al., 2005) and Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 196 Broader ethnographic inclusion, especially of younger and older users, would enhance representativeness. Second, the cross-case comparative analysis, while enriched by practitioner insights, focused on a selected set of platforms, omitting the full spectrum of emerging or regional platform models that may reveal alternative dynamics relevant to ethical design. Third, this research was conducted during a period of significant technological evolution, including the rise of AI-generated content and blockchain models. Therefore, both theoretical propositions and practical recommendations outlined herein should be considered provisional and open to continuous re-

evaluation. In particular, the advent of AI-generated music presents a rapidly growing area of concern, one that merits dedicated attention in future research.

Based on these limitations, several avenues for future investigation are proposed. Methodologically, enriching findings by incorporating a quantitative method can complement the current results and foster a broader empirical and actionable validation. Future research might also expand into comparative studies across different cultural and regulatory contexts, investigating how platform cooperativism and ethical innovation manifest across varying socio-economic conditions. Finally, there is a critical need to examine the real viability and scalability of the hybrid platform architectures previously exemplified by the emerging initiatives involved (Subvert, Nina Protocol and Tone).

5.2.3 Societal Relevance

This thesis holds significant societal relevance as it addresses one of the most pressing challenges in today's digital ecosystem: the growing commodification and algorithmic governance of creative labor within the global music industry. Music is more than a commercial product: it's a vital form of cultural expression and social identity that shapes collective experiences, human feelings, and public discourse. The findings reveal that the current platform-based streaming models marginalize artists, particularly independent creators, and reshape listener behavior in ways that diminish cultural diversity and agency.

By proposing an actionable framework grounded in artist-centered, community-driven, and ethically transparent practices, this research contributes to broader debates on digital justice (Crawford, 2021), platform fairness (Alaei et al., 2021), and the future of participatory digital culture (Jenkins, 2006). In doing so, it speaks to the interests of multiple stakeholders: musicians seeking fair compensation and creative autonomy, listeners demanding authentic engagement and cultural diversity, policymakers navigating platform regulation, and platform designers moving toward ethical innovation.

Furthermore, by highlighting participatory governance and value co-creation as practical alternatives to extractive platform capitalism, this thesis resonates with societal movements toward platform cooperativism, data sovereignty, and digital commons, offering pathways for cultural industries to evolve in ways that foreground human values and cultural sustainability over pure market logics. Therefore, it proves insights applicable to a broader spectrum of creative sectors undergoing similar transformations.

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APPENDIX:

APPENDIX A:

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Selected Music Platforms: Business Models, Missions, and Functions

Platform	Business Model	Mission	Function
Spotify	Freemium model (ad-supported + premium subscriptions); revenue shared with rights holders (approx. 70%)	To become the world's creator platform, enabling 50 million creators to manage their businesses and monetize their work	Global streaming service using algorithmic recommendations; vast catalog; industry standard shaped by platform capitalism
Bandcamp	Direct-to-fan sales (digital + physical); 10-15% commission; fast payouts to artists	To help spread the healing power of music by building a community where artists thrive through direct fan support	Platform for artist autonomy, direct payments, and strong artist-fan interaction; community-driven and sustainable
SoundCloud	Fan-powered royalties; artists paid based on individual fan engagement	To empower both emerging and established artists to share and monetize their music	Hybrid platform blending grassroots content with algorithmic discovery; hub for independent creators
Nina Protocol	Decentralized on Solana blockchain; on-chain publishing; artists	To create a transparent, equitable music ecosystem	Open-source protocol eliminating intermediaries;

Platform	Business Model	Mission	Function
	set prices with minimal fees	through decentralization	artist ownership and control of royalties; community participation
Subvert	Cooperative ownership; direct sales of music and merchandise; fair, democratic compensation	To provide an artist-centric, transparent alternative to exploitative DSPs	Artist-first cooperative model; ethical engagement; anti-capitalist governance structure
Tone	Royalty processing and back-office services for modern labels; accurate financial data and artist portals	To simplify financial processes and ensure fair, timely payments in the music industry	Infrastructural service for labels/artists; transparent royalty calculation; supports ethical scaling of payment models

APPENDIX B:

Introduction	• Briefly introduce yourself and your research project. • Explain the purpose of the interview and its relevance to AI's role in creative industries. • Assure the interviewee that their responses will remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. • Consent for Recording & Usage
Icebreakers (applicable to all the participants)	• Could you tell me about your background a role within the music industry? • How do you live and perceived today' music system? • Do you use music streaming platforms? (Follow up) If so, which platform and how

	in terms of "consumption"?
Artist – Label- Owner (or both)	• How would you describe your experience with current music streaming platforms (e.g., Spotify, Apple Music, Bandcamp)? (Follow-up) What do you perceive as their strengths and limitations for independent artists? • Do you feel the current revenue models reflect the value of your creative labor? (Follow up) Why or why not? • How much influence do you think you have over the visibility of your music on platforms? *Probe*: Have you ever adapted your content or style to "fit" platform algorithms? • How transparent are platforms regarding how they recommend your music to users? • Have you ever tried alternative or community-based platforms? (Follow up) What motivated your choice, and how was the experience different? • Do you see your work and presence on platforms as empowering, exploitative — or both? *Probe*: How does this relate to your sense of artistic autonomy? • In your opinion, what would an "ethical" music streaming model look like?
Platform Developer	*Platform Strategy & Industry Dynamics* • How would you describe your platform's current role in the wider music industry ecosystem? *Probe:* Has this role evolved over time?

	• What kinds of pressures (economic, regulatory, or cultural) shape your platform's strategic decisions? • To what extent do traditional music industry power structures (labels, rights holders) influence platform's policies and operations? • How do you navigate tensions between market competition and cultural responsibility (e.g., promoting diversity vs. maximizing clicks)? *Platform Governance & Accountability* • What mechanisms exist (if any) for artists and users to influence the platform's design or policies? *Probe:* Do you consider this "participatory governance" or more of a feedback loop? • How do you internally define or measure 'fairness' in terms of artist treatment, algorithmic distribution, or data handling? *Metrics, Monetization & Value Creation* • Which key performance indicators (KPIs) guide your decision-making when it comes to user engagement and artist success? • Do you see a disconnection between the value generated by creators and the way revenue is distributed? (Follow up) How does your platform respond to that? • What are your thoughts on emerging models like user-centric payment systems?

	• In your view, what ethical responsibilities do streaming platforms have toward independent artists? • Do you consider your platform more as a neutral intermediary, or as an active cultural curator?
Data Analyst / Platform Designers / Digital Strategists	• What are the key technical criteria behind content recommendation systems on music platforms? *Probe*: To what extent is artist visibility data-driven vs. curated? • How does the platform currently define and measure "success" (for artists, users, or content)? • Do you believe algorithmic systems in music platforms reinforce certain power imbalances? • What efforts are made to ensure fairness or inclusivity in recommendation algorithms? • How is user and artist data collected, and how is it typically monetized or leveraged by the platform? • How open is your platform to feedback or collaboration from artists and users regarding design choices or governance? • Do you see a tension between user personalization and the visibility of niche or emerging artists? How is that managed?
Active and Passive Users	• How do you usually discover new music online? • Which platforms do you use most? (Follow-up) Why?

	• Do you feel in control of what is recommended to you, or do you sense that the algorithm limits your choices? • Have you ever contributed content, reviews, playlists, or suggestions to a platform? (Follow up) Did it feel empowering or transactional? • Do you feel that your listening habits contribute to shaping the platform (e.g., what becomes popular or visible)? • How important is it to you that platforms treat artists fairly and ethically? (Follow up) Does that affect which platforms you support? • Would you be willing to pay more for a platform that ensures better revenue distribution to artists? (Follow up) Why or why not? • What does "community" mean to you in the context of music streaming? (Follow up) Do you feel platforms foster it, or hinder it?
Optional Cross-Cutting Questions (Applicable to all the participants)	• What role should music streaming platforms play in supporting cultural diversity and equity? • Do you trust platforms to act in the best interests of both users and creators? Why or why not? • What would a truly artist-centered and community-driven platform look like to you? • How do you imagine a fairer future for music creation, distribution, and consumption?

APPENDIX C: Expert list.

Name and Organization	Description
1. Francesca Bono (Passive User)	Francesca Bono, an Italian citizen residing in Amsterdam with a background in international relations. Considered a passive user since she does not curating a public-facing presence on music streaming platforms (e.g. Playlist, Radio Shows etc.)
2. Veronica Fanzio (Passive User, media-researcher)	Veronica Fanzio, a master's researcher and scholar at the University of Amsterdam, contributes crucial insights through her academic background specifically focused on platformization and related dynamics. Considered a passive user since she does not maintain a public-facing curatorial presence on music streaming platforms.
3. Greta De Zani (Active User)	Great De Zani, professionally active in the fashion industry, is also an avid music researcher and passionate listener. She currently hosts a weekly radio show on Spotify, touching a variegated range of melodies and genres.
4. Nabil El Ayane (Active User, music writer)	Nabil El Ayane is a dedicated explorer of experimental and alternative music, as well as a music writer. A statistician by profession, he applies the same empirical approach to cultivating and supporting the industry and its artists by keeping on digging deeper into always new shades of sound.
5. Bram Kuijper (Active User, Production Manager of 013)	A Production Manager of 013 with a decade of experience in the music industry, he has worked across various festivals in the Netherlands. His professional perspective is deeply enriched by a strong personal passion and daily curation for music, which also manifests through his practice as a DJ.
6. Frank Klick	The interviewee is a professional independent

(Independent Artist, music producer and teacher)	artist, music producer and teacher who entered the industry after studying at Fontys IMES in Tilburg, gaining experience through DJing and event production such as Draaimolen.
7. Grand River (Independent Artist, label-owner)	Aimée Portioli, known as Grand River, is a Berlin-based Dutch-Italian composer and sound designer whose emotionally rich electronic compositions draw from minimalism, ambient, and contemporary sound design. Beyond albums, she creates immersive sound art and spatial audio installations and has performed at renowned venues such as Barbican Hall, Berghain, and Centre Pompidou. Portioli also runs the One Instrument label and holds a degree in linguistics and communication, where she explored music's psychological communicative power.
8. Elisa Batti (Independent artist, sound-engineer, label-owner)	Elisa Batti is an Italian electronic musician, producer and sound engineer based in the Netherlands. Part of her background as a versatile musician includes a career in music production for performing and theatrical arts. Trough music she conveys a message that connect her personal sound with the ethical mission that such a cultural vehicle should always embed.
9. Jacopo Severitano (Independent Artist, label-owner)	Jacopo Severitano is a Berlin-based multidisciplinary designer, DJ, and label founder recognized for championing genre-defying electronic music through his imprint, Midgar Records. Through Midgar, he combines visual storytelling and music, designing logos, record sleeves, and promotional materials himself, reinforcing a cohesive creative vision
10. Coloray	Coloray is the multidisciplinary project of

(Independent Arist, label-owner)	Raynor de Groot, a Tilburg-based DJ, producer, singer, and graphic designer known for blending raw sound aesthetics with dynamic energy. As the founder of Intercept Records, he bridges visual and sonic storytelling, shaping a bold artistic identity. With releases and performances that push the boundaries of genre, Coloray has emerged as a forward-thinking voice in the electronic music landscape.
11. Pascal Terstappen (Independent Artist, label owner)	Pascal Terstappen, known artistically as Applescal, is a Dutch electronic music producer and the founder of the Amsterdam-based label Atomnation. Since 2008, he has cultivated a distinct sonic identity through intelligent, melodic house and techno, reflected in solo albums like Dreaming In Key and For. As a label curator, he champions forward-thinking artists such as Gidge and David Douglas, shaping a cohesive yet eclectic vision of deconstructed electronic music. His work spans both studio and DJ sets, consistently merging introspective soundscapes with dancefloor sensibilities.
12. Emily White (Ex Spotify Product Manager – Spotify For Artist- music writer)	Emily White is a mission-driven senior product leader and founding member of Spotify for Artists, where she developed tools to help musicians grow and monetize their fanbases through direct-to-fan offerings like merch, tickets, and digital experiences. With a background in both Spotify and Billboard, she brings deep industry knowledge and a focus on creator sustainability and fan engagement.
13. Interviewee 13	Anonymized
14. Scott Munro (Head of Labels of Tone)	Scott Munro is the Head of Label Services & Operations at Tone, bringing over 15 years of

	experience in royalties, rights management, and client service at industry-leading organizations like PRS and MCPS. An active musician himself, guitarist in indie band Happy Hollows, he combines practical creative insight with deep operational knowledge to support artists throughout the royalty process
15. Austin Robey (Founder of Subvert)	Austin Robey is the Founder of Subvert, an innovative platform advocating for artist-owned digital infrastructure, where creators can maintain governance and financial agency. Formerly a co-founder of the cooperative platform Ampled, he supports models of community-funded music and cooperative digital economies. Additionally, Robey serves as a Creative Resident at IDEO and a Mentor in Residence at NEW INC, where he continues to champion solidarity-based and artist-driven alternatives to traditional streaming models
16. Cal Hickox (Head of Music and Operations of Nina Protocol)	Cal Hickox is the Head of Music Operations at Nina Protocol, currently based in Brooklyn and educated at Wesleyan University, bringing extensive expertise in managing and scaling music initiatives within tokenized and decentralized frameworks. In this role, he oversees music curation, platform onboarding, and operational strategy, positioning Nina Protocol as a next-generation platform for artist empowerment and community engagement. With a collaborative approach to decentralizing music production and distribution, Hickox plays a pivotal part in steering the platform toward more equitable and artist-first digital ecosystems.

APPENDIX D: Documents selected for analysis, secondary data.

Table 1: Documents selected for analysis, secondary data

Case	Document/report/website	Theme
1. Spotify	Spotify. (2024). *Loud and Clear by Spotify*. Loud and Clear. https://loudandclear.byspotify.com/#takeaway-1	- Platform Power Dynamics
2. Spotify	"Spotify Playlist" (2024) https://fanstudy.byspotify.com/edition/spotify-playlists	- Platform Power Dynamics - Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
3. Spotify	United states securities and exchange commission. (2025). United states securities and exchange commission form 6-k report of foreign private issuer pursuant to rule 13a-16 or 15d-16 under the securities exchange act of 1934 Spotify Technology S.A. https://s29.q4cdn.com/175625835/files/doc_financials/2025/q1/Q1-25-6K-Final.pdf	- Platform Power Dynamics - Revenue Distribution Models
4. Spotify	Spotify. (2023). Royalties. Spotify. https://support.spotify.com/us/artists/article/royalties/	- Revenue Distribution Models
5. Spotify	How much does Spotify pay per stream in 2025. Ditto Music https://dittomusic.com/en/blog/how-much-does-spotify-pay-per-stream	- Revenue Distribution Models
6. Spotify	Mucenieks, A. (2023, October 10). How Do Artists Make Money on Spotify: Full Guide (2024). Printify.com. https://printify.com/blog/how-do-artists-make-money-on-spotify/	- Revenue Distribution Models
7. Bandcamp	Bandcamp. (2025a). About Bandcamp | Bandcamp. Bandcamp.com. https://bandcamp.com/about	- Platform Power Dynamics - Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
8. Bandcamp	What are Bandcamp's fees? https://get.bandcamp.help/hc/en-us/articles/23020665520663-What-are-Bandcamp-s-fees	- Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics - Revenue Distribution Models
9. Bandcamp	Bandcamp. (2024b). What about taxes? Bandcamp Help Center. https://doi.org/1071918/22995953672343	- Revenue Distribution Models
10. Bandcamp	Terms of use | Bandcamp. (2024). Bandcamp.com. https://bandcamp.com/terms_of_use?from=embed#fees	- Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics - Revenue Distribution Models
11. Bandcamp	Bandcamp business model canvas. (n.d.). Vizologi | Rethinking Business Model Design. https://vizologi.com/business-strategy-canvas/bandcamp-business-model-canvas/	- Revenue Distribution Models
12. Soundcloud	Premier Payments FAQs. (2023). SoundCloud Help Center. https://help.soundcloud.com/hc/en-us/articles/360053309894-Premier-Payments-FAQs	- Revenue Distribution Models

13. Soundcloud	Marshall, W., Fishwick, M., & Dodaro, J. (2025). First-Ever SoundCloud Music Intelligence Report: The Future of Music Starts Here. Soundcloud.com. https://community.soundcloud.com/playbook-articles/first-ever-soundcloud-music-intelligence-report-the-future-of-music-starts-here-h9ye	- Platform Power Dynamics - Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics - Revenue Distribution Models
14. Soundcloud	SoundCloud Unveils Six New AI-Powered Tools to Democratize Music Creation for All Artists. (2025). Soundcloud.com. https://community.soundcloud.com/playbook-articles/soundcloud-unveils-six-new-ai-powered-tools-to-democratize-music-creation-for-all-artists	- Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
15. Nina Protocol	Nina • Nina. (2024). Nina; Nina. https://www.ninaprotocol.comm	- Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
16. Nina Protocol	Nina For Artist - https://www.ninaprotocol.com/nina-for-artists	- Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
17. Subvert	Subvert — The Collectively Owned Music Marketplace. (2024). Subvert — the Collectively Owned Music Marketplace. https://subvert.fm	- Platform Power Dynamics - Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
18. Subvert	Subvert's Organizational Documentation - https://subvert.fm/docs/	- Consumer Roles & Community Dynamics
19. Tone	Tone. (2025, June 3). Tone. https://tone.is	- Revenue Distribution Models
20. Tone	Dessa, K. (2025, May 15). On-Demand Royalty Processing: More Control & Transparency. Tone. https://tone.is/introducing-on-demand-royalty-processing/	- Revenue Distribution Models
21. iTnews	iTnews. (2013, October 31). Hacker uses bots to top music charts, bumps P!nk, Nicki Minaj. ITnews. https://www.itnews.com.au/news/hacker-uses-bots-to-top-music-charts-bumps-pnk-nicki-minaj-362462	- Revenue Distribution Models

APPENDIX E: Coding Framework

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
Platform Power Dynamics	Pre-Platform Capitalism	• Music consumption before platformization • CDs, piracy, peer-to-peer • Personal value & investment in music • Community-based discovery • Intentional discovery • Limited accessibility • Accessibility: positive shift from music piracy to legitimate streaming platforms • Early streaming optimism • Open-access models
	Platform Ownership & Market Monopolies	• Profit-driven logic • Commercial value over everything • User retention as success metric • Access instead of Ownership • Platform Gatekeeping • Winner-take-all competition • Corporate ownership & data extraction • Platform dependence • Platform Dependence: release music on every DPS (visibility) • Music as contingent commodity
	User Commodification	• User engagement • Loss of user agency • Algorithmic shaping of listening behavior • Dependence on user-friendly interfaces
	Artist Exploitation	• Algorithmic gatekeeping • Pressure for consistency and productivity • Loss of autonomy, agency, ownership • Forced adaptation as strategic adaptation • Digital saturation that led to devaluation • Fragmentation • Undervaluation of the music content and creative process • Marketization of creative labor • Digital presence as condition for music relevance • Consistency as visibility strategy

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
	Algo-Torial Power	• Algorithm as new gatekeeper • Algorithmic control over artist success • Profit-driven algorithm • Bias toward commercially viable content • Algorithm prediction • Algorithm constraint: loss of artistic control • Lack of diversity • How to train your algorithm • Algorithmic recommendations: Spotify
	The Playlist Effect	• Playlist power and pay-for-play dynamics • Playlist curation based on mood or context • How to strategically create a playlist to discover new music • Routine-based consumption • Personalization • Visibility bias • "Musical identity" shaped by algorithm • Diversity through active consumption • Crescent need for contextual and narrative framing • Loss of human touch • Algorithmic homogenization • User manipulation toward passive consumption
User Roles & Community Dynamics	Conditional Autonomy, Agency & Empowerment	• Adaptation to platform logic (Artist) • Anti-platform dynamics (Artist) • Anti-mass accessibility (Label-owner) • Conditional creative autonomy (Artists) • Resistance through unique content (Artist) • Artist autonomy: Bandcamp • Parallel income strategies (Artist) • Music Industry Evolution: Nicheification • Platform exit (Artist and User) • Active vs. passive listening (User) • Perception of individual agency vs recommendation systems (User) • Limits of individual agency (User)

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
		• Passion as real driver within the music industry (Artist and User) • Music as cultural act (Artist and User)
	Ethics as Resistance	• Spreading awareness through education • Active user: emotional reward from collecting music and supporting artists • Creative autonomy as ethical reaction • Music-centered • Ethics of non-participation: platform exit
	Community Values	• Community-based discovery • Participatory discovery • Artist support through its community • Collective agency • Peer recommendations vs algorithm • Streamlining of community features • Contextual listening: editorial-community models • Sense of belonging and purpose • Demand for niche communities and independent online spaces • Depth and quality fan-artist relationship through smaller audience
Revenue Distribution Models	Revenue Asymmetries	• Spotify - pro-rata • Spotify: royalties' redistribution doesn't depend on real listeners' tastes • Spotify: rewarding artists that reach the scale • Bandcamp - artist-centric model • Bandcamp for music distribution for independent artists • Bandcamp: active or utilitarian form of music consumption • Bandcamp: transparency • SoundCloud - fan-powered model • Hybrid Revenue Sharing Model
	Ethical Revenue Model	• User-centric models considered ethical solution • Transparency and fairness • General distrust toward streaming platforms

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
		• Digital Surveillance • Digital surveillance awareness: Spotify • Digital surveillance: to keep the consumer engaged (Spotify) • Equity embedded into platform design • Need for ethical alignment with platform design • Transparency: data as an actionable insight for artists for monetization • Stakeholders priorities

APPENDIX F: Consent Form

Consent Request for Participation in Research Interviews for the Master Thesis:

"The Stream Of Consciousness: Rethinking a Music Streaming Platform Artist-Centered and Community Driven."

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Virginia Bianchi

Email: 615870vb@eur.nl

Phone: +31 684808201

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

You are invited to participate in a master thesis study focused on rethinking the music streaming industry through an artist-centered and community-driven lens. The purpose of this study is to explore how artists and consumers experience platformization, and to identify what a fairer, more sustainable music streaming model could look like. This research examines changes in platform governance, algorithmic fairness, revenue distribution, and cultural participation in the digital music ecosystem.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means you agree to be interviewed. Your participation involves a semi-structured interview where you will be asked to share your views and experiences.

Unless you request otherwise, the interview will be audio recorded. You are always free to skip any question and/or withdraw from the study at any time.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by using a pseudonym or more general identification, only mentioning age and gender, etc.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work.

PROCEDURES

Participation means agreeing to be interviewed for approximately 40–60 minutes, either online or in person. The conversation will focus on your experiences with music streaming platforms, including topics like visibility, revenue, ethics, autonomy, and community interaction. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis. You may skip any question and withdraw at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA USAGE

Data such as your role in the music ecosystem, cultural background, and opinions regarding the current systems behind the music streaming platforms will be collected. Your email address will be used only to share final research findings.

Your data will be retained for a minimum of 5 years. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

- Participation is voluntary.
- You may withdraw your consent at any time without consequence.
- You may choose to be identified or to remain anonymous.
- You may ask questions at any point in the process.
- You may request access to the transcript of your interview.

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— the thesis supervisor, Selma Toktas via toktas@eshcc.eur.nl

If you have concerns about your privacy or data use, you may contact: Virginia Bianchi-615870vb@eur.nl

Or visit: www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl | T: 088 - 1805250

CONSENT OPTIONS

Please tick and sign below as applicable:

☐ I give consent to be audio recorded for this research.

☐ I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study.

☐ I prefer to remain anonymous.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Alternatively, you may give oral consent at the beginning of the interview, which will be recorded in line with ethical guidelines.

APPENDIX G: Case Study comparison - Revenue Sharing Systems

Feature	Spotify	Bandcamp	SoundCloud
Monetization type	Streaming	Direct sales	Streaming (fan-powered)
Revenue split (artist %)	50–55% (after label retention)	85–90%	55%
Payout model	Pro-rata (stream pool)	Direct sale (per item)	User-centric (fan-powered)
Typical earnings per stream	€0.003 - €0.005	N/A (per sale)	Varies (based on fan spend)
Typical earnings per sale	N/A	€8.50/€9 on €10 sale	N/A
Payment frequency	Monthly	24-48 hours	Monthly / quarterly
Transparency	Low	High	Medium
Artist control over pricing	None	Full control	None
Audience monetization path	Subscriptions + ads	Direct-to-fan sales	Subscriptions + ads

Feature	Spotify	Bandcamp	SoundCloud
Minimum payout threshold	Varies (via distributor)	None	€5-10

APPENDIX F: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information:

Name: Virginia Bianchi
Student ID: 615870
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Selma Toktas
Date: 23.06.2025

Declaration:
Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title, codes improvements).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., Turboscribe, ATLAS.it)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [ChatGPT, Grammarly], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity
☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI- generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions. By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI

tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Virginia Bianchi
Date of Signature: 23.06.2025