Platform Ambivalence

Exploring the Dynamic Relationship Between Platformization and the Norwegian Music Industry

Håvard Kiberg

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
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Scientific environment

Throughout my PhD studies, I've mainly been based in two academic environments. First, I've been a doctoral student at the Faculty of Social Sciences, affiliated with the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen. Second, I've been employed at the Department of Communication within the School of Communication, Leadership, and Marketing at Kristiania University College in Oslo. Additionally, I have previously been involved with the research project Streaming the Cultural Industries (STREAM) at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo. I would like to thank all these institutions for the collaboration over the past few years.

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Abstract in English

This thesis investigates the intricate relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry. Drawing upon insights from cultural studies, critical political economy, media and cultural policy research, and software studies, the thesis adopts a combining and holistic theoretical approach to explore how platformization interacts with various cases related to the Norwegian music industry. Through an exploratory multiple case study design, that combines qualitative interview studies with document analyses, the thesis addresses the following, overarching research question: In what ways do the dynamic processes of platformization interact with the production, economy, policy, and technological infrastructure within the Norwegian music industry?

The thesis is structured around four case studies and corresponding articles, focusing on (1) production, (2) economy, (3) policy, and (4) technology. Case 1 examines the relationship between platformization and creative music production, contributing empirical depth to discussions on music streaming's influence on music culture. Case 2 investigates the economic implications of recent developments in the music streaming market, with a particular focus on Spotify's evolution towards becoming a general audio and entertainment platform. Case 3 explores the encounter between the Norwegian media welfare state and global platformization, analyzing the recent decades' decline in domestic market shares of Norwegian music and the corresponding expansion of global platformization. Finally, Case 4 examines perceptions of algorithmic recommendation systems' impact on musical diversity, within the Norwegian music industry.

The thesis finds that the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry is complex and ambivalent. Concerning Case 1 on platformization and music production, the thesis demonstrates how Norwegian music creators continually negotiate between three distinct perspectives when producing music. This involves striking a balance between highlighting the democratizing and creatively liberating potentials of platformization, while also criticizing the commercializing and creatively standardizing effects that platformization (and the

attention economy) have on contemporary music culture. In Case 2 regarding economy, the thesis observes that the evolution of the streaming service Spotify, from being a mere music distributor to becoming a comprehensive provider of audiovisual content (involving investments in podcasts, vodcasts, audiobooks, etc.), is perceived as concerning from a music industry standpoint due to its disruption of power dynamics between the music industry and platform actors. In Case 3, which focuses on music platformization and policy, the thesis highlights how Norwegian cultural and media policy has responded to the unique challenges the Norwegian music industry have experienced the last decade (regarding declining domestic market shares) by primarily adopting a defensive stance against global platformization. Finally, regarding Case 4 concerning music and technology, the thesis finds that Norwegian music industry stakeholders are surprisingly united in their view of that algorithmic recommendation systems in music streaming platforms potentially threatens the distribution of music diversity. However, alternative algorithmic recommendation systems are also discussed to shed light on the potential these filtering mechanisms have in promoting musical diversity.

In conclusion, the thesis thus underscores the complexity and ambivalence inherent in the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry. Through the three concepts of contestation, context, and continuity, the thesis concludes with a discussion on how platformization presents both opportunities and challenges for the industry, including aspects of both democratization and power concentration. By adopting a holistic approach, the thesis thus offers a nuanced critique of music platformization, emphasizing the need for more combining and holistic analyses on these developments in order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of music platformization as a phenomenon.

Abstract in Norwegian

Denne avhandlingen undersøker det intrikate forholdet mellom plattformisering og den norske musikkbransjen. Ved å trekke på innsikter fra cultural studies, kritisk politisk økonomi, forskning på medie- og kulturpolitikk, og software studies, tar forskningen i bruk en kombinerende og holistisk teoretisk tilnærming for å utforske hvordan plattformisering interagerer med ulike aspekter av den norske musikkbransjen. Gjennom et utforskende multiple casestudiedesign, som kombinerer kvalitative intervjustudier med dokumentanalyser, tar studien sikte på å svare på det følgende overordnede forskningsspørsmålet: På hvilke måter interagerer de dynamiske prosessene av plattformisering med produksjon, økonomi, politikk og teknologisk infrastruktur, innen den norske musikkbransjen?

Avhandlingen er strukturert rundt fire casestudier og tilhørende artikler, med fokus på (1) produksjon, (2) økonomi, (3) politikk og (4) teknologi. Case 1 undersøker forholdet mellom plattformisering og kreativ musikkproduksjon, og bidrar med empirisk dybde til diskusjoner om musikkstrømmingens innflytelse på musikkulturen. Case 2 undersøker de økonomiske implikasjonene av nyere utvikling i musikkstrømmemarkedet, med særlig fokus på Spotifys bevegelser mot generell lydunderholdning. Case 3 utforsker møtet mellom den norske medievelferdsstaten og global plattformisering, og analyserer det siste tiårets nedgang i markedsandeler for norsk musikk og den tilsvarende utbredelsen av global plattformisering. Til slutt undersøker Case 4 oppfatninger av algoritmiske anbefalingssystemers innvirkning på musikalsk mangfold, innen den norske musikkbransjen.

Avhandlingen finner at forholdet mellom plattformisering og den norske musikkbransjen er komplekst og ambivalent. Når det gjelder Case 1 om plattformisering og musikkproduksjon, viser den hvordan norske musikkskapere kontinuerlig forhandler mellom tre forskjellige perspektiver når de produserer musikk. Dette innebærer, blant annet, en balanse mellom å fremheve det demokratiserende og kreativt frigjørende potensialet til plattformisering, og de kritiske, kommersielle og kreativt standardiserende effektene plattformisering (og oppmerksomhetsøkonomien) har på kontemporær musikkultur. I Case 2 angående økonomi, observerer

avhandlingen at utviklingen av strømmetjenesten Spotify, fra å være en ren musikkdistributør til å bli en omfattende leverandør av audiovisuelt innhold (med investeringer i podcast, vodcast, lydbøker osv.), oppfattes som bekymringsfull fra et musikkbransjeperspektiv på grunn av dens forstyrrelse av maktforholdene mellom musikkbransjen og plattformaktører. I Case 3, som fokuserer på musikkplattformisering og politikk, fremhever avhandlingen hvordan norsk kultur- og mediepolitikk har respondert på de unike utfordringene den norske musikkbransjen har opplevd det siste tiåret, hva gjelder synkende markedsandeler, ved primært å innta en defensiv holdning mot global plattformisering. Til slutt, angående Case 4 om musikk og teknologi, finner avhandlingen at norske aktører i musikkbransjen er overraskende enige i synet på at algoritmiske anbefalingssystemer i musikkstrømmetjenester potensielt truer distribusjonen av musikkmangfold. Imidlertid diskuteres også alternative, algoritmiske anbefalingssystemer, for å belyse potensialet slike filtreringsmekanismer også har når det kommer til å fremme musikkmangfold.

Samlet sett understreker avhandlingen således kompleksiteten og ambivalensen som er iboende i forholdet mellom plattformisering og den norske musikkbransjen. Gjennom begrepene strid (contestation), kontekst og kontinuitet, konkluderer avhandlingen med en diskusjon om hvordan plattformisering presenterer både muligheter og utfordringer for bransjen, inkludert aspekter knyttet til demokratisering og maktkonsentrasjon. Ved å ta i bruk en holistisk tilnærming, tilbyr avhandlingen således en nyansert kritikk av musikkplattformisering, og understreker behovet for flere kombinerende analyser av denne utviklingen for å oppnå en mer omfattende forståelse av musikkplattformisering som fenomen.

List of Publications

Article 1: Kiberg, Håvard. (2023). “(Plat)formatted Creativity: Creating Music in the Age of Streaming.” *Cultural Sociology*. DOI: 17499755231202055.

Article 2: Kiberg, Håvard, & Spilker, Hendrik S. (2023). “One More Turn after the Algorithmic Turn? Spotify’s Colonization of the Online Audio Space.” *Popular Music and Society*, 46(2), 151-171.

Article 3: Kiberg, Håvard (in review). "The Encounter Between Global Platformization and the Media Welfare State: The Case of Norwegian Music Consumption and Domestic Cultural Policy." Submitted to International Journal for Cultural Policy.

Article 4: Kiberg, Håvard. "Personalized recommendations and musical diversity – an impossible combination?" [This is an English version of the article: Kiberg, Håvard (2020) "Personaliserte anbefalinger og musikalsk mangfold – en umulig kombinasjon?". *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 27(3), 1-18.].

Contents

Part II: The Articles

Appendices

Part I:

Framing Introduction

1. Introduction

In the Netflix series “The Playlist” (Spurrier et al., 2022), the story of Spotify's rise to fame is told from six different, partly opposing perspectives. The narrative established in the first episode adopts the viewpoint of Spotify’s visionary founder, Daniel Ek, and portrays Spotify’s inception as the music industry’s salvation in the face of the piracy crisis of the 2000s. Here, the idea of the internet and the democratizing potential of digitalization is pursued, whereas promises of a service that offers users universal access to all the world’s music and music industry players the compensation they deserve seductively depict a youthful and optimistic entrepreneurial environment—a music streaming company ready to change and conquer the world of music.

The second episode, however, supersedes this perception by incorporating the perspectives of record companies. This time, the story revolves around the industry’s relentless battle against illegal downloading throughout the 2000s and later, the pursuit of making Spotify and competing services establish more sustainable, economic models. In contrast, a critical and skeptical view of platform-based music distribution is established in which the emergence of streaming is seen as something foreign and threatening that is poised to deprive an entire industry of its livelihood.

In turn, the series continues to reflect on various conflicting aspects of online music distribution. Whereas the third episode delves into the service’s complex legal clarifications regarding copyright disputes, episode four counters by addressing the piracy ideology of free and open access to art and culture. Even Spotify’s economic foundation and the risky investments of its co-founder Martin Lorentzon are given space (in episode five), serving as a crucial reminder of the indispensable economic foundation that must have been laid for the company to come into existence at all.

Finally, in episode six, the artists are brought forth. As source of perhaps the biggest controversies the music industry has been through, since the move from physical CD sales to online and eventually platform-based distribution, this episode takes us through the financial challenges and failing living conditions music creators consequently experience. In a future scenario, musicians protest against the minimal and insufficient income they are left with, by eventually taking Spotify to court.

Although "The Playlist" (Spurrier et al., 2022) never offers a satisfactory solution to the knot that is music streaming, it successfully conveys the complexity and opposing interests at play in today's digital and platform-based music industry. Music streaming itself is a multidimensional phenomenon (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020). On the one hand, services like Spotify have navigated a struggling music industry back on course, catalyzing an economic growth the industry has not seen since the 1990s. Their ability to turn this ship around and get audience to begin paying for recorded music once again is commendable, especially when recalling the challenges the industry faced at the turn of the millennium. However, music streaming has also brought about a range of controversies. Despite economic growth, few musicians and artists today find it financially viable to engage in music creation (Marshall, 2015; Sinnreich et al., 2016). Concurrently, several researchers today report about terms of commercial homogenization and so-called blockbuster or winner-takes-it-all-effects (see e.g., Maasø & Spilker, 2022; Ordanini & Nunses, 2016), in which a cumulative concentration of visibility, money, and power continuously maintains a high level of conflict throughout the industry (Spilker, 2017).

1.1 Research Questions and Disposition

It is the streaming platforms' relationship with the Norwegian music industry that lies at the center of this thesis. As exemplified through the "The Playlist" (Spurrier et al., 2022), however, it does not seek to tell one side of the story, but rather focuses on understanding the complexity of this relationship by studying different perspectives of music platformization. Responding to the broader and increasingly more frequent calls for more nuanced perspectives within cultural and media industries research (Wasko, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Poell et al., 2019; 2022), this thesis employs a combining approach and synthesizes insights from four different theoretical traditions within cultural industries research: cultural studies, political economy, media and cultural policy research, and software studies. In this sense, I explore the complex relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry holistically—studying one phenomenon from several different perspectives (see Wasko, 2014, p. 266; Poell et al., 2022, p. 17; Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 53). In this framing introduction (the "*kappe*"), I

thus present a thematically coherent framework, comprising four different case studies focusing, respectively on the production, economy, policy, and technology of music platformization—where each case is positioned within one of the four theoretical traditions.

The objective of this thesis is thus to add depth and nuance to the sometimes categorical and even simplistic discourse surrounding music platformization, aiming to illustrate the complexities of these evolving relationships (see also Nordgård, 2021). Together, the thesis investigates music platformization from four different perspectives. Case 1 draws on insights from cultural studies in order to explore how the creative processes of music production evolve under the paradigm of platformization. Case 2, on the other hand, employs perspectives within critical political economy to investigate how actors within the Norwegian music industry perceive and discuss the economic consequences of recent developments within the music streaming market. Furthermore, Case 3 puts perspectives of media and cultural policy research in dialogue with the concept of platform governance, in order to research how domestic policies are shaped in response to the growth of global platformization. Finally, Case 4 draws on perspectives within software studies to examine how the key technologies of algorithmic recommendation systems are perceived to impact terms of diversity within the Norwegian music industry. By combining these four theoretical perspectives, the thesis aims to answer the following overarching research question: **In what ways do the dynamic processes of platformization interact with the production, economy, policy, and technological infrastructure within the Norwegian music industry?** To address this main problem, I additionally ask the following research questions corresponding to the four perspectives and cases:

> **RQ1**: To what extent does platformization influence the creative processes of music production, and how do music creators respond to this influence?
>
> **RQ2**: In what ways are recent developments within the music streaming market perceived to affect the economy of the Norwegian music industry?

> **RQ3**: How does music platformization challenge the ability of cultural and media policy to achieve its goals, and how do policymakers respond to these challenges?
>
> **RQ4**: In what ways do Norwegian music industry actors understand the relationship between algorithmic recommendations and music diversity?

In the following, this opening Chapter 1 outlines the development of music and online media research and establishes the current status of the field. Building on Kjus & Spilker's (2020) historical three-part phase division of this development, I demonstrate how current research gives an indication of a fourth "ambivalent" phase of music and online media research characterized by an improved focus on nuance, complexity, and contradiction. Furthermore, I describe the Norwegian context of the thesis before outlining the thesis' most important contributions overall.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the broad theoretical framework of the thesis. This section offers a historical overview of significant traditions within research on cultural industries and links each tradition to their respective case study and the overarching approach of the thesis. Although the four perspectives of this thesis—cultural studies, political economy, cultural and media policy research, and software studies—have arisen at various historical junctures, often in reaction to one another, I argue that they have enduring significance in terms of shaping contemporary research on music and platformization. Thus, building on these perspectives, I ultimately outline the overall combining and holistic theoretical approach of the thesis.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological approaches utilized in the thesis. This involves an exploratory multiple case study design grounded in the epistemological framework of critical realism. Furthermore, this chapter provides a detailed discussion on the choice of conducting qualitative interviews and document analyses—as well as qualitative method triangulation and thematic analysis – before discussing the research's overall validity, reliability, and generalizability.

Chapter 4 contains a summary of the thesis's four articles, while Chapter 5 features a conclusive discussion concerning the thesis' contributions to the field of music and platformization research to answer the overarching question of the thesis. In this chapter, I elaborate on the existence of the previously introduced ambivalent fourth

phase of music and online media research, and introduce the concepts of contestation, context, and continuity as core principles for further investigations of music and platformization. In this chapter, I thus demonstrate how key findings of the thesis' four cases in combination provide what I argue is a more holistic and comprehensive picture of the dynamic and ambivalent relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry. In conclusion, the thesis thus constitutes a multifaceted study on the interplay between platformization and the Norwegian music industry.

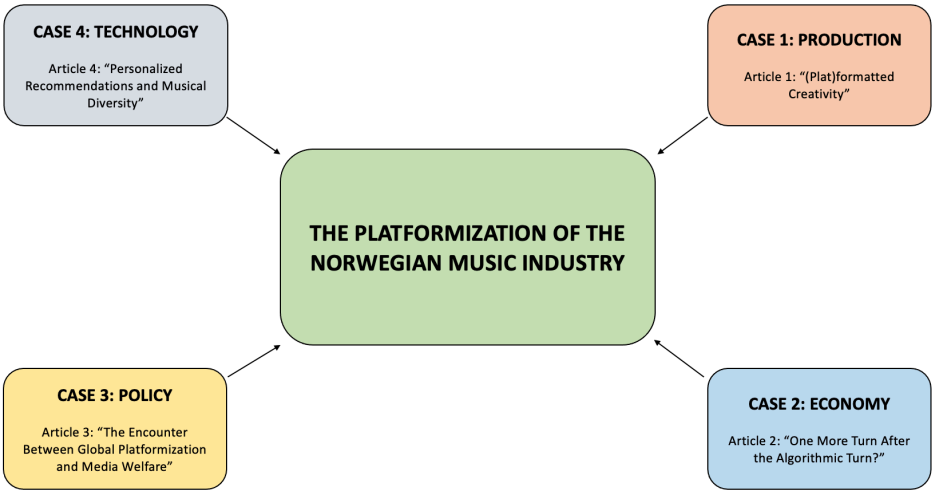

***Table 1—Thesis Overview**: Illustration of how the four cases of production, economy, policy, and technology, and their respective articles, are connected to the overall theme concerning the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry.*

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1. Three phases of music and online media research

Music has always evolved in close interaction with media and technological developments. Therefore, a broad research tradition exists to study the relationship between music, media, and technology. On the one hand, this tradition has involved research that primarily considers music as an economic product. Here, scholars have come to explore the commodification and industrialization of music (see Tschmuck, 2017; Wikström, 2013) and developed categorized overviews of the intricate network of various distributional functions within the industry (e.g., record labels, promotion

agencies, publishers, music distribution companies, etc.) (see, e.g., Leyshon, 2001; Negus, 1992; Wikström, 2013). On the other hand, this tradition also involves research that assesses how the development of both recording and distribution technologies has shaped music as an artistic expression (see, e.g., Chanan, 1995; Day, 2010; Eisenberg, 2005; Gould, 1984; Katz, 2010). By emphasizing how different media technologies possess both opportunities, limitations, and specific affordances, these studies have described how the emergence of popular genres, musical formats, subcultures, and other creative practices is often closely linked to media and technological developments. As Mark Katz (2010, p. 108) noted, "recording [technology] is not simply a preservational tool, but a catalyst," inciting changes in the way we perceive, perform, and compose music.

Research on music, media, and technology has, however, received increased attention in recent decades due to music's close connection to online digitalization processes. While this research has been important for describing the emergence of new digital infrastructures, it has also come to reflect the development of various perspectives and attitudes related to the relationship between music, economy, and democracy. In the following, I will therefore introduce Kjus & Spilker's (2020) historical three-part phase division of research on music and online media—labeled (1) "the innocent 1990s," (2) "the optimistic 2000s," and (3) "the critical 2010s"—as a starting point for understanding the current status of the field. Synthesizing current research in this area, I will further argue for the emergence of a fourth phase of music and online media research—(4) the ambivalent 2020s—which, to a greater extent is concerned with introducing nuance and complexity into the overall discussion concerning the platformization of the music industry.

"The innocent 1990s" is framed as somewhat descriptive and exploratory, where different studies (at times prophetically) attempted to comprehend the role the internet would come to play in the future of music. With its particular focus on online communities and fan networks (Watson, 1997; Hodkinson, 2003), this phase thus involved various industry-focused studies that considered the approaching digitalization as a potentially transformative shift (Jones, 2000). On the one hand, particular questions of whether global music companies could maintain the control they

at that point had in the market were discussed (Jones, 2000; Rao, 1999), as well as studies assessing digitalization's disruptive potential to weaken or strengthen various connections within the industry's value chain (e.g., between artists and audiences or between record labels and distributors; Leyshon, 2001). Although the industry was standing on the threshold of a digital revolution at the time, the tone of the research was generally wondering in how it discussed various future scenarios potential to challenge established models, mindsets, and procedures. As famously put by David Bowie (BBC, 2016) in 1999, "I don't think we've even seen the tip of the iceberg. […] The potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable."

Conversely, "the optimistic 2000s" were more explicitly positive about the revolutionary potential of online media. As described by Kjus & Spilker (2020), this phase was more distinctly politicized and highlighted the internet's democratizing influence on the music industry, e.g., through tone-setting theories related to "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006; Fagerjord, 2010), "the long tail" (Anderson, 2006), or "remix culture" (Lessig, 2009)—each concept having a major impact on the public discourse surrounding the internet's role in cultural production. A proposed dissolution of music industry gatekeepers over this period led to optimism on behalf of artists, the public, and internet users in general, whereas the facilitation of free music access and low-threshold distribution constituted core premises. Here, among others, Thèberge's (2004) study on the "network studio" became central, where artists' potential to communicate directly with fans and followers—by bypassing established, distributional links—was presented as a potential democratic good. As Kjus & Spilker (2020) emphasize, however, this second phase was also marked by an occasional "warning undertone." File-sharing was the decade's most central distribution technology, and much research focused on what came to be known as the piracy wars—the conflict amid pirates, the users, and file-sharing technology on one hand, and artists, record labels, and the established industry on the other.

The third phase—"the critical 2010s"—thus advocated a more pessimistic and pronounced critical tone. More focused on music platforms' developing power, this period was marked by discussions concerning the lack of sustainable economic models

and commercial homogenization (Elberse, 2013; Eriksson et al., 2019; Maasø & Spilker, 2022; Marshall, 2015). In this phase, researchers debated whether the streaming revolution, and the end of the piracy wars represented a victory for the industry or for the pirates (Allen-Robertson, 2013; Andersson Schwarts, 2014; Spilker, 2017). On the one hand, it was argued that streaming offered regained control for parts of the industry (e.g., major record labels) that experienced economic growth for the first time since the turn of the millennium (Mulligan, 2017). On the other hand, it was argued that a significant political legacy from the liberal piracy ideology continued through streaming platforms and the principle of cheap and subscription-based access to *all the world's music* (Spilker, 2017). Furthermore, concerns regarding platformization and algorithmification took center stage at the research front, where global platform companies became objects of criticism for the way they came to colonize what was once perceived as the open, democratic internet (Burgess & Green, 2018; Eriksson et al., 2019; Maasø & Spilker, 2022). In particular, the ways these platforms catalyzed self-reinforcing cultural homogenization through algorithmic filtering processes were discussed and criticized. Whereas Elberse (2013) and Eriksson et al. (2019) demonstrated the governing power of platforms to shape what people listen to, Maasø (2016, p, 169) discussed how cumulative "Matthew effects" (in reference to the biblical saying "to those who have, more will be given," from Gospel of Matthew 25:29, The Bible) occur in the interactions between promotion in the interfaces, user responses, and algorithmic constructions. Consequently, this research suggests that streaming platforms could produce a "streaming paradox" (Maasø & Spilker, 2022) in which massive access to music in streaming services in fact represents an abundance of choices that, in the end, results in narrower and more homogenized listening patterns.

Overall, one can argue that research into online music distribution—from the disruption of piracy to the rise of streaming—has moved from a partially optimistic mood that understood online digitalization though its inherent democratic potential towards a more trenchant critique aimed at the governing power of platform companies, emphasizing terms of commercialization and power concentration. It is beyond any doubt that all these phases together have expanded our understanding of the internet

and the role of digitalization in musical life. As I will argue throughout this thesis, the insights from these phases of research are each valuable in the way they collectively point to the complexity of digital development in the music industry. I claim that both the optimistic analyses, pointing to the democratic aspects of digital developments, and the critical perspectives that legitimately direct the spotlight towards capitalist concentration of power, together synthesize a thorough and complex academic foundation that results in nuances, dialectics, and contradictions in their analyses of how music cultures and industries evolve. Thus, in the following subsection, I will stress the essentials of implementing insights at the intersection of these phases when striving for a more holistic understanding of the processes of music platformization.

1.2.2. The ambivalent phase of music and online media research

Taking Kjus & Spilker's (2020) phase division as a point of departure, this thesis proposes a fourth phase of music and online media research. Grounded in the expanding field of platform studies, I coin this phase as "the ambivalent 2020s." Being a synthesis of different research traditions—particularly political economy, cultural studies, business studies and the more recent tradition of software studies (Poell et al., 2019)—the field of platforms studies combines different perspectives within cultural industries research, providing a combined approach to study terms related to platformization. As an important corrective to the critical 2010s (Kjus & Spilker, 2020), which to great extents involved critical political economy analyses of capitalism and power concentration, this integrative approach to platform studies attempts to produce a more holistic analysis of the social, cultural, political, and economic consequences of platformization.

While moving beyond the optimism of the 2000s, and the pessimism of the 2010s—somewhat nuancing the one-sided critique of terms such as platform power, capitalism, or imperialism (Srnicek, 2016; Jin, 2015; Fuchs, 2017)—this ambivalent phase of research questions the ways in which previous approaches have come to employ somewhat deterministic or reductionistic analyses on the development and processes of platformization (stated categorically, one can claim that the optimism of the 2000s was overly naive and that the criticism of the 2010s was too narrow or

economically reductionistic). For example, Nieborg & Poell (2018) refer to each of the mentioned traditions of platform studies—that is, political economy, cultural studies, business studies, and software studies—as in isolation "partial," emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive approach that combines insights from each tradition in the search to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the extensive processes of platformization. While tracing how "institutional changes and shifting cultural practices mutually articulate each other" (Poell et al., 2019, p. 5), the authors underline the following:

> Although these four approaches [software studies, business studies, cultural studies, political economy] provide us with different *foci* and interpretations of platformisation, we would like to argue that they are not mutually exclusive (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The observed institutional changes and shifts in cultural practices associated with platforms are in practice closely interrelated. Thus, a more fundamental and critical insight in what platformisation entails can only be achieved by studying these changes and shifts in relation to each other (Poell et al., 2019, p. 5).

Consequently, the emerging ambivalent phase of music and digitalization research represents a responsive—a rational middle ground—capable of addressing critical aspects of platform power, capitalism, and imperialism, without excluding other important aspects, such as the democratic or the creative potential platformization brings forth. Thus, when introducing this fourth phase, I draw on different research contributions that function as correctives to the earlier, one-sided critique of how platforms commercialize, homogenize, and concentrate power—ultimately emphasizing both the challenges and possibilities of the ambivalent processes of music platformization. Rather than rejecting these critical aspects, I argue that the fourth phase provides an increased focus on bringing forth nuances, dialectics, and contradictions when studying the digital development of musical life. In the following, I will illustrate this shift through three distinct branches of research that specifically study the diverse and multifaceted ways in which individuals engage with the digital system of online music platformization.

The first branch can be found in the still-expanding body of research on music recommendation systems, where several recent contributions have come to demystify some of the values and considerations that underlie the platforms' algorithmically

informed decisions. In contrast to much of the criticism from the previous decade ("the critical 2010s"), which revolved around concerns regarding algorithms' tendency to personalize, homogenize, and simply reduce music into mere 1s and 0s, several researchers now highlight how these recommendation systems are rather dynamic and continuously evolving systems that improve over time, potentially becoming more adjusted to rectify skewed or biased outcomes related to music culture (Seaver, 2022; Siles, 2023; Hodgson, 2021; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023). Nick Seaver's (2022) fieldwork on computer engineers and designers of algorithmic recommendation systems in music streaming services, does the important job of adding nuance to some of the most critical notions of these systems by simply pointing out how they are fundamentally human—that is, they are manifestations of human processes and decisions. In his studies, Seaver convincingly reveals that algorithm developers are often reflective, critical, and passionate about music—deeply invested in their ability to connect people through musical experiences.

In another example, Ignacio Siles (2023) offers a complex perspective on how data-driven culture can be comprehended from a user's standpoint. Siles's book "Living with Algorithms" (2023) critically challenges the idea of algorithms exerting complete control over musical consumption by mapping out different user dynamics in Latin America across three algorithmically driven platforms (Netflix, Spotify, TikTok). While concentrating on what people do with algorithms rather than what algorithms do with people, he places particular emphasis on the personal relationships that develop between users and algorithms, highlighting the empowering potential and agency users have when navigating between following and opposing algorithmic recommendations—ultimately stressing the autonomy users wield when encountering algorithmic streaming services.

The second branch of research that adds nuance to the critical understandings of music platformization research, similarly focuses on human interactions, agency, and the various negotiations that unfold between the platforms and the users of the platforms. Moving beyond Seaver's (2022) and Siles' (2023) contributions, this research is more focused on exploring how users, including producers, consumers, and prosumers, respond to or operate within the frameworks proposed by these platforms.

The works of Marika Lüders (2021a; 2021b) and Anja Nylund Hagen (2015) add, for example, nuance to our understanding of the platforms' power to shape the musical landscape by highlighting particular user practices. Whereas Lüders (2021a) point to how users of music streaming services often prefer to archive music and listen to their own self-curated playlists, despite the platforms' efforts to promote music discovery through their recommendation systems, Hagen (2015) identify a range of intricate and creative user practices and skills associated with music streaming – involving extensive creativity in terms of how users search and explore music, as well as significant efforts in self-curating personal playlists—ultimately underscoring the need to recognize the broader context in which curatorial power operates. As Robert Prey (2020) argues, analyses of curatorial power should extend beyond the platforms themselves to encompass all the different stakeholders involved in the musical field, such as record companies, advertisers, investors, and others contributing to shape musical visibility.

Additionally, this branch of research also includes the operations of content producers. While not being exclusively centered around music, the work of Cunningham and Craig (2019; 2021) "creator culture" and "social media entertainment" highlight the broader impact online platforms have had in terms of lowering the barriers for both producing and distributing media content—importantly stressing how platformization processes hold a potential to foster a more diverse representation of creators across various demographics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.). As Nancy Baym stated in her foreword for Cunningham and Craig's anthology on "Creator Culture" (2022), their line of argument points to interesting contradictions concerning the dynamics in play within the online creator environment:

> Social media entertainment … seems well on its way toward being an industry (or industries?) of its own, yet in many ways it appears as another iteration of (or feeder for) well-established industries. On the one hand, it seems to offer the radical decentralization that can let a kid from a rural state in the United States achieve international fame through self-produced media. On the other hand, it is increasingly concentrated in a handful of corporations that, like media of old, make money by selling their users to advertisers (Cunningham and Craig, 2022, vii).

In addition to Cunningham and Craig's (2019; 2021) focus on online media production, studies such as Jeremy Wade Morris' (2020) article on "platform optimization," which

examined how users adapt and optimize musical and auditory content for online platform circulation, as well as David Hesmondhalgh's (2022) discussion on "music streaming's effect on music culture," present crucial insights in this context, with the latter adding nuance to the most critical claims of how music streaming foster bland, unchallenging, and functionalistic music.

Finally, the third branch of research has come to emphasize the significance of context and perspective. While much of the research on music platformization in the last decade has originated from Western countries (particularly the Nordic region, the USA the UK, and Western Europe), there is an increasing body of research addressing music platformization in various under-researched parts of the world. The previously mentioned Siles et al. (2022), for instance, have notably highlighted distinctive aspects of the Latin American streaming market. In an article (Siles et al., 2022) addressing the approaches of Costa Rican and Mexican artists to playlisting, they argue for considering platformization as more than a mere technological process, that must be situated within broader national histories and cultural configurations of the music industries (in their study, for example, differences between the Costa Rican and Mexican music industries constitute a key explanation for variations between the artists' perspectives on playlisting). Other studies have similarly examined the dynamic relationships between local and global music platformization. For example, Park et al.'s (2023) study of the platformization of local cultural production in South Korea offers insights into how domestic platforms such as Kakao and NAVER use Korean music (K-pop productions) as a tool for generating revenue streams and penetrating global markets. Another example is Khalil & Zayani's (2022) study of music streaming in the Middle East, which describes the establishment of the regional platform Anghami through an in-depth assessment of embodied economic, cultural, and political values within the region. While highlighting how music platformization is perceived differently depending on each specific situated context, these studies respond to a call, as articulated by Wasserman (2018), to de-Westernize or decolonize global media and communication studies and, among other things, "pointing out the need to conduct research not *about* or *from*, but *with* the Global South"—or any other region of the world (Khalil & Zayani, 2022).

Together, these branches of research thus provide a more ambivalent and nuanced understanding of music platformization—approaches that underline the interrelated challenges and opportunities presented by platformization. There are also other important contributions that further signal this fourth phase. This involves, for example, Nordgård's (2021) study on how Norwegian record company representatives understand their current positions and future opportunities in the streaming market, which argues in a pronounced nuanced and dynamic way how different stakeholders hold dynamic and constantly changing attitudes to how streaming affects their business activities (p. 32). Hesmondhalgh's (2020) analyses of the music streaming economy, on the other hand, are also important in this context, emphasizing how much of the criticism directed at streaming services' small and unfair payments to artists lacks empirical evidence. Thus, as Hagen et al. (2021, p. 139) notes, the music industry is today affected by "digital ambivalence"—an attitude that recognizes both the possibilities (associated with, for example, diversity, music exports, global connection) and the challenges (associated with, for example, how involved actors experience powerlessness, mistrust, lack of knowledge, and unpredictability, when facing these platforms) of music platformization. Consequently, anchored in the idea of placing analyses of music and platformization within a broader system of music and ownership, this ambivalent phase overall reflects a more complex picture of how the digitalization of music has developed. Although several of these studies also draw on critical perspectives, the works of this phase are particularly concerned with empirically drilling into the most pessimistic arguments put forward. I contend that this approach can serve to nuance the critique, or more precisely, direct attention toward the most contested aspects of music platformization's development, an argument that I will return to at the end of this thesis. As Hesmondhalgh (2020) notes, such an approach is based on the view that "imprecise, inaccurate and under-supported criticisms may hinder efforts at transformation, rather than a belief that the current musical system functions in a just way" (p. 3597).

In this sense, the emerging ambivalent fourth phase of music and online media research promotes a view that focuses on both possibilities and challenges associated with music platformization—a view that conveys increased complexity. As Morris

(2020) state when addressing the negotiations put into play in platformization processes:

> Platformization (...) is not solely a top-down process where platforms set the terms and conditions for the circulation of culture and all users and stakeholders are left to merely respond (...). Platforms bring the conflicting agendas and motivations of platform providers, content creators, retailers, users, and more into the same space and the result is a dynamic and always shifting set of relationships and practices (Morris, 2020, p. 4).

In the concluding discussion (Chapter 5), I will return to how this ambivalent phase plays out in the context of the Norwegian music industry. Here, I will both emphasize the need for, and demonstrate how the thesis contributes to seeing music platformization in relationship to the three concepts of contestation, context, and continuation—ultimately elaborating on the complex relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry.

1.2.3. The Norwegian Context

While platformization is a process that is developing on a global scale, it also has diverse local consequences, shaping economic dynamics, cultural practices, and local policies in distinct ways within specific geographic contexts. In line with the emerging ambivalent phase focus on context, it is thus important to emphasize how this thesis is situated in Norway. The presented perspectives and attitudes toward music platformization, in this thesis, are thus marked by specific features of the Norwegian music field. These features are evident on several levels.

First, Norway is often recognized as an early adopter of music streaming (Nordgård, 2016). As a digitally advanced nation that recently ranked fourth in the Digital Economy and Society Index (European Commission, 2022), Norway boasts robust broadband coverage and extensive digital infrastructure. Coupled with high living standards and widespread purchasing power, these factors ensured that Norwegian consumers had early access to various digital devices and online subscription services (European Commision, 2022), making it ideal for the Norwegian music market to be one of the first to embrace streaming early on. Consequently, digital music sales made up the majority turnover in the Norwegian recording industry as early

as 2012, seven years ahead of the global trend (Nordgård, 2016). Similarly, Nordic companies took on a leading role in developing music streaming services. While Spotify launched in 2008, the Norwegian music streaming service WiMP launched in 2010, before being acquired and rebranded as TIDAL by Jay-Z in 2015 (Eidsvold-Tøien et al., 2019).

Second, the Norwegian music industry is known for comprising a well-organized industry network that both evolves and converges in tandem with increased levels of digitalization (Røyseng et al., 2022; Hagen et al., 2021). I roughly divide this network into four segments: the creative, the distributing, the trade, and the policy segments. As with other music industries across the globe, the creative segment of the Norwegian industry involves a growing and increasingly diverse pool of music creators (including artists, bands, musicians, composers, songwriters, etc.). While it is becoming exceedingly difficult to separate these actors from each other as their operations and occupations gradually converge, I generally refer to this group as "music creators" (see more in Article 1). Due to lowered production and distribution barriers, this group is expanding in the digital age—both among amateurs and professionals—eventually fueling increased competition for visibility and income (Wikström, 2013; Hagen et al., 2021). Recently, several of these creators have also left their mark by gaining traction across different social media platforms. In Norway, artists such as Boy Pablo, Victoria Nadine, Ràmon, Synne Vo, etc. are examples of artists going viral on platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, or TikTok before entering the center of the wider domestic popular music scene (Skeleton, 2017; Hoff, 2022; Nilsen, 2022)—eventually illustrating the evolving synergy between the pop music industry and social media entertainment (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). While this development somewhat blurs the boundaries between terms of advertising and artistic performance, I also include actors working with promotion and marketing in this segment. As this work was traditionally outsourced to external companies, today's shift towards artists taking on this responsibility themselves through continuous branding and profiling across different social media platforms (Hagen, 2020) is notable—a phenomenon Nancy Baym (2018) has dubbed "relational labor," that is, the "ongoing

communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work."

To varying degrees, these creators also collaborate with different professional intermediaries, such as record labels, music publishers, and distribution aggregators, within the distributional segment. While modern online platforms have made it easier to distribute one's own music, these companies still play a decisive role in the Norwegian music industry and serve as important sources for professional networks, industry experience, and resources (Spilker, 2012; Nordgård, 2016; Ryssevik, 2023). On the one hand, record labels continue to hold central positions in the Norwegian music industry (Spilker, 2012; Nordgård, 2022; Røyseng et al., 2022)—where the majors (Sony, Universal, Warner) remain the biggest players domestically, alongside a broad landscape of different indie labels (e.g., NMG, Smalltown Supersound, Fysisk Format, etc.) and a small but increasing share of artists who handle distribution directly (Ryssevik, 2023, pp. 15-16). Music publishing companies, on the other hand, concentrate mainly on managing copyright by contributing to the added use and value of musical works, for example, through synchronizing music with television, film, radio, video games, or any other medium (Hagen, 2022a). In addition to the majors' respective publishing departments, companies such as Arctic Rights or MTG Music constitute core Norwegian examples in that manner, being companies that actively work to preserve Norwegian rights within the Norwegian industry. Finally, music distribution companies mainly ensure that the music reaches a wider audience through different retailers (such as streaming, record stores, digital downloading, etc.). While both local and global companies (e.g., IndigoBoom, InGrooves, or The Orchard) today make up the most important distribution aggregators in Norway, these companies are also subject to increased competition from different online aggregators (CDBaby, Distrokid, etc.), allowing and facilitating greater amounts of amateur content (Ryssevik, 2023, p. 35).

Together, these different actors are organized through copyright organizations that ensure the rightsholders reasonable compensation for the use of musical works (in Norway, these are primarily Tono and Gramo)—bringing us over to the established policy segment assisting the Norwegian music industry. Together, this segment

comprises different actors, interest organizations, politicians, and more who negotiate various rights and other economic, cultural, and legal issues. While such intermediaries are established in most music industries, the Nordic region is often said to hold a special position characterized by a highly developed media welfare system (Hallin & Manicini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). In that sense, one might understand the Norwegian music industry as being particularly organized around culture and media policy. On an overarching level, the "Ministry of Culture and Equality" and the governmental operator "Art and Culture Norway" are important for crafting the general framework of the music industry (e.g., through the management of support schemes and copyright regulations). Subordinate, this policy segment involves a range of different organizations and unions working on behalf of various stakeholders and interests, such as artists and musicians (GramArt), bands and ensembles (BandOrg), music exports (Music Norway), publishing (Musikkforleggerne), self-employed composers and lyricists (NOPA), major record labels (IFPI), independent record labels (FONO), and the arts and cultural field in general (CREO). By frequently being invited to take part in public investigations, debates or to record political proposals for the authorities, these stakeholders are involved in shaping the policies and conditions for the Norwegian music industry as a whole.

Finally, with regards to the progress of digitalization in Norway, a breadth of research studying these terms of music and media developments has broadened our knowledge of how digitalization and platformization processes interact with the music industry in recent years. This involves important research studying music streaming and its relationship to live music (Maasø, 2016; Kjus, 2018; Danielsen et al., 2018), music discovery, algorithmic recommendations and playlisting (Hagen, 2015; Lüders, 2021a; Maasø & Spilker, 2022; Kjus, 2016), music business, economy and revenue streams (Nordgård, 2018; Haampland et al., 2022; Maasø, 2014; Colbjørnsen et al., 2022), law and copyright (Kjus, 2021; Kjus & Jacobsen, 2022), usage (Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Lüders et al., 2021), social media (Mjøs, 2013; Danielsen & Kjus, 2019), neighboring industries (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020; Colbjørnsen, 2021; Sundet & Colbjørnsen, 2021), the use of metrics and data literacy (Maasø & Hagen, 2020; Hagen, 2022b), digital distribution (Spilker, 2017)—and many other aspects.

Following this broad foundation of research, this thesis builds on an extensive contextual understanding of how music platformization has evolved over the last decade. We will eventually return to the Norwegian context, which is an important aspect in this thesis, highlight the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry. While several of these aspects are transferable to comparable contexts, I believe such a focus on context should constitute a core premise in future research on music platformization, as it potentially elucidates how these processes vary depending on the perspective adopted.

1.3 Main contributions

The contributions of this thesis can be summarized on several levels. The overarching research question, which explores the interaction between platformization and the Norwegian music industry through four different cases, is addressed and answered through a combined and holistic approach. First, the thesis is thus original theoretically in that it examines the phenomenon of music platformization through four different theoretical traditions and perspectives. As I will elaborate in Chapter 2, this holistic approach serves to analyze different aspects of these relationships from four different perspectives situated within the Norwegian context—an approach that, in combination, provides nuance and critical insights into our understanding of music platformization and avoids overly one-sided interpretations of how these processes play out.

Second, the thesis makes a methodological contribution. Consistent with the holistic theoretical framework, the thesis's combined and exploratory multiple case study design also contributes to highlighting various types of insights on music platformization as a phenomenon. As I will discuss more in Chapter 3, the combination of different qualitative in-depth interviews, comprehensive document analyses of different texts, and triangulations of these different methods collectively bring forth a diversity of perspectives, both within and across the thesis' four different case studies. Thus, the thesis adds empirical weight to this multidimensional understanding of the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry.

Third, each article engages with specific research areas and conversations, contributing to and expanding our knowledge within these fields. The first article

(Article 1), theorizing over different perspectives on platformization's interaction with terms of music production and creativity, demonstrates how platformization can be experienced differently depending on the perspective taken. More specifically, the concept of "platform negotiations" and the idea of how "creativity constraints" associated with platformization and the attention economy, also can be seen as creatively liberating, constitute core contributions in this article, that can be transferred and tested out in other contexts. The second article (Article 2), on the other hand, strengthens the idea of music streaming as something dynamic and continuously evolving. The concept of "auxiliary streaming" in particular contributes to the current understanding of the development of the music streaming market and the multi-dimensional consequences of this development for actors within the music industry. The third article (Article 3) contributes to knowledge on how global platformization has local consequences and how these consequences again vary depending on the context. Specifically, this article highlights the encounters between global platformization and the media and cultural policy concept of the Norwegian media welfare state, directing attention to discussions concerning how national and regional policies can work to safeguard terms of local music diversity. Finally, questions regarding technology and algorithmic recommendations are raised in Article 4, where I provide a critical discussion of how key actors within the Norwegian music industry express concerns related to algorithmification and cultural homogenization.

In total, the thesis seeks to highlight the complexity of these processes in order to form a more accurate picture of music platformization as a phenomenon. As we will further discussed in the conclusion of the thesis, this is achieved by emphasizing different levels of contestation, context, and continuity—three concepts that I argue are key within this thesis, as well as in future research on music platformization. Overall, this is conceptualized within the fourth ambivalent phase of research on music and online media. Following these key concepts, a major point within this thesis is that the overall holistic and combining approach to study the interaction between platformization and the Norwegian music industry functions as an important means of nuancing the critique of music platformization and ultimately placing emphasis on the complexity and ambivalence of the phenomenon of music platformization.

2. Theoretical Framework

While change is nothing new to the music industry, the digitalization and platformization processes of recent years have undoubtedly transcended the field's conventional boundaries. Although recent distributional and consumption changes are consistent with long-standing "patterns of turbulence" within the music industry, it is safe to say that the transformations of the past 25 years have ushered in particularly "high levels of disruption (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018, p. 1556).

While approaching these relationships, this chapter introduces the broad theoretical framework of the thesis. This framework is divided into two main parts. The first part (2.1) provides a historical overview of the key theoretical foundations within cultural industries research, from the beginnings of critical theory through cultural studies and political economy to today's digital culture and platform studies. The point of reviewing this development is to highlight how these traditions have often emerged as reactions to one another and how they, in combination, continue to be relevant by forming a complex and nuanced picture of today's dynamic cultural industries. Furthermore, the key traditions within this theoretical framework are connected to the four case studies of the thesis. Cultural studies are linked to Case Study 1 on production, critical political economy is linked to Case Study 2 on economy, culture and media policy research is linked to Case Study 3 on policy, while the later tradition within software studies is linked to Case Study 4 on technology. The second part (2.2) of this framework conceptualizes the overall holistic and combining theoretical approach of the thesis. Here, I connect the overall approach of the thesis to three specific contributions within cultural industry research: Janet Wasko's (2014) "integrated studies," David Hesmondhalgh's (2019) "cultural industries approach," and Thomas Poell et al.'s (2019; 2022) combining approach to "platform studies." These approaches all argue for a theoretical approach at the intersection of different traditions within cultural industries research to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the cultural industries—arguments I seek to reinforce and further develop in my conceptualization of the fourth ambivalent phase of music and online media research.

2.1 Cultural Industries Research: A Broad Theoretical Overview

In broad strokes, one can say that cultural industry research emerged during the mid-20th century, in response to the profound social, political, and economic developments of the time. Its main origins are often traced back to the intellectual climate of the Frankfurter School, particularly to scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947), who critically examined the mass production and commercialization of culture within Western societies. While being deeply concerned with the so-called *standardization* and *commodification* of art and culture—and moreover, the role of mass media in shaping public consciousness—Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) marked the birth of what has come to be known as critical theory, which, building on neo-Marxist philosophy, laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the cultural industry as a particular influential agent in society. While mainly addressing broader concerns about the cultural industry's impact on terms of artistic autonomy and authenticity, critical theory serves as an essential academic starting point for assessing the commercial or commodifying aspects of *music culture*. In particular, Adorno's essay *On Popular Music* (1941) is significant because of its critical review of commodified popular music's tendency to suppress individuality and artistic expression. In this essay, Adorno argues that popular music is characterized by formulaic structures and repetitiveness, driven by the culture industry's pursuit of mass appeal—formulas that ultimately stifle individual expression and artistic innovation and reduce music to a commodity designed for passive consumption that reinforces conformity and prevailing social norms.

While being criticized for understanding consumers of mass culture as extensively passive and lacking agency, however, notions of critical theory became challenged during the 1950s and 1960s. Spearheaded by influential figures like Raymond Williams (1958, 1981), David Morley (1986, 1992), and Stuart Hall (1973, 1992, 1994)—all of whom were associates of "The Birmingham School"—this period saw the emergence of cultural studies as a pivotal development in the field of cultural industry research. Embracing poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives, cultural studies came to play a crucial role in addressing different power dynamics, identity

formation, and representation within the realm of cultural production. While moving beyond the Frankfurter School's somewhat deterministic claims that cultural industrialization automatically leads to cultural homogenization (Hall, 1981; Grossberg, 1992), this eclectic tradition broadened the cultural industry focus to include a critical examination of popular culture, media, and everyday practices. Thus, cultural studies ultimately forwarded the notion of culture being a more complex space in which multitudes of influences conflict and combine—contrary to the very idea of "one, shared culture" (Hall, 1994: 323) as a bounded, fixed thing (which was, to some extent, implied in the idea of the singular term "the cultural industry" suggested by Adorno and Horkheimer). In terms of music culture, Dick Hebdige (1979, 1987) work on the role of music in the construction of identity became particularly important in understanding how music contributes to the formation of subcultures and the negotiation of cultural meanings (in general, scholars of cultural studies often analyze popular music as sites of negotiation, resistance, and representation). One of the most influential works on music and cultural studies from this period is Simon Frith's book "Sound Effects" (1981), which explores the cultural and political dimensions of rock music, and the ways in which rock music serves as a cultural expression for youth, intersecting with issues of identity, politics, and social change (see also Frith, 1978, 1987).

Later, as the world gradually grew more interconnected, terms of globalization and postcolonial theory became increasingly more important within cultural studies (Hall, 1994; Saïd, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). By shedding light on how cultural products are created, distributed, and consumed in a world marked by historical colonialism and neocolonialism, these perspectives are essential in broadening the scope of cultural industry research to encompass issues of cultural diversity and representation on a global scale—ultimately underlining the importance of incorporating questions concerning cultural contexts and perspectives when researching cultural industries. Sharma et al.'s (1996) work on the emergence of Asian youth music in Britain as a response to the experience of migration and diaspora, or Aparicio's (1998) study on salsa music in the context of Puerto Rican and Latin cultures, examining how salsa became an expression for resistance within diasporic

communities, constitutes pivotal examples in this matter—unveiling how music culture serves as a site for negotiating global and diasporic realities while exploring intersections of gender, race, and postcolonial identities.

By emphasizing issues of subjectivity, identity, and discourse, cultural studies and post-colonial theory made a huge impact on cultural industries research, which still marks essential contributions to the field. However, by occasionally being criticized somewhat uncritically celebrating contemporary popular culture, certain contributions within cultural studies have also been denounced for having moved too far away from the critical analyses of corporate and capitalist power within cultural industries. While sporadically neglecting aspects of cultural production, through the overemphasis on the democratizing potential of popular culture and entertainment, or through the enlarged focus on audiences and their total freedom to interpret texts in their own subjective way (see Fiske, 1987; Hartley, 2004; Jenkins, 2006), cultural studies has been criticized for neglecting questions concerning commercialism or capitalism, among others, through the polemic term "cultural populism" (see McGuigan, 1992; Lea, 2007; Agger, 1992). Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, the critical and more Marxist approach to studying the cultural industries experienced a revival. Led by North American scholars such as Dallas Smythe (1977; 1981) and Herbert Schiller (1969; 1975), cultural industry research began examining the political and economic structures that influence cultural production and distribution. While highlighting how corporate interests and the concentration of media ownership could impact the cultural industries, this branch of cultural industry research—often referred to as the critical political economy of communication—grew particularly concerned about media monopolies and the implications for democratic discourse (Smythe, 1977; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999). While underscoring the idea that media and communication systems are not neutral but deeply intertwined with economic and political interests, political economy came to emphasize the need to critically examine the ownership, control, and regulation of media and its impact on society, culture, and democracy. Australian scholar Trajce Cvetkovski's (2007) work on the disorganizing effects within the global music industry, focusing on the dominating major record labels (controlling about 80% of sound carrier and music publishing revenue) is one more recent example

of political economy research focusing on music, particularly exploring the impact of new, emerging technologies on the industry's organizational structure in the context of late capitalism.

There are, however, variations in political economy approaches to media and culture across different regions of the world (Mosco, 1996). During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, an alternative branch of political economy progressed in Europe. Led by scholars such as Bernard Miège (1989), Nicholas Garnham (1990), and later David Hesmondhalgh (2019), this approach—referred to as the cultural industries approach—came to promote an arguably more complex and nuanced understanding of cultural production. A pivotal aspect of this approach begins with their criticism of the singular concept of the culture industry (as expounded in Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947) and the introduction of the "cultural industries" in the plural form (Miège, 1987). In line with Stuart Hall's argument against the idea of "one, shared culture" (Hall, 1994, p. 323), this transition rejects the notion of the culture industry as a unified domain (a singular culture industry) where various forms of cultural production and consumption adhere to the logics of the same framework. Instead, this approach accentuates the intricacy within these distinct industries, where diverse logics give rise to various forms of cultural production and consumption. This is particularly notable in Bernard Miège's (1989, p. 146–147) three paradigms of cultural production—the publishing model, the flow model, and the written model—emphasizing how different modes of cultural production are shaped by the interplay between technological, economic, and social factors, ultimately influencing the types of content produced and the ways in which it is disseminated and consumed within society. Furthermore, the cultural industries approach challenged the somewhat one-sided critique that industrializing cultural production inevitably results in an increased commodification of culture, as is often depicted in the traditions of critical theory and critical political economy (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 57–59). By presenting a more nuanced analysis that acknowledges how new technologies enable innovative directions in cultural production, the approach offers a counterpoint to the relatively pronounced pessimism particularly introduced by the Frankfurter School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947) in cultural industries research—consequently presenting a more contested perspective on

cultural industries. As David Hesmondhalgh (2019, p. 30) suggests, the cultural industries approach sees these industries as "a zone of continuing struggle" that increasingly reveals contradiction, ambivalence, and complexity.

In parallel to the emergence of cultural studies and the various traditions of political economy, contributions within cultural sociology have also made a significant impact on cultural industries research in the late 20th century. Associated with the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1972, 1979, 1993), cultural sociology gained great importance in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of providing analyses of how cultural practices—and especially patterns of cultural consumption, taste, and identity—are shaped by social structures. This involves the emphasized role of cultural hierarchies and the ways in which individuals' cultural preferences are influenced by their social positions. Similar to both the cultural studies and political economy traditions, this approach aims to unveil power relations and inequalities in society by understanding cultural phenomena as integral parts of societal structures—however, by focusing more on constructions of cultural capital and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1979). A core tenet of Bourdieu's approach thus lies in his field theory, particularly the concept of "habitus," which denotes the socially acquired set of dispositions, attitudes, and embodied cultural knowledge shaping an individual's perception and practices in the world (Bourdieu, 1972). In "The Field of Cultural Production" (Bourdieu, 1993), this theory proves integral to the study of the cultural industries, revealing how individuals within cultural fields navigate and negotiate their positions and contributing to an understanding of the dynamics influencing the broader landscape of the cultural industries.

Building on Bourdieu's influential contributions to cultural sociology, these theories have also played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of cultural policy research (Røyseng, 2010). In particular, cultural policy scholars have drawn inspiration from Bourdieu's insights to analyze the intricate relationships among cultural practices, social structures, and the dynamics of cultural consumption, where, in particular, examinations of cultural hierarchies and the impact of social positions on individuals' cultural preferences align with Bourdieu's emphasis on the role of cultural capital and symbolic power (see Ahearne, 2004; Dubois, 2011; Røyseng, 2010). In essence,

cultural policy research thus encompasses the exploration of artistic autonomy, the dynamics of cultural production, and the societal implications of cultural hierarchies, often examining questions concerning how, for example, governments and institutions shape cultural production and consumption through different sets of policies and regulations—especially considering issues such as cultural diversity, cultural heritage, and the role of the state in supporting or regulating the cultural sector (Mangset & Hylland, 2017). In this sense, cultural policy research questions of how cultural policies shape and are shaped by these structures, shedding light on power relations and inequalities in society.

Cultural policy research also extends to include not only the traditional domains of the arts but also the realm of media policy, which involves the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods. Moving beyond the essential focus in cultural policy, media policy research frequently involve scrutinizing the ramifications of public policy decisions and regulatory frameworks on the media landscape, as well as the intricate dynamics among media entities, political actors, and society—to understand how these relationships mold the accessibility, diversity, and content of media (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In recent decades, these questions have also been subject to an investigation of how these different systems of media policy have developed differently in various parts of the world. Hallin and Mancini's "Comparing Media Systems" (2004), or in the context of this thesis, Syvertsen et al. (2014) conceptualization of "the Nordic media welfare states" are crucial in this regard as they highlight the dynamics of different media landscapes in various sociopolitical contexts. As described in Syvertsen et al. (2014), the Norwegian media welfare system is particularly characterized by an intricate and close relationship between the media, the authorities, and societal welfare—underscoring how the principles of the welfare state are also shaping the media and cultural sector. These relationships underscore the importance of comprehending how media policy, societal structures, and governmental interventions shape the media landscape and its broader implications, which is crucial for research within the cultural industries.

While the opposition between these traditions has mostly faded over the last few decades, there are still some tensions between certain approaches within cultural

industries research. This has, for example, become evident as the development of the internet and digitalization processes has come to mark cultural industries research in the 21st century. In recent decades, we have seen a rising research interest in digital culture, which can be seen as a more comprehensive field converging several of the above-mentioned traditions with more technology and digitally focused perspectives, such as "science and technology studies," "digital humanities," or "software studies" (see e.g., Bonini & Magaudda, 2021; Latour, 2000; Haraway, 2013; Manovich, 2002; 2013; Fuller, 2008; Drucker, 2015; Berry & Fagerjord, 2017). Here, however, I will emphasize the evolving field of platform studies (Poell et al., 2022), in particular, which serves as a key perspective within contemporary research on cultural industries.

Platform studies draw insights primarily from four distinct disciplines (Poell et al., 2019). Whereas contributions within software studies research the computational, material, and infrastructural dimension of platformization – focusing on the relationship between platforms and end-users through exploring how computational backends (such as application programming interfaces or software development kits) shape the strategies and operations of content developers (Helmond et al., 2019; Helmond, 2015; Plantin et al., 2018) – business studies play a crucial role in understanding the economic dimensions of these processes, particularly in elucidating how platforms gain competitive advantages through multi-sided markets and network effects (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017; Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). Cultural studies, on the other hand, emphasize platforms' often-transformative impact on cultural practices, such as user behaviors and emerging occupations (e.g., streamers, vloggers, Youtubers, etc.) (Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2016), while critical political economy has come to underscore terms of global power dynamics, surveillance, and labor exploitation within platformization (Srnicek, 2016; Fuchs, 2017; Jin, 2015; Scholz, 2016). Importantly, these studies have come to demonstrate the increased dependence between cultural production and powerful platform companies, characterized by the systematic tracking and profiling of user activities and preferences, allowing content developers to navigate and adapt to the data-driven infrastructures and governance standards imposed by platforms (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). In platform studies, cultural production is thus described as "contingent," which refers to the adaptability and malleability of

cultural commodities that are constantly revised in accordance with user feedback and openness to recirculation (highlighting how cultural products are subject to ongoing changes, responsive to user interactions, data, and other evolving conditions). Importantly, these interactions also involve various institutional actors, or "platform complementors" (e.g., advertisers, content producers, or other third parties), contributing to the economic dynamics of these multisided markets (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Platform studies, then, as conceptualized by Poell et al. (2019), provide a comprehensive approach to analyzing platformization as a socio-technical process (p. 4), rather than understanding platforms as static objects, where terms of "institutional changes and shifting cultural practices mutually articulate each other" (p. 5). To as we will return, this combining approach, synthesizing insights from the above-mentioned research traditions, makes platform studies a useful framework when seeking to capture the more complex and nuanced developments of music platformization.

2.2 Combining Approaches: A Holistic Perspective

When taken together, the theoretical traditions within research on cultural industries provide a comprehensive toolkit for analyzing how cultural industries operate and evolve, also amid the rise of digital platforms. While recent focus has shifted toward digital culture and platform studies, it is crucial to recognize the enduring relevance of critical theory, cultural studies, political economy, cultural sociology, postcolonial theory, and cultural and media policy research in today's digital cultural landscape. While extensive work has been done to integrate cultural studies (Jenkins, 2006; Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2016; Cunningham & Craig, 2019) and political economy (Srnicek, 2016; Jin, 2015; Fuchs, 2017) with digital culture and platform studies, significant research within critical theory, cultural sociology, and the cultural industries approach also continues to offer valuable insights into cultural production in the digital age (see e.g., Berry, 2014; Fuchs, 2016; Webster, 2020; 2023; Arioldi 2017; 2021; Sundet & Colbjørnsen, 2021; Herbert et al., 2019; Meier, 2019).

With the combining and holistic approach of this thesis, I build on several of these approaches. I particularly draw on cultural studies, political economy, cultural

and media policy research, and software studies in order to analyze how the complex relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry plays out according to the thesis' four cases of study and corresponding articles, addressing production, economy, policy, and technology. In Case 1 (Production), I particularly draw on insights from the cultural studies tradition and focus on the democratic and empowering potential of music platformization, analyzing how creative music production can potentially play out within the constraints of platformization. In this article, I argue that although terms of platformization and the related attention economy might produce specific formulas for what kind of music succeeds or not, platformization also provides opportunities for a more diverse range of genres, voices, and approaches to music production to come to prominence. Ultimately, this underscores how music creators continuously negotiate between focusing on the opportunities and challenges associated with music production under the age of platformization (see Article 1).[1]

Case 2 (Economy) draws insights from critical political economy, as it analyzes the dimensions of platform dominance, power, imperialism, and colonization within the music and audio streaming market. My co-author Hendrik Spilker and I discuss how Spotify's turn towards audio and entertainment is perceived worrisome from a music industry perspective, as it challenges power balances between music industry actors and technology platform companies. The article then poses questions regarding corporate capitalism and global platform dominance, ultimately contributing to the larger political economy discussion on power dynamics and capitalism within the evolving landscape of information and communication technologies (see Article 2).

In Case 3 (Policy), traditions within cultural and media policy research are compared to the contemporary logics of platform governance. This is particularly done by exploring how the media welfare systems of Nordic countries have come to be challenged by the business models and commercial logics of global platformization.

[1] Notably, I do not make use of the specific contributions of cultural studies within this article (see Article 1). However, by paying attention to the opportunities of platformization in terms of creative music production and democratization, I draw on insights of the cultural studies tradition and comprehend platformization as a possibility for increasing terms of diversity and representativeness within the music industry.

Here the focus is on how national policies have met the particular challenge of declining domestic market shares within the Norwegian music industry, and the correlating rise of global platformization (see Article 3).

Finally, Case 4 (Technology) puts the cultural policy ideal of music diversity in dialog with the critical literature within software studies. Here I focus on how the relationship between algorithmic recommendation systems and terms of music discovery and personalization is perceived by particular actors within the Norwegian music industry. Through the article's five keywords of visibility, curation, personalization, standardization, and professionalization, this article ultimately bridges studies within cultural policy and software studies to discuss how music diversity unfolds under the paradigm of platformization (see Article 4).

Together, the combining and holistic theoretical approach of this thesis thus seeks to gain a more comprehensive picture of how these developments of music platformization are taking place. Consequently, my approach is also consistent with several recent trends within cultural industries research. Whereas previous tensions between different research paradigms have occasionally incited conflicts within the overarching field of cultural industries research—for example, between political economy and cultural studies, or between the two different approaches of political economy (Grossberg, 1995; Garnham, 1995; Garnham, 2016; Garnham & Fuchs, 2014)—several scholars now highlight how an increased influx of studies combines diverse approaches within cultural and media industries research in the pursuit of a more nuanced analysis of the operations of the cultural industries. Political economist Janet Wasko (2014, p. 265-266), for example, points to how a rise in so-called "integrated studies" today shapes research on cultural production in which various scholars representing different research traditions come together. Wasko (2014, pp. 265–266) writes the following about integrating political economy with other social and cultural research approaches:

> Many scholars working in cultural studies, international communications, feminism, race-ethnic studies and other forms of social research have produced work that integrates these perspectives with PEM [author's note, *the political economy of media and communications*]. In other words, they embrace a political economic perspective as only one of the lenses they use to understand media. This outpouring of research and its recognition of structuration and agency—whether individual, collective, corporate or

> institutional—have been ongoing for decades. For many contextual scholars, the conceptual or methodological divisions between or among political economy, cultural studies and social research have essentially collapsed, yielding scholarship that synthesizes these areas (Wasko, 2014, pp. 265-266).

Wasko (2014) underlines how such integrated studies can be employed in several ways. While some researchers combine political economy with other approaches in order to assess a particular case of study in a more holistic manner (Babe, 2010; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Gripsrud, 1995; Kapur, 2005; Maxwell, 2001; Meehan & Riordan, 2002; Stabile, 2006), others employ a more overarching approach that brings scholars of different research traditions and national contexts together in research projects that merge critical political economy with a multitude of other approaches (Barker & Mathijs, 2007; Biltereyst and Meers, 2011; Wasko et al., 2001). Wasko's (2001) own case study of Walt Disney, however, serves as a key example in this matter. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, she scrutinizes Disney's growth within historical, political, and economic contexts alongside a textual analysis of Disney films, cartoons, and television programs, coupled with interviews exploring audience engagement with or against Disney products. While this comprehensive study adeptly captures the essence of political economy, highlighting power dynamics in cultural production, distribution, and consumption, it also embraces other relevant dimensions. Similar to the approach taken in this thesis, Wasko (2001) employs diverse methodologies, synthesizing various theoretical approaches to elucidate the multifaceted nature of how a specific media company operates within the broader cultural industries landscape.

Such integrated studies also relate to the emerging field of platform studies, as they seek to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between culture, power, and economy within the cultural industries. Building on this, Poell et al. (2019; 2022) stresses the importance of analyzing the cultural and societal impact of platforms at the intersection of different scholarly traditions—such as the aforementioned traditions of political economy, cultural studies, business studies, and software studies—in order to "retrace how shifts in economic, infrastructural, and governmental power mutually articulate each other in the platformization of cultural production" (Poell et al., 2022, p. 182). Similar to Wasko's (2014) integrated approach,

Poell et al. write the following about exploring institutional changes and cultural practices in combination and within particular contexts:

> It is vital that we move beyond the particular foci of software studies, business studies, political economy, and cultural studies that have, so far, dominated the study of platforms and platformisation. We need to gain insight in how changes in infrastructures, market relations, and governance frameworks are intertwined, and how they take shape in relation with shifting cultural practices. (…) A systematic inquiry into the connections between the institutional and cultural dimensions of platformisation is particularly crucial because it will bring into view the correspondences and tensions between, on the one hand, global platform infrastructures, market arrangements, and governing frameworks, and, on the other hand, local and national practices and institutions (Poell et al., 2019, p. 9).

In that sense, Poell et al. (2019) stresses the importance of producing a more comprehensive understanding of how platformization, as a process, brings about "transformation of key societal sectors and how it presents particular challenges for stakeholders in these sectors" (p. 9). Finally, a related argument can be found in David Hesmondhalgh's (2019) notion or continuation of the cultural industries approach (as associated with Miège, 1989; Garnham, 1990). While combining different traditions connected to political economy, critical sociology, and cultural studies, Hesmondhalgh (2019, p. 77) promotes a critical yet balanced analysis of the cultural industries, that is able to pay attention to both the evolving relationship between creativity, culture, and power, while at the same time being sensitive to questions concerning continuity and change—often warning against over-emphasizing transformation, and reminding about the importance of implementing macro-historical accounts (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2020; 2022). While not excluding, but emphasizing the "complex, ambivalent and contested" (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 8) view on the cultural industries, Hesmondhalgh argues that one should seek to integrate the best aspects of each tradition, according to the specific research being conducted. He writes:

> The real goal of discussions about theory and method in relation to media and popular culture (…) should be to understand the potential contributions and limitations of the key approaches, and to synthesise the best aspects of them, according to which particular research questions are being addressed. Discussions organised around simple dichotomies such as political economy versus cultural studies were never likely to achieve this goal (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 73–74).

Following the approaches of Wasko (2014), Poell et al. (2019), and Hesmondhalgh (2019), this thesis also seeks to avoid the most prevalent traps of becoming too narrow or one-sided. Although an increasing number of researchers today transcend the confines of the previously more separated traditions within cultural industries research, it is important to note how certain contributions within this broader tradition have been accused of placing exaggerated focus on limited aspects of the cultural industries operations. For example, as proposed by Wasko (2014), political economists are often ascribed a "simplistic notion of ideology," as their focus on the economy and production of commodifying culture tends to overlook important elements of "texts, discourses, audiences, and consumption" (p. 265). Hesmondhalgh (2019, pp. 56–58) comparably points to how the American tradition of political economy (or the "Schiller-McChesney tradition") tends to underestimate terms of "contradiction" within the system, where an overemphasis on production fails to highlight specific conditions of the cultural industries, underestimating the importance of "symbol creators," popular culture, or historical variations. Conversely, contributions within the field of cultural studies have occasionally been accused of not adequately addressing critical issues related to capitalism or commercialism and of being overly celebratory towards popular culture (see Gitlin, 1997; in Ferguson & Golding, 1997).

While it is true that these tensions—primarily between political economy and cultural studies—have mostly faded (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 74), there still remain discussions between the most divided ends within each of these traditions (see e.g., Garnham, 2016; Garnham & Fuchs, 2014).[2] Whereas tension and conflict between different ways of assessing these matters are certainly necessary—as the critical addressing of theoretical and methodological weaknesses is important for enriching the discourse and to develop new insights—my approach intends to make use of these

[2] Some cultural studies' contributions promoting the democratizing potential of digital media (e.g., convergence culture, democratainment, or social media entertainment) (Jenkins, 2006; Hartley, 2004; Cunningham & Craig, 2019) have been criticized for having overly celebratory tones and for promoting digital optimism (see Glatt, 2020; Maasø & Spilker, 2022). In contrast, recent political economy perspectives such as platform imperialism, platform capitalism, and surveillance capitalism (Jin, 2015; Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2018) have been criticized for their determinist, reductionist, or dystopian accounts that tend to simplify the complexities of platformization and digitalization developments (see e.g., Wood & Monahan, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 208–209).

different perspectives to ultimately gain a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamic relationships. Similar to Wasko's (2001) integrated approach, the overall objective of the thesis is thus to "encourage analysis of popular culture and its role in society by exploring a specific popular culture phenomenon through various approaches and methodologies" (p. 4). Ultimately, the aim of this combining and holistic approach, to study the platformization of the Norwegian music industry, is corresponding to Wasko's (2001, p. 225), as it looks at music platformization from different perspectives to more fully understand the complexity of how these processes play out.

3. Methods

This thesis's combining and holistic approach aims to research the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry from various perspectives. In this chapter, I discuss the methodological approaches of the thesis and how they relate to each other. I begin by discussing my epistemological approach, which is grounded in the paradigm of critical realism, before outlining the overall research design of the thesis, conceptualized as an exploratory multiple case study. Furthermore, I discuss my choice of methods, which include qualitative interviews, document analyses, and qualitative method triangulation, before describing how I thematically analyzed the data. I conclude with a discussion of issues regarding validity, reliability, and generalizability.

3.1 A Critical Realist Perspective

In this thesis, I adopt a critical realist perspective to undertake a nuanced exploration of music platformization as a societal phenomenon, recognizing the intricate interplay between observable realities and underlying concealed structural mechanisms (Howitt, 2010, pp. 34–5). Critical realism, as expounded on by Roy Bhaskar (1975), posits that reality, or multiple realities, are socially constructed entities that are constantly influenced by internal dynamics and power relations within a society (Patel, 2015). Critical realism diverges from both the positivist notion that the social world can be solely comprehended through a natural science approach, and the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the role of human interpretation in shaping societal phenomena (Howitt, 2010, pp. 34). In this sense, critical realism understands something as real if it has a causal effect, whether this is an aspect of the physical or the social world. For example, in the context of music platformization, the streaming economy or the recent shifts in artist revenues are considered real from a critical realist perspective because we can establish its causal relationship to the social world. Equally, the infrastructure supporting streaming platforms' vast server networks is also deemed *real* in this perspective given its tangible impact on the physical world and its ability to enable seamless music distribution and consumption.

In contrast to prevalent constructivist approaches in qualitative research, critical realism thus acknowledges the existence of a reality—a tangible physical world comprehensible through scientific discourses and inquiry (Howitt, 2010, pp. 34; Sayer, 2004, p. 6). This does not mean that critical realism dismisses the notion that different perspectives on reality exist. However, as constructivism identifies that there are numerous views on reality that are perceived through different lenses—rejecting the notion that a constant and knowable reality can be directly observed—critical realism questions the extent to which research observations accurately reflect the complexities of the real world (Howitt, 2010, pp. 34). In that sense, critical realists acknowledge the constructivist view that reality is viewed through different lenses (e.g., different theoretical paradigms or methods of data collection), but question whether these views represent more than mere perspectives on reality—and not reality in itself.

These epistemological concepts have also influenced the ideological tensions between different theoretical traditions. Political economists, for example, tend to adopt a more realist perspective, positing the existence of an external, materially defined world accessible to human understanding (Garnham, 1990, p. 3). Postmodernist scholars within cultural studies, on the other hand, often lean more toward a constructivist or subjectivist paradigm, highlighting the role of individual interpretation in knowledge construction (Hall, 1997, pp. 24–25). Therefore, the epistemological position of critical realism maintains, in my perspective, a significant stance in terms of both the interpretive process of understanding the world, highlighting the importance of interpretation and meaning-making and the acknowledgment of the limitations of our knowledge about it—underscoring the inherent shortcomings of our understanding. As Hesmondhalgh (2019) notes, critical realism recognizes both "the centrality of interpretation and meaning in making sense of the world", and "the profound fallibility of our knowledge about that world, and that therefore [there] must be a world independent of our knowledge of it where some explanations, interpretations and evaluations are more valid than others" (p. 76; see also Sayer, 2000). Ultimately, by embracing this critical realist perspective, this thesis aims to gain insights into not only the surface-level changes happening with regard to music platformization, but also

the implicit attitudes, discourses, and power dynamics influencing how various stakeholders perceive and navigate within this evolving landscape.

3.2 Exploratory Multiple Case Study

Critical realists believe in the complexity and contextuality of reality and recognize that reality may not always be readily apparent. To delve into this complexity and research the specific developments, changes, and discourses surrounding the music–platformization relationship, this thesis employs an exploratory multiple case study design. Rooted in critical realism, this approach investigates the intricacies and contexts of four distinct cases to uncover underlying structures and offer a nuanced description of what characterizes the interplay between platformization and the Norwegian music industry.

A case study is often referred to as a study of a single unit (Gerring, 2004). Rather than examining larger samples of data, this means that the researcher narrows its focus down towards a specific subject, unit, or *case*—be it a person, an organization, an event, a project, a phenomenon, or any other subject of interest. In contrast to quantitative methods of studying cause-and-effect relationships, the case study method focuses on observing the unique characteristics of specific units in their natural contexts with the aim of producing complex and detailed accounts of the selected entity (Yin, 2009). On the one hand, case studies thus intend to develop in-depth knowledge of a specific unit being studied, serving as an interesting case in and of itself—set apart from a larger and more comprehensive universe. On the other hand, case studies can also aim to develop concepts or theories as starting points for theoretical generalization. In these approaches, the observed unit is strategically selected due to their being representative of a larger universe, understood within a wider context and in relation to other similar units (Yin, 2009). This latter purpose, with its descriptive and inductive nature, thus follows an exploratory design, as it aims to both identify knowledge gaps and to generate hypotheses that can be further explored and tested (Yin, 2009).

In order to gain insights into the dynamic relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry, an exploratory multiple case study approach was employed to gain in-depth insights into both the particular developments and

discourses marking this relationship. A multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006) studies several units sequentially in order to draw comparisons, contrasts, and patterns across them – developing theories that can be applied or tested to a wider range of situations (Stake, 2006). In essence, multiple case studies are thus often used to explore complex phenomena, test hypotheses, or validate theories by examining how different units respond to or behave in similar or distinct ways. Consequently, researchers typically analyze data from each case to identify overarching themes, trends, or relationships that might inform their research findings. Ultimately, this allows for a more robust examination of the particular research question by considering multiple perspectives and contexts. As Stake (2006, p. vi) notes, multiple case studies seek to understand how a "larger whole" (or a "quintain") "operates in different situations." In that sense, the four cases of this thesis are used to explore the overarching and more complex relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry, exploring what insights the unique life of each case can tell us about this bigger phenomenon.

In this thesis, the exploratory multiple case study design functions as an overarching framework in which the four cases are subordinated under the main theme of music platformization. In that sense, the Norwegian music industry serves as a context-dependent example illustrating how different processes of platformization can unfold within a given industry positioned in a certain national context. While combining four different cases, the thesis seeks to highlight the unique characteristics of each case in order to underline how music platformization involves a multitude of different processes and perspectives. Thus, the four cases have both individual contributions, as articulated through the specific findings of each article, and, in combination, as part of the larger whole (Stake, 2006). See Table 2 for an overview of the thesis's methods.

3.3 Methods

Following the multiple case study design, I use a variety of qualitative methods to fully comprehend the four cases of the thesis. This involves two qualitative interview studies with Norwegian music creators and Norwegian music industry actors, and three

document analyses of press releases, media coverage, and Norwegian policy documents. Given the research questions of each case, I have carefully selected the methods I believe to be both the most suitable and the most manageable approaches for generating insights into these four cases and the research questions being asked.

WHEN?	METHOD?	QUANTITY?	DATA?	CASE?	RESEARCH QUESTION?	ARTICLE?
2021-2022	QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS	15	TRANSCRIBED TEXT	1. PRODUCTION	**RQ1**	1
2019-2020	QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS	11	TRANSCRIBED TEXT	2. ECONOMY / 4. TECHNOLOGY	**RQ2, RQ4**	2, 4
2021	DOCUMENT ANALYSIS	1185	PRESS RELEASES	2. ECONOMY	**RQ2**	2
2022	DOCUMENT ANALYSIS	667	PRESS COVERAGE	2. ECONOMY	**RQ2**	2
2023	DOCUMENT ANALYSIS	15	POLICY DOCUMENTS	3. POLICY	**RQ3**	3

***Table 2—Method Overview**: Overview illustrating the size and scope of the qualitative interview studies and the document analyses and how they each relate to the research questions, articles, and case studies of the thesis.*

3.3.1. Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative interviews were conducted to obtain insights into how different actors within the Norwegian music industry experience and perceive processes of music platformization. This involves one qualitative interview study with 15 Norwegian music creators, and one qualitative interview study with 11 Norwegian music industry actors. As Brinkmann & Kvale (2018) notes, "The qualitative interview is a key venue for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their world. [Providing a] unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences, and opinions" (p. 10).

Given this thesis' primary focus on the Norwegian music industry, these qualitative interviews can be considered "expert" or "elite interviews" (Bogner, et al., 2009; Bruun, 2016). Such interviews delve into the expertise and experiences of selected individuals, who, through their roles, actions, and involvements in particular institutional or social contexts, provide in-depth insights into industry-specific

perceptions, operations, and strategies (Bogner et al., 2009). Due to them being sources of information and knowledge that is not easily accessible through alternative methods (Bruun, 2016, pp. 132–135), expert or elite interviews are particularly valuable for researchers seeking to gain rich data about the complex dynamics, trends, and discourses surrounding the specific field under scrutiny. As this thesis seeks to gain knowledge about how specific stakeholders perceive and evaluate key developments regarding music platformization, conducting expert or elite interviews serves is a crucial method that promotes a nuanced exploration of the intricacies involved in these industry dynamics. Ultimately, this facilitates a broad understanding of different stakeholders' perspectives and strategic approaches in navigating the landscape of music platformization within the Norwegian music industry.

The flexibility inherent in qualitative interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 98) thus enabled me to explore emergent themes or ideas, allowing for the capture of unexpected insights and nuances that might have been overlooked in other, more structured approaches (p. 16). Moreover, by relying on a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions, I was able to encourage participants to engage in profound reflections and share somewhat unfiltered opinions, fostering a more organic and rich dialogue. On the one hand, the interviews with the music creators, who possess unique insight into how both platformization affects their individual work and how the broader music culture evolves in aesthetic, artistic, or cultural terms, thus enabled a detailed examination of the nuanced ways in which platformization intersects with artistic expression, creativity, and production within the Norwegian music landscape. Similarly, the interviews with the music industry actors—who hold important knowledge and opinions about how platformization processes affect specific industry operations at both macro and micro levels—provided valuable insights into the strategic responses, adaptations, and challenges faced by key stakeholders within the Norwegian music industry in the face of increasing platformization. Overall, the qualitative interviews thus served as powerful tools for conducting a thorough exploration of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and opinions, ultimately facilitating a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dynamics shaping the industry's response to the challenges and opportunities posed by platformization.

3.3.2. Sample

A total of 15 Norwegian music creators (artists, producers, and songwriters) involving eight men and seven women aged 23–40, were selected for the first qualitative interview study on music production. The aim was to provide a detailed picture of the phenomenon of the platformization of music production from various perspectives within a relatively homogeneous group of young music creators who were part of the broader popular music scene in Norway. The sample was strategically chosen based on the participants' relative success within the Norwegian music industry and their experiences with platform-based music production and distribution. Prospective candidates were contacted via email and social media and recruited based on availability (see anonymized overview of the sample in Table 3).

#	GENDER	AGE	PLACE	ROLE	GENRE
1	Male	26	Oslo	Artist	Electronica
2	Female	33	Oslo	Artist	Hip hop
3	Male	26	Oslo	Artist	Indie pop
4	Female	26	Zoom (Online)	Artist	Indie pop
5	Male	23	Oslo	Artist	Indie pop
6	Female	36	Zoom (Online)	Artist	Electronica
7	Male	28	Zoom (Online)	Artist	Chill Beats
8	Male	33	Oslo	Artist	Chill Beats
9	Female	26	Zoom (Online)	Songwriter	Pop
10	Female	30	Zoom (Online)	Songwriter	Pop / EDM
11	Female	26	Zoom (Online)	Songwriter	Pop / EDM
12	Male	28	Oslo	Producer	Pop
13	Male	30	Zoom (Online)	Producer	Pop / Hip hop
14	Male	40	Zoom (Online)	Producer	Pop / Hip hop
15	Female	28	Zoom (Online)	Producer	Pop

Table 3—Qualitative interviews 1: *Anonymized overview of the participants, including their gender, age, the place the interview took place, their role, and their affiliated genre.*

The interviews occurred from December 2021 to November 2022, each lasting between 40 and 75 minutes. Employing a semi-structured method, I emphasized fostering trusting dialogues, accommodating diversions, and posing additional inquiries when necessary. This approach involved maintaining openness toward the interviewees,

actively listening to their input, and addressing key points raised through follow-up questions.

Three central questions were, however, emphasized in all interviews as a means of generating reliable insights into how the music creators experienced the impact of platformization on their creative production processes. These were: Does music streaming (or other music platforms) influence how popular music *sounds* – how it is created and experienced? In what ways (if any) does producing music intended for circulation on online platforms affect your creative process? To what extent do you think the medium for which you produce music (such as music streaming platforms) liberates your creative process? Based on these questions, I was able to obtain insights into how the music creators perceived, made sense of, and saw themselves involved in these processes. Finally, an external company transcribed the interviews and prepared them for subsequent analysis.

In addition, I conducted the second qualitative interview study to gain insights into how key decision-makers in the Norwegian music industry perceive different opportunities and challenges related to music platformization. More specifically, this involved interviews with 11 Norwegian music industry actors, which constituted a more comprehensive description of the overarching situation related to music streaming and the possibilities and challenges associated with adapting to this model. This sample features both key figures within the Norwegian music industry—including decision-makers from major record labels, interest organizations, copyright organizations, and music publishers—and one interview with a Swedish Spotify executive who offered an insider perspective from a major music streaming platform. In total, the participants were comprised of five women and six men aged between 34–59 who possessed a minimum of 12 years of experience in the Norwegian music industry, thus providing valuable insights and expertise related to the digital transformation over the last decade. All participants provided explicit consent for their names to be disclosed in this study (see Table 4 for an overview of the participants).

#	NAME	GENDER	AGE	PLACE	ROLE	ORGANIZATION	COMPANY TYPE
1	Larry Bringsjord	Male	60	Oslo	Chair	Fono	Interest organization
2	Herman Foss	Male	49	Oslo	Advisor	Tono	Copyright organization
3	Kerstin Mangert	Female	54	Oslo	General Manager	Arctic Rights	Publisher
4	Live McKay	Female	33	Oslo	Commercial Director	Universal Music	Record company
5	Inger Elise Mey	Female	50	Oslo	Assistant Director	Tono	Copyright organization
6	Lena Midtveit	Female	49	Oslo	Senior Manager	IFPI Norway	Interest organization
7	Marius Øvrebø-Engmoen	Male	43	Oslo	Managing Director	GramArt	Interest organization
8	Hans Ole Rian	Male	51	Oslo	Head of Union	Creo	Interest organization
9	Sveinung Rindal	Male	43	Oslo	Country Manager	The Orchard	Agency
10	Johan Seidefors	Male	45	Stockholm	Head of Content	Spotify	Streaming platform
11	Marte Thorsby	Female	47	Oslo	Managing Director	IFPI Norway	Interest organization

Table 4—Qualitative interviews 2: *Overview of the participants, including their gender, age, the place of the interview, their role, organization name, and the type of organization they represent.*

All interviews were conducted between October 2019—February 2020 in Oslo. These participants were also contacted via email and recruited based on their availability. The interviews lasted roughly 60 minutes each and followed a semi-structured approach.

Importantly, this qualitative interview study is part of the broader research project Streaming the Cultural Industries (STREAM) at the University of Oslo, encompassing a total of 39 participants from different stakeholders across the Norwegian music, film, television, and publishing industries.[3] In these interviews, I was thus more reliant on following the pre-determined interview guide, consequently ensuring a higher degree of internal reliability within the study. The interviews, crafted to gain a more comprehensive overview of how platformization processes or streaming are perceived across different industries, covered a variety of themes and questions aimed at facilitating a comparable analysis of how various aspects of these industries adapted to the streaming model. The same set of questions was posed to all interviewees, which enabled us to compare answers across sectors and industries. Given these varied themes, two cases in this thesis focused on different parts of the

[3] Within the scope of this thesis, I only made use of the 11 interviews carried out with actors within the music industry. This complete qualitative interview study was conducted by Associate Professor Terje Colbjørnsen, Associate Professor Vilde Schanke Sundet, and myself. Additionally, the transcription process involved the collective efforts of myself and research assistants Benedikte Solstad and Eline Rud Wagle.

interviews. While Case 2 investigated issues related to terms of power dynamics within the music streaming market, Case 4 paid more attention to issues concerning musical diversity and perceptions of algorithmic recommendation systems (see, e.g., Sundet & Colbjørnsen, 2021, for another article based on the same material).

3.3.3. Document Analysis

To provide a more holistic view of the relationship between the Norwegian music industry and platformization, I also analyzed three categories of documents: press releases from the platform company Spotify, media coverage about Spotify, and Norwegian policy documents.

Document analysis encompasses a methodical approach to reviewing and assessing documents, for "finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents—both printed and electronic" (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). This involves an iterative procedure of examining and interpreting selected textual sources in order to extract relevant information, identify patterns, discern underlying meanings, and gain insights into the context or subject matter under study. Karppinen and Moe (2012) delineate two primary approaches to document analysis. On the one hand "documents as sources" refers to the interest of using documents as "sources intended to document a process" (p. 9). In this approach, documents can serve a simply descriptive function by providing valuable information about specific developments or actions—the researcher uses documents as sources to track specific events or trends. On the other hand, "documents as texts" refers to the understanding of texts as "social products that have consequences in themselves, irrespective of their authors' intentions" (p. 11). Contrary to conventional document analysis methods, this approach incorporates techniques such as discourse analysis, narrative analysis, argument analysis, and more to scrutinize the quality of the documents as textual entities that hold certain socio-political implications or discursive power (Karppinen & More, 2012).

In line with this delineation, this thesis has a two-fold motivation for conducting document analysis. First, Spotify's collection of press releases is a vital source for documenting specific market-based movements and strategies undertaken by Spotify.

This resource included documentation of anything from specific acquisitions of smaller companies, introductions of new platform features, financial reports, or more cultural initiatives. However, these sources also provided a basis for analyzing how Spotify, as a powerful platform company, strategically portrays itself, as well as how the company justifies and rationalizes its strategic choices within the music streaming market. To the contrary, the collected documents from Norwegian media coverage of Spotify thus serve as a more corrective source to the press releases, both documenting many of the same trends as with the press releases – and discussing and evaluating these trends with an external (and often critical) perspective (see Article 2). By stressing the textual qualities in these various documents, I thus gained insight into multiple perspectives and opinions regarding the same trends and developments surrounding Spotify.

A similar two-fold motivation drove my analysis of the Norwegian policy documents. On the one hand, these documents provided me with an opportunity to document how Norwegian cultural and media policies' have implemented specific measures and actions in response to the emergence of global platformization. On the other hand, I have simultaneously been able to assess the agency within these documents—that is, the attitudes, opinions, and interests implicit within these documents—authored by various actors in the Norwegian cultural and media policy field. In this sense, the analysis of all these diverse documents has offered me a multifaceted understanding of the dynamics between the Norwegian music industry and platformization, both getting insights into the strategic maneuvers of platform companies such as Spotify, and how Norwegian cultural and media policies operate in response to such maneuvers, ultimately providing me with a complex picture of the overarching phenomena of music platformization.

3.3.4. Sample

The analysis of Spotify press releases was conducted between August 2021 and June 2022. I began by gathering all the available press releases that Spotify had shared on their website Newsroom.spotify.com from April 2018 to June 2022 (the website did not have access to press releases issued prior to April 2018). A total of 1185 press releases were categorized into the website's four different sections: "What's New?,"

"Culture and Trends," "Behind the Mic," and "Inside Spotify." Furthermore, the press releases were all read and filtered into categories based on their relevance to the study to ultimately produce a sample of 396 articles. This also involved removing articles that did not say anything specific about Spotify's strategic movements or developments into new markets. The remaining press releases were then sorted under three thematic divisions that encompassed Spotify's strategic shifts toward other "audio-based content" (podcasts, audiobooks, live audio, etc.), "video-based content" (vodcasts, music videos, livestreamed concerts, etc.), and more "controversial undertakings" (related to, e.g., the rise of AI-generated music, so-called fake artists, and the vast quantities of soundscapes, ASMR, and noise found in Spotify's catalogs). See Table 5 for an overview.

CATEGORY	WHAT'S NEW?			CULTURE & TRENDS			BEHIND THE MIC			INSIDE SPOTIFY		
OVERALL POPULATION	477			245			245			218		
FILTERED OUT SAMPLE	202			30			65			99		
MAIN THEMES	AUDIO	VIDEO	OTHER	AUDIO	VIDEO	OTHER	AUDIO	VIDEO	OTHER	AUDIO	VIDEO	OTHER
QUANTITY	159	48	25	13	18	10	50	23	12	71	19	11

Table 5—Document analysis 1: *The sampling and the initial part of the thematic analysis of Spotify's press releases. As shown, several documents were filtered out based on their relevance to the study. Moreover, different articles of the sample were categorized into one or several of the main themes of the analysis—involving movements toward audio, video, or other relevant movements.*

This analysis was combined with a document analysis of the media coverage of Spotify in the Norwegian media. This study was conducted from May to June 2022. Using the Norwegian online media archive Atekst (Retriever), I gathered a total of 667 articles extracted from 15 Norwegian online newspapers, from around the same period as the press releases (May 2018–April 2022). These included five of the largest and most influential (online) newspapers in Norway (VG.no, Dagbladet.no, NRK.no, TV2.no, and Nettavisen.no); newspapers that more explicitly focus on issues at the intersection of media, technology, and/or economics (M24.no, DN.no, Tek.no, and ITAvisen.no); and five newspapers that concentrate on the matters of popular culture and, specifically, music (Gaffa.no; Nattogdag.no, 730.no, Musikknyheter.no, and Ballade.no). To narrow the search, I included only articles where the word "Spotify" was mentioned in the title or the lead of the articles. As with the content analysis of Spotify's press

releases, these articles were read through and categorized based on their relevance to the identified themes (see Table 6 for an overview).

An important point to make in this second document analysis is that it was conducted after the analysis of Spotify press releases. When filtering out relevant articles, I was thus more focused on what these newspapers wrote about regarding the three categories already identified, encompassing Spotify's movements towards "audio-based content," "video-based content," and the more "controversial movements" related to, e.g., AI-generated music, fake artists, and other kinds of noise. The purpose of this analysis was thus to better identify any trends that Spotify did not address in its press releases, thereby including a more critical outside perspective on how the company navigated and positioned itself within the market.

NEWS OUTLET	VG	DAG-BLADET	NRK	TV2	NETT-AVISEN	M24	DN	TEK	ITAVISEN	GAFFA	NATT & DAG	730	MUSIKK-NYHETER	BALLADE
N	71	19	79	26	26	17	23	64	149	42	50	55	30	16

Table 6—Document analysis 2: *Overview of all the articles collected in the media coverage analysis. As these articles were collected after the analysis of press releases, I more actively searched through the documents to see what they commented on regarding the three main themes addressed in the press release analysis.*

Finally, a document analysis covering 15 policy documents that included public studies, reports, and parliamentary white papers from the last decade (2013–2023) obtained from the official website of the Norwegian government (Regjeringen.no) was conducted between August 2023 and October 2023. These documents were strategically selected based on their themes: they involved texts that explored opportunities and challenges related to digitalization, art, culture, media, and music, as well as the business and industry policy aspects of these topics. In that way, they all addressed matters of both media policy and cultural policy, as well as business policy interests. See Table 7 for an overview of all the collected policy documents.

#	ENGLISH TITLE	NORWEGIAN TITLE	YEAR	TYPE OF DOCUMENT
1	"Obstacles to digital value creation"	"Hindre for digital verdiskaping"	2013	Norwegian Official Reports
2	"The Cultural Survey 2014"	"Kulturutredningen 2014"	2013	Norwegian Official Reports
3	"The Norwegian Media Diversity"	"Det norske mediemangfoldet"	2017	Norwegian Official Reports
4	"Report from the Nordgård Committee"	"Rapport fra Nordgårdutvalget"	2013	Smaller reports and input notes
5	"Commercial measures to promote Norwegian audiovisual content in a digital market"	"Kommersielle tiltak for å fremme norsk audiovisuelt innhold"	2015	Smaller reports and input notes
6	"First input note from the Business Policy Council for cultural and creative industries"	"Første innspillnotat fra næringspolitisk råd"	2016	Smaller reports and input notes
7	"Future culture from a user-perspective"	"Fremtidens kultur i et brukerperspektiv"	2018	Smaller reports and input notes
8	"What Now? The impact of digitization on the Norwegian music industry"	"Hva nå? Digitaliseringens innvirkning på norsk musikkbransje"	2019	Smaller reports and input notes
9	"NRK's contribution to media diversity"	"NRKs bidrag til mediemangfoldet"	2021	Smaller reports and input notes
10	"The government's international cultural efforts"	"Regjeringens internasjonale kulturinnsats"	2013	White Papers
11	"Digital agenda for Norway"	"Digital agenda for Norge"	2013	White Papers
12	"A modern and future-oriented NRK – Financing and content requirements"	"Eit moderne og fremtidsretta NRK – Finansiering og innhaldsplikter"	2017	White Papers
13	"The power of culture – Cultural policy for the future"	"Kulturens kraft – Kulturpolitikk for framtida"	2019	White Papers
14	"Diversity and arm's-length-distance – Media policy for a new era"	"Mangfald og armlengds avstand – Mediepolitikk for ei ny tid"	2019	White Papers
15	"Artistic conditions"	"Kunstnarkår"	2023	White Papers

Table 7—Document analysis 3: *Overview of all the collected policy documents. This overview includes the translated title of the document, the original title of the document, the year of the publication, and the type of policy document.*

3.4 Thematic Analysis

The collected data were analyzed thematically. Thematic or "reflexive thematic analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2021) is an analytical approach focused on the systematic exploration of qualitative data by identifying, analyzing, and reporting specific, recognized patterns within a qualitative dataset. In this approach, "a theme" is defined as "the patterning of meaning across the dataset" and can encompass both "shared meanings" or "conceptual patterns" of expressed ideas, thoughts, or perspectives in some form of text (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 76).

The decision to employ reflexive thematic analysis in this thesis revolved around two main arguments. First, reflexive thematic analysis provided room for me to explore and understand the complexity, nuance, and contradictions within the datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 7). As Nowell et al. (2017, p. 2) argues, "through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of

data." By applying this approach to each of this thesis's four cases, reflexive thematic analysis has thus enabled me to identify patterns, trends, and key themes that permeate the collected data, both within and across each case, consequently serving to develop a holistic understanding of the overall relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry. Second, reflexive thematic analysis is a highly applicable and flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data. Although Braun and Clarke (2021, pp. 35–36) distinctly defines a six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis—involving (1) familiarizing yourself with the data; (2) coding; (3) generating initial themes; (4) developing and reviewing themes; (5), refining, defining, and naming themes; and (6) writing up—they emphasize how this approach is not strictly linear, but a dynamic and iterative process. Thus, I have the room to continuously move back and forth between the different steps in order to carefully review and develop the central themes of the analysis.

In this thesis, I have therefore initially spent considerable time familiarizing myself with the various datasets—especially through the transcribing, reading, and reviewing of the different documents—before gradually developing codes and eventually themes that identify specific patterns. This fluid approach has primarily begun with a thorough process of coding the documents (in NVivo software) into a range of highly specific but often overlapping codes. On one hand, these codes had a semantic value, that is, a more "explicit or surface meaning" comprising concrete themes and aspects within the documents (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 35). On the other hand, they had a more latent value, which means a more "conceptual or implicit meaning," for example, codes describing specific beliefs, opinions, or attitudes a participant might have when discussing specific aspects within the qualitative interviews (p. 35). The process of coding was primarily followed by a dynamic process of moving back and forth between the steps of generating, developing, and defining themes – in order to construct broad categories that encompass complex sets of different perceptions and trends within each case.

In the transcribed dataset of qualitative interviews with music creators, for example, I have thus consolidated codes encompassing various positive experiences and attitudes related to the relationship between platformization and music production

into one theme (“creative possibilities”). I also synthesized codes that include corresponding negative experiences and attitudes into another theme (“creative limitations”). Moreover, a third theme (“platform negotiations”) was identified through the synthesis of different codes, reflecting the more ambivalent attitudes of the music creators. In the analysis of Spotify press releases, on the other hand, I was more concerned about categorizing coded data representing various trends in Spotify’s movements toward audiovisual content into three main themes, “audio-based content,” “controversial audio content,” and “video-based content.” Similar approaches have also been taken in the other analyses, where I have clustered together different codes into broader, more comprehensive categories representing certain main trends or “conceptual patterns” (Braun & Clarke 2021, p. 77).

While these processes – being flexible, dynamic, and sometimes chaotic – all in all have involved me discarding, splitting apart and collapsing themes together – they all have a systematic approach in common. This means that I have carefully reviewed all of the documents and systematically categorized them into broader themes that reflect some important patterns of the specific case under scrutiny. In conclusion, the utilization of reflexive thematic analysis has thus provided me with a robust framework for exploring the complexities inherent in the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry, allowing for the identification and interpretation of key patterns and themes both within and across the different datasets.

3.5.1. Reflexivity

The term “reflexive” in reflexive thematic analysis refers to the subjectivity and self-awareness of the researcher’s own role embedded within the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 5). As Kristanto and Padmi (2020, p. 177) notes, when conducting thematic analysis, the “themes are not readily available in the data; they need to be constructed by the researcher.” This means that the researcher must always take an active part in generating the themes. While qualitative research, in essence, is valuable when it comes to accumulating rich, contextual data—offering profound insights into the worldviews of participants of other textual sources of information—it is always discursively embedded (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Qualitative data are thus

profoundly shaped by the interaction between the researcher and the subject of inquiry. When conducting qualitative interviews, for example, scholars engaged in conducting and interpreting these encounters, have little authority to say anything beyond the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions voluntarily disclosed by the participants. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 24) thus aptly characterize the research interview as particular "inter-views," understanding knowledge as something being constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Recognizing these inherent challenges, it becomes imperative for researchers to approach their findings with a nuanced understanding of the constructed nature of knowledge in the interview setting. Related problems arise in document analyzes, which aim to explore patterns of sense-making and meaning-creation in the communicative characteristics of language (Preiser et al., 2021).

In this way, reflexive thematic analysis underlines the nuanced interplay between researchers and the data, enriching the understanding of the research context and the research's findings. While reflecting on my own role as a researcher, my background as a semi-professional musician most certainly shapes particular perspectives emphasized in this thesis—on the Norwegian music industry and processes of platformization. While having both positive and negative personal experiences with particular sides of the Norwegian music industry, I tended to empathize with smaller and independent players within the industry who, in my experience, often find the disruption of platforms problematic, as well as other industry-sensitive questions concerning inequality, terms of revenues, commercialization, or questions regarding representation and diversity. In that sense, my initial approach to studying music and platformization was critical, primarily problematizing aspects of corporate power and inequalities within the industry. While I must emphasize that I, during this academic process, have reflected and reached more nuanced understanding of these processes, I believe this background has shaped the most critical outlooks within this thesis—ultimately influencing both the questions being asked and the analyses being conducted.

Second, similar terms of subjectivity are also relevant when discussing the impact of the interview participants. For example, in Case 1, where I focused on music

production and creativity, a question arose regarding whether the interviewed music creators presented themselves favorably, aligning their responses with the expected ideals associated with being an artist (see more in Article 1). In Cases 2 and 4, on the other hand, where the exploration centered on how music industry executives discussed, e.g., power dynamics within the platformized music industry, it became important considering who the different industry players were, and what role each of them held within the industry. Importantly, all interviewees represented specific facets of the industry, consequently advocating for particular industry interests. In this context, as informants with significant influence, they all (to varying degrees) presented arguments that mirrored their own (or their company's) corporate interests. As discussed in the qualitative interview literature, such elite interviews can often be colored by a great deal of corporate talk in which the interviewee seeks to promote the viewpoints they want to communicate (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 94; Sundet, 2021; Bruun, 2016). Considering the inherent agendas of expert informants in interviews, as emphasized by Bruun (2016), it is essential to recognize these perspectives as "part of the research findings" (p. 142).

While the researcher is an active part in constructing the data within qualitative interviews, these terms of subjectivity unfold a bit different within qualitative document analyzes. Although these sources of data are also undeniably subjective, the researcher assumes a more detached role in document analysis, refraining from active participation in constructing the text under scrutiny. While language and texts indeed possess agency (Preiser et al., 2021), being influential mediums of expression, this detachment however, to some extent enhances the objectivity of the examination, allowing the researcher to interpret texts produced outside of their direct involvement. While this does not mean that the researchers' own subjective worldviews don't color the conducted analysis, this detachment might ultimately contribute to a more impartial understanding of the subject matter at hand.

3.5.2. Triangulation

Overall, the various methods employed in this thesis function in conjunction as a means of capturing diverse perspectives on music platformization within the context of the

Norwegian music industry in a holistic manner. Therefore, method triangulation was employed in this thesis, as well.

Triangulation is an approach that involves utilizing multiple methodologies to investigate the same phenomenon (Flick, 2004). By integrating various methods, such as qualitative interviews, document analysis, or any other qualitative or quantitative method, the overarching goal of triangulation is to enhance the reliability and validity of their findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5). Triangulation thus allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter by incorporating diverse perspectives and tools. In this sense, method triangulation also facilitates the identification and mitigation of potential biases or limitations within the research process (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Particularly in complex research endeavors, this approach enables a thorough and more nuanced analysis of data—consequently serving to bolster the credibility and applicability of the research findings (Patton, 2015).

In this thesis, triangulation is particularly relevant in Case 2 (Article 2), where the qualitative interview study with Norwegian music industry actors is combined with document analyses of Spotify press releases and Norwegian media coverage of Spotify. The different datasets in Case 2 each played distinct roles and contributed in their own way to more holistic understanding of Spotify's evolution from being a dedicated music platform to becoming a more general audio and entertainment platform. While the press release analysis contributed to documenting Spotify's specific market movements—through the aforementioned mapping of the company's acquisitions of smaller firms, introduction of new platform features, and other relevant developments—the press coverage analysis provided an outside perspective and insight into the same trends, however, by focusing more on issues Spotify not necessarily address within their own communication efforts. Moreover, the qualitative interviews further served as a means to discuss and comment on these trends, with music industry actors providing critical insights into how these developments impact their work and operations within the industry.

In this way, this triangulation has contributed to illuminating various dimensions of Spotify's developments, both internally and externally, providing a more comprehensive picture of how the platform has affected the Norwegian music industry.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

In this chapter, I have reflected on the methodological approaches employed in this study. However, it is commonplace for researchers to confront challenges concerning scientific terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability. Therefore, it is imperative to offer concluding reflections on these dimensions.

Validity in qualitative research pertains to the accuracy with which a method or study evaluates its intended subject matter (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 142). While validity originally emerged within a positivist framework, contemporary scholars from both qualitative and quantitative domains scrutinize validity today (Winter, 2000; Creswell & Miller, 2000). While a positivist stance often confines validity to measurement and numerical data, a broader perspective within qualitative research acknowledges validity as the extent to which a method delves into its intended topic. Thus, by rejecting the notion of a singular, objective social reality, this qualitative standpoint shifts focus away from discussing absolute certainty to prioritizing the quality and trustworthiness of the knowledge produced and employing diverse validation methods that consider various interpretations and their implications (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

Several issues regarding validity arose over the course of this thesis. On the one hand, as all the collected data must be considered discursive, they purely represented expressed opinions, attitudes, perspectives, and experiences on the addressed topics. In that sense, one can question whether the employed methods are valid when seeking to map certain processes, actions, or specific developments taking place within the field. For instance, in the qualitative interviews with music creators, one might discuss the prominent gap between "saying and doing," which refers to the disparity between what the participants assert, when discussing music production, and what they truly do when performing music production (see more in Article 1). Similar issues should also be addressed in correspondence to the qualitative interviews with music industry stakeholders, where it became important to treat the data as subjectively expressed attitudes, opinions, and experiences, and not primarily as sources of information

providing with factual information about different processes developing within the field.

While such issues are unavoidable to a certain extent within qualitative research, there are ways, however, to remedy problems related to the credibility and trustworthiness of such research. In this thesis, for example, I argue that the particular contextual focus of the Norwegian music industry serves to bolster the general validity of the research. This thesis never assumes responsibility for asserting anything beyond the perspectives identified within the Norwegian context underpinning this study. Furthermore, I find that the studies are saturated (Hennink et al., 2017) in the sense that I have sufficiently explored a diversity of viewpoints and experiences within the Norwegian music industry, which contributes to increasing the credibility of the study. For example, both qualitative interview studies encompass carefully and strategically selected representations of the Norwegian music industry, collectively representing a breadth of perspectives on the overarching theme of music platformization in the Norwegian context. The document samples also represent strategic selections from larger populations who possess relevant information. For instance, the analyzed policy documents comprise nearly all Norwegian governmental policy documents pertaining to issues related to music, culture, technology, and digitalization from the past decade. Thus, they provide insights into a breadth of domain-specific perspectives from various governmental commissions comprising actors from a range of different industries and academic disciplines in Norway. The Spotify case study, on the other hand, contains all press releases shared by Spotify within a given period, while the media coverage analysis aggregates the most significant articles regarding Spotify from the largest and most relevant newspapers in Norway. In this manner, I perceive the overall study to fulfill what is often referred to as “meaning saturation,” which is a deep and nuanced collection of data (Hennink et al., 2017). Together, all the different perspectives researched in this thesis paint a comprehensive and holistic picture of the overarching relationship between the Norwegan music industry and terms of platformization.

Reliability, on the other hand, denotes the degree of consistency in measurements or findings within the research (Golafshani, 2003). Questions of reliability often revolve around whether the same results identified by a study could be

replicated under similar conditions or whether different researchers could reach the same conclusions by reviewing the same data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 142). As with validity, discussions persist regarding whether traditional understandings of reliability from quantitative research can be directly applied to qualitative research given qualitative research's emphasis on in-depth understanding and contextual nuances that may be challenging to replicate accurately (Golafshani, 2003). In qualitative research, inquiries into reliability thus focus more on examining whether findings are stable, repeatable, and consistent across diverse contexts and interpretations, thereby enhancing trust in the research results (Golafshani, 2003).

As described above, the reflexive and biased component of these analyses plays an important role within the thesis; my potential favoring of certain findings or subjective interpretations of the data, might challenge the study's overall reliability. As subjectivity is "at the heart" of my reflexive thematical analysis approach to each of these cases (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 12), it is imperative to question whether it would be possible at all for other researchers to arrive at the same conclusions and findings as I have in this thesis. As Braun and Clarke (2021) argues, "reflexive research treats knowledge as situated, and as inevitably and inescapably shaped by the processes and practices of knowledge production, including the practices of the researcher" (p. 12). Understanding the researcher's subjectivity, "and the aligned practice of reflexivity, as the *key* to successful reflexive TA" (p. 12), thus underscores the importance of addressing potential biases and ensuring transparency throughout the research process. By employing clearly defined methodological approaches, research questions, and objectives, however, such as triangulation of data sources, I ensured a robust foundation for my study. Additionally, by reflecting openly on my own position and influence as a researcher, and by providing a thorough contextualization of the study, I further bolster the reliability of my qualitative findings—ultimately being open to ambivalence and alternative interpretations to the questions under scrutiny.

Finally, generalizability refers to the process of extrapolating conclusions or transferring findings from a specific context to similar situations or populations (Creswell, 2007). Discussing terms of generalizability can be seen as particularly relevant in qualitative research, which often emphasizes the comprehension of complex

phenomena within specific contexts rather than making universal claims. Therefore, generalizability in qualitative research does not pertain to statistical representativeness but rather to the "transferability" of findings to analogous contexts or populations, also known as "external validity" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This entails considering the extent to which findings can be applied or adapted to different settings or groups beyond the immediate research context. Achieving generalizability in qualitative research thus necessitates a careful documentation of the research process, including detailed descriptions of the context, participants, and data collection methods, to enable readers to evaluate the relevance and applicability of findings to their own contexts (Creswell, 2007). Although generalizability may not be as straightforward in qualitative research as in quantitative research, thorough attention to methodological rigor and transparency can enhance confidence in the applicability of qualitative findings beyond the immediate study context.

Regarding terms of generalizability, it is worth, however, discussing the overarching motivation behind generalizing qualitative research. While qualitative research typically does not aim for statistical generalization to a larger population, it seeks to attain a conceptual or theoretical generalization by exploring deeper understandings of the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These terms refer to the process of deriving general concepts, theories, or principles from data that may be relevant to other contexts or settings. In contrast to statistical generalization, which involves drawing conclusions about an entire population based on representative samples, conceptual or theoretical generalization thus focuses on generalizing ideas, patterns, or theories derived from the study to similar phenomena or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can contribute to expanding the understanding of a phenomenon in a more abstract or transferable manner, although it does not necessarily imply that the findings are valid for all situations or populations.

Through this thesis's focus on context, again, the point is thus not to make statistical generalizations but to highlight the importance of investigating the peculiarities of each case and emphasize how these platformization processes are perceived within specific contexts. I therefore argue that the conceptualized findings within this thesis (which we delve deeper into in the articles and in the forthcoming

chapters), including those pertinent to the fourth phase of research on music and platformization, are concepts that would all be interesting to transfer and explore further in other contexts. The question of whether a more ambivalent attitude toward issues regarding digitization and platformization in culture and society generally—as suggested in the fourth phase of music and online media research, which this thesis argues for (Chapter 1)—has, for example, potential to be transferred and compared to contexts other than that of the Norwegian music industry. In this way, one can argue that the thesis partially satisfies the quest for theoretical generalization despite bringing forth nuances, contexts, and specificities within the thesis's four cases.

3.5.1. Ethical Considerations

I conclude this chapter with a brief clarification regarding ethical considerations. In line with Norwegian law on managing ethics in research, the thesis's qualitative interview studies were approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD). The first interview study involving industry actors (as part of the research project STREAM) was approved in 2019. Here, all 11 informants (and a total of 39) consented to be identified by name (see Table 4). The second interview study with music creators was approved in 2021. In this particular study, not all participants consented to be identified by name. Therefore, I have chosen to anonymize the entire sample (see Table 3). Written consent to participate was, however, retrieved from all informants in both studies (see more information about these interview studies in Appendix 1 and Appendix 3).

4. Article Summaries

4.1 (Plat)formatted Creativity

In the first article of the thesis, "(Plat)formatted Creativity: Creating Music in the Age of Streaming" (published in Cultural Sociology in October 2023), I conduct a qualitative interview study of the impact of music streaming on the production, creativity and aesthetics of popular music. This analysis is conducted within the framework of platformization, exploring the concept of "creativity constraints" (Onarheim & Biskjær, 2013) to understand the constraining and enabling factors surrounding creative agency. The study involves 15 qualitative interviews with Norwegian music creators, revealing continuous negotiations between three perspectives: the democratizing and creatively liberating potential of platforms, the commercializing and creatively constraining effects of platforms, and a more ambivalent stance focusing on what I term "creative platform negotiations" (Article 1).

Building on a theoretical framework comprised of "platformization" (Poell et al., 2022), "platform optimization" (Morris, 2020), "the attention economy" (Léveillé Gauvin, 2018), "phonographic effects" (Katz, 2010), and the concept of "creativity constraints" (Onarheim & Bikjær, 2013), the article addresses an ongoing debate regarding the influence of online platforms on popular music, aiming to provide empirical substantiation to critiques that previously have labelled contemporary popular music as unchallenging, homogeneous, and functionalist (see Hesmondhalgh, 2022, for an overview). The research questions thus center on the extent to which music streaming shapes the creative processes of music production and how music creators creatively navigate within this paradigm.

Findings reveal that music creators are highly aware of the influence of platformization but disagree on the degree of its impact and the extent to which they allow themselves to be influenced by platforms. The analysis has three main points focused on "creative opportunities," "creative challenges," and "platform negotiations" (Article 1). Whereas the perspective on creative opportunities emphasizes the democratic potential of platforms, showcasing the new voices, the new genres, and the

new approaches of (platformized) music production (examples discussed include the rise of hip-hop, variations of "genre-bending," playful, untutored approaches to music production), the perspective on creative challenges conversely presents a pessimistic view that highlights how streaming platforms contribute to homogenize and standardize music by favoring certain features, formulas and genres (the concepts of "attention-seeking" and "attention-rejecting" music are introduced at this section of the paper to reflect the impact of the attention economy on music production). The third perspective, on creative "platform negotiations," however, takes a more ambivalent stance, acknowledging both the limitations and opportunities offered by platforms. Creators within this category see platforms as creative challenges or dogmas that have the potential to both spark and guide musical creativity.

The article concludes by asserting that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive but represent legitimate, overlapping views on platformized music production, with creators often negotiating between them. As the study was situated within a Norwegian context, the article invites future research to explore similar phenomena in other contexts.

4.2 One More Turn, After the Algorithmic Turn?

Article 2 of the thesis, titled "One More Turn after the Algorithmic Turn? Spotify's Colonization of the Online Audio Space," coauthored with Prof. Hendrik S. Spilker, explores the evolving landscape of music streaming platforms, specifically focusing on Spotify's transition from being a dedicated music distributor to becoming a more universal audio and entertainment platform. Published in Popular Music and Society (March 2023), the article introduces a new phase in the evolution of music streaming termed the "auxiliary services phase" and investigates its implications for the power dynamics between the music industry and platform actors (see Article 2).

The theoretical framework builds on both Maasø and Spilker's (2022) previously introduced three-phase categorization of the evolution of music streaming, as well as Spilker and Colbjørnsen's (2020) concept of the "dimension of streaming"– both suggesting how music streaming is a multidimensional phenomenon that develops in tandem with competing platforms and technological change. Methodologically, the

study employs a qualitative case study that triangulates qualitative interviews with content analyses of both press releases and media coverage of Spotify.

The analysis unfolds in three parts. The first part of the analysis, "Audio first," delves into Spotify's strategic movements into podcasting, audiobooks, and live audio, exploring the platform's intent to gain control over distributed content through initiatives such as Spotify Originals. As subsequently discussed, the interviewed industry stakeholders expressed skepticism about these developments and speculate on the power Spotify and competing services may accumulate through increased investments in in-house productions. The second part of the analysis, "Music second," however, examines Spotify's incorporation of so-called "non-artistic" and "non-musical" content, such as AI-generated music and playlists dominated by different soundscapes (e.g., white noise or nature sounds). In this section, the informants speculate on the economic motivations behind these developments, describing them as forms of "royalty-free content." Lastly, the third part of the analysis, "Video next?," discusses Spotify's potential evolution toward video-based content, analyzing market movements, acquisitions, and platform features. These movements, which include music videos, virtual concerts, talk shows, and "vodcasts," raise concerns about potential threats to music industry actors and reduced royalties.

Aligned with the theoretical framework, the analysis focuses on Spotify's turn toward becoming a more universal audio and entertainment platform. This evolution represents what we label the "auxiliary services phase," marking Spotify as a "multi-purpose platform" in line with broader industry trends (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020). In conclusion, the article identifies and explores this emerging phase of music streaming, in which platforms such as Spotify expand beyond music to offer a more diverse range of audio and visual content. This shift poses challenges to music industry stakeholders and places them in direct competition with other entertainment markets. Ultimately, the article highlights the intricate dynamics shaping the contemporary online audio space and the need for further research to comprehend these evolving phenomena across various contexts.

4.3 The Encounter Between Global Platformization and the Media Welfare State

Article 3 of this thesis, "The Encounter Between Global Platformization and the Media Welfare State: The Case of Norwegian Music Consumption and Domestic Cultural Policy," was submitted to the Nordic Journal of Media Policy in February 2024. This article investigates a specific challenge within the Norwegian music industry—namely, the last decade's steady decline in domestic market shares of Norwegian music, how this decline coincides with the global expansion of music streaming, and how national cultural and media policy has responded to this challenge. Employing the concepts of platform governance (Poell et al., 2022) and the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014)—the article discusses the historical protection and promotion of Norwegian music using welfare measures, especially those associated with public broadcasting, and how global streaming platforms potentially diverge from these regulations (see Article 3).

Alongside a qualitative analysis of 15 Norwegian policy documents, Article 3 offers a three-part analysis. First, it examines how Norwegian cultural and media policy describes the challenges faced by the domestic music industry. Here, a "diversity challenge" is emphasized, involving a view focusing on the concentration of visibility, money, and power with the global spread of streaming services—which is put in conjunction with the decline in domestic Norwegian music market shares (critically comparing it with other Nordic countries, which do not experience the same issues). Second, it explores the proposed policy solutions to address these challenges. These proposals include increased requirements for Norwegian music in public radio channels, expanded financial support schemes, and further public investigations. Here, however, questions are raised about the effectiveness of these traditional measures, when it comes to remedying specific challenges related to platformization and streaming. Third, the analysis investigates how developments in policy encourage more international collaborations to regulate global platform dominance—a notable shift towards European solutions within Norwegian cultural and media policy (conceptualized as a "continental turn"). This part of the analysis particularly discuss

how Norway seeks cooperation with the European Union, to regulate global platform power – ultimately raising questions about whether European measures are effective enough when it comes to regulating specific national conditions (as the challenge of falling domestic market shares seems to be specifically urgent in a Norwegian context).

In conclusion, the article thus argues that Norwegian cultural and media policy has primarily taken a defensive stance against global platformization. At the same time, it calls for more investigations of what specifically makes this a Norwegian challenge, of which is (apparently) not reflected as well in other, comparable countries.

4.4 Personalized Recommendations and Musical Diversity

Article 4 of this thesis, titled "Personalized Recommendations and Musical Diversity—An Impossible Combination?," is an English version of the article "Personaliserte anbefalinger og musickalsk mangfold—en umulig kombinasjon?," which was published in Norsk medietidsskrift (the Norwegian Media Journal, September 2020). The article explores the impact of algorithmic recommendations in music streaming services and their implications for the cultural policy ideal of "aesthetic expression diversity" within the music industry. The study focuses on the dynamics of democratization and professionalization in the digital era, emphasizing the dominant role of global streaming platforms in shaping the production, distribution, and consumption of music (see Article 4).

The theoretical framework of this article mainly incorporates recent research on algorithmic recommendation systems and discussions on democratization and professionalization (see e.g., Striphas, 2015; Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2016; Tallerås et al., 2019; Snickars, 2017; Seaver, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2019; Maasø & Spilker, 2022; Prey, 2017; Pariser, 2011; Wolf, 2016). The framework is divided into five keywords guiding the article's analysis—visibility, curation, personalization, homogenization, and professionalization. Furthermore, the article details 11 qualitative interviews with various industry players and decision-makers within the Norwegian music industry.

Building on these five keywords, the analysis addresses concerns about the perceived homogenization of music culture within streaming platforms. It explores the emergence of a "superstar economy" and "cumulative homogenization," leading to a

reduction in the diversity of artists and genres. Challenges faced by niche musicians adapting to the streaming model and the impact of algorithmic preferences on music visibility are also discussed before highlighting concerns regarding how shorter, more "repetitive" songs gain visibility, potentially sidelining longer and more complex compositions. Together, the interviewed stakeholders of the Norwegian music industry express concerns regarding potential losses in musical diversity due to algorithmic recommendation systems.

In conclusion, the article highlights the tension between the influence of powerful global streaming platforms and the cultural policy ideals of promoting aesthetic expression diversity. Despite the democratizing potential of digital platforms, the article also discusses how there is a notable tension favoring those with resources and technical expertise. The reliance on algorithms for content curation thus raises concerns about the potential loss of diversity. While acknowledging the need for content sorting in the face of information overload, the study finally suggests alternative curation methods, such as a "public service algorithm" (Bennett, 2016) that entertains, challenges, and enlightens the user.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The thesis' four cases offer nuanced insights into the dynamics shaping music platformization—from the constraints of creativity in music production and Spotify's industrial transformations to the potential cultural and political ramifications of these processes. In this chapter, I provide a concluding discussion to evaluate the contributions of the overall thesis and the four individual articles to the field of cultural industries research and the expanding domain of music and platformization studies.

First, this chapter positions the findings and reflections of each article within the ambivalent fourth phase of music and online media research, as stated in the introduction. Here, I will discuss the articles in relation to the three key concepts of contestation, context, and continuity, emerging when combining the four cases of the thesis. I argue that these concepts are essential for investigating the dynamics of music platformization in Norway. This discussion will then lead to a conclusion that addresses the research questions raised in the introduction of the thesis. Here, I will advocate for ongoing and intensified research efforts aimed at understanding the complexities, nuances, and ambivalence inherent in music platformization processes.

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Contestation

When discussing the dynamics of music platformization through the concept of contestation, I adopt the cultural industries approach, understanding the cultural industries as a "zone of continuing struggle" (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 30). In the context of this thesis, this perspective thus views the cultural industries as a space in which various stakeholders negotiate different viewpoints on the dynamics of music platformization. Similar to Miège's (1989) and Garnham's (1990) emphasis on the pluralistic nature of the culture industries, this perspective highlights the diverse processes, conflicts, and consequences of music platformization, ultimately emphasizing a complexity representing contested opportunities and challenges for the

various actors involved. In this sense, the concept of contestation is a recurring motif in all four cases.

This is particularly evident in Case 1, where contested views on the impact and extent of platformization on music production are brought to the forefront. Within what may seem like a relatively homogenous group of young Norwegian music creators, three contrasting perspectives emerge (see Article 1): one optimistic viewpoint stressing the democratic and diversifying potential of platformization, associated with reduced participation barriers; one critical stance regarding the commercial and capitalist dimensions of platformization, highlighting standardization, homogenization, and the emergence of formulaic music production; and one ambivalent or negotiating standpoint that illustrates how music creators navigate between perceiving limitations and opportunities within the platforms' constraining frameworks. Depending on the perspective adopted, the article demonstrates how it is possible to both praise and criticize platforms as enablers of creative expression. While new voices, genres, and approaches to music production find room to flourish, it remains debatable whether those who adeptly leverage their expressions for online circulation on platforms are the ones seemingly achieving success. Despite these contradictory viewpoints, these perspectives embody an indispensable ambivalence, shedding light on and recognizing nuances within these dynamic landscapes—ultimately showing how these creators are not passive receivers of platformization but active respondents to the framework within which they operate. This is a viewpoint aligning with perspectives within cultural studies (see, e.g., Hall, 1973).

In Case 2, contested interests between a streaming platform company (Spotify) and various actors within the Norwegian music industry are highlighted (see Article 2). On the one hand, this involves a critical political economy analysis of Spotify's power and its expansion into the broader audio and entertainment domain, illustrating how Spotify is diversifying its offerings to exert more control and claim exclusive ownership over distributed content. On the other hand, the concerns of music industry actors regarding these developments are emphasized, particularly demonstrating how an increase in in-house content production and static subscription prices could pose a threat to an already-vulnerable music industry. The proposed concept of "auxiliary

streaming" thus represents an ambivalent and contested development within music platformization. Music streaming initially emerged as a response to a challenging situation marked by illegal downloading and piracy, and today services like Spotify operate in a market dominated by even larger players (such as Google, Apple, Amazon, etc.). Consequently, Spotify—a relatively smaller player in this landscape—must evolve and find ways to generate revenue to gain competitive advantages. However, music industry players find themselves dependent on these dynamics and must continuously navigate this ever-changing and unpredictable terrain when distributing their own products online. Therefore, questions regarding the inequality and power dynamics between platforms and both larger and smaller players in the music industry remain important.

In Case 3, this contested perspective is examined on a broader scale, delving into the disparities between larger systems of media and cultural policy (see Article 3). This case thus underscores the conflict between the principles of the Nordic media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014), on the one hand, in this article particularly characterized by public subsidies and public service broadcasting, that prioritize diversity and safeguarding local music – and global platformization, on the other hand. The latter being criticized for adhering to a logic that allows platform companies to operate based on their own commercial interests, often associated with a more market-liberal approach. Thus, the article demonstrates how tensions between profit motives and the idea of fostering cultural development, or between global accessibility and local content, manifest in the digital era. In my analysis of policy documents, these lines of conflict also emerge among different policy perspectives. While studies associated more closely with business policy tend to emphasize the potential of platformization for export and business development, those linked to cultural policy are more inclined to question how platformization might undermine the visibility of small, niche-based, or local cultural expressions.

Finally, this contested perspective also surfaces in Case 4 (see Article 4). On one hand, this case explores the potential of algorithmic personalization, which can enrich the user experience and enhance convenience for audiences, consequently boosting the platform's attractiveness, popularity, and competitive edge. On the other

hand, concerns about the potential loss of musical diversity are identified, with algorithmic recommendations viewed as self-reinforcing, homogenizing, and prone to promoting a "more-of-the-same" approach (Snickars, 2017). These lines of conflict intersect with discussions regarding the concept of "the long tail," popularized in the mid-2000s (Anderson, 2006; Mulligan, 2014), as well as theories concerning the rise of a "superstar economy" (Elberse, 2013), the so-called "streaming paradox" (Maasø & Spilker, 2022) or other critical perspectives within software studies (Bucher, 2012; Snickars, 2017; Gillespie, 2016). While the article mainly aligns with the critical perspective of the music industry actors, which questions the algorithmification and homogenization of music culture, it is worth pondering whether strategies for algorithmic curation have evolved and improved over time (as discussed initially with references to, among others, Seaver, 2022; and Siles, 2023). Increasingly, reports suggest that trends toward homogenization today may be reversing, a topic also debated within the Norwegian discourse on music and media studies (see Maasø & Spilker, 2022; Ryssevik, 2023, p. 65). Due to the challenges associated with measuring degrees of musical diversity, especially when comparing with previous music-cultural periods and other media (see Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 424–426), I find it difficult to take a definitive stance on these questions today. Article 4 was published in 2020, and while the issues and analyses it presents remain pertinent, there is a pressing need for further investigation into these matters in the future.

Together, the thesis as a whole thus reveals several dimensions of contestation that illuminate the complexity of music platformization. These conflicts often center around issues such as corporate power concentration or cultural homogenization, on one side, and more optimistic perspectives linked to democratization, diversity, creativity, and autonomy, on the other. They also involve how global platformization can create new export opportunities in smaller music markets while simultaneously challenging established norms in cultural and media policies within domestic markets. While it is common for research to delve into such conflicts, I find this contesting perspective on the evolution of music platformization particularly valuable, as it effectively captures some of the inherent ambivalence within these processes. As Morris (2020) articulates, music platformization brings "the conflicting agendas and

motivations of platform providers, content creators, retailers, users, and more into the same space." Hence, I believe it is crucial to acknowledge how various actors, with their varying degrees of legitimacy in their perspectives, opinions, or motivations for their actions, collectively contribute to a multifaceted and contested view of music platformization. This reflects how divergent interests, perceptions of reality, and experiences intersect to create an ongoing struggle of interests.

5.1.2 Context

When it comes to understanding the processes of music platformization through the concept of context, I emphasize the significance of the Norwegian perspective within which this thesis is situated. While the positions of various actors also can be considered relevant contextual information enriching the analytical depth of the thesis, I here specifically highlight the importance of recognizing the distinct cultural and societal conditions situated in Norway. As outlined in the introduction of the thesis, I propose that the concept of context is essential, as it serves to illuminate how the dynamics of music platformization are contingent upon the different perspectives taken.

Most prominently, this is evident in Case 3, where the encounter between global platformization (Poell et al., 2022) and the Nordic media welfare state (Syvertsen et al., 2014) is addressed. Here, specific Norwegian conditions related to the strong domestic tradition of media welfare policy are highlighted (see Article 3). Within the music industry, this context is especially pertinent to public service broadcasting and its mandates, including the protection of local music and the promotion of diversity. In this article, I discuss how the challenges related to declining shares of domestic market shares appear to be unique to Norway and not as prominently observed in comparable countries. Although I question the validity of these measurements in the article, this challenge nevertheless highlights the crucial role of specific contextual factors in shaping the diverse outcomes of platformization across different regions. While the cause of this context-dependent challenge is not identified, the study serves as a compelling example of the importance of caution when generalizing findings across cultures and national or regional political media systems. As some questions raised in

this article remain unanswered, particularly regarding why Norway faces these challenges in particular, I contend, however, that further exploration of Norwegian contextual factors is highly necessary to better explain this particular phenomenon.

Context is also highly relevant in Case 1, where the different perspectives brought forth by music creators regarding the platformization of music production are influenced by specific Norwegian conditions (see Article 1). As previously noted, the Norwegian music scene has had early experience with platformization and music streaming. Norwegian music creators have thus had the opportunity to adopt and adapt to the format early on, possessing widespread digital competence, with many growing up with access to essential tools for creating, sharing, and consuming music (see Hagen, 2022, for a related analysis on music and the concept of data literacy). This access also has a socioeconomic component, where one could argue that the generally affluent economic conditions in Norwegian society contribute to broadening digital accessibility. While not explicitly stated in the article, several of the interviewed music creators mentioned growing up with access to relevant music production software and instruments both at home and through various educational institutions. While the argument in the article suggests that lowered barriers to participation can have a democratizing effect on music culture, it is thus important to acknowledge that access to digital and online-based production and distribution tools may not be uniform across different contexts, both internationally and within Norwegian society itself. An intriguing doctoral project at the University of Oslo, for example, is currently exploring how access to these tools are not equally available to everyone, contrary to common assumptions in Norway (Skjerdal, 2023). As I argue toward the end of the article, there is thus a pressing need for more comparable studies on platformized music production focusing on other environments and contexts, whether in different countries, targeting various genres, or involving different types of creators and content.

The Norwegian context is also relevant, if not explicitly addressed, in Cases 2 (Article 2) and 4 (Article 4). As mentioned, both these cases are based on data collected and analyzed in Norway, which implicitly makes them products of the political, economic, and cultural conditions of Norway. In Case 4, which studies how Norwegian music industry actors perceive the relationship between algorithmic personalization

and musical diversity, one can discuss whether the skepticism regarding global and commercial platformization is rooted in a specific welfare state of mind (Syvertsen et al., 2014)—which traditionally has emphasized the ideals of public broadcasting, representation, and exposure to diversity. An important point here is thus that many of the actors interviewed in this case are representatives of organized unions and interest groups, reflecting the generally high degree of professional organization in Norway and the democratic ideals this organization reflects (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 5). Although these aspects are not explicitly addressed in Case 4, it is a relevant perspective to consider, as the case touches on a specific cultural policy ideal related to diversity and representation (see Article 4). Case 2 (Article 2), on the other hand, reflects discussions that, during recent years, have been particularly visible in the Norwegian public discourse on music, audio, and digital media. In Norway, these movements have among other things become central to a tremendous increase in podcasts, which has led to discussions about radio and the public broadcasting positions in the audio platform market (Lindeberg & Ala-Fossi, 2023). Simultaneously, the expanding audiobook initiative of Spotify, as well as its movements into the Norwegian publishing industry—which, when placed in an international context, is strongly regulated—have fostered a debate concerning how key domestic literary policy tools have become pressured, due to increasing levels of digitalization (Spjeldnæs, 2023, pp. 49-51; Larsen et al., 2022).

The contextual aspects of this thesis are addressed across the four articles, yet in different ways and with different emphases. In addition to the Norwegian context, other important perspectives could also have been highlighted in this regard. It is, for example, difficult to avoid the fact that the recent years of the COVID-19 pandemic affected these studies and the music industry in general (see e.g., Kjus et al., 2022). Other terms of international trends, technological inventions, juridical or regulative conditions, patterns of user behavior, or other economic, social, or cultural changes could also have been considered in this matter as relevant contextual information shaping these interpretations of music platformization. I argue, however, that this general focus on context and perspective helps bring nuances, complexity, and ambivalence to our understandings of these relationships. As Poell et al. (2019) note,

while the processes of platformization "involves changes in infrastructures, markets, and governance, there are crucial differences in how these changes take shape in particular countries and regions" (p. 2). In that sense, music platformization looks different depending on the perspective taken. In line with this thesis, I will therefore encourage further research to emphasize the significance of underlining context, as it provides more precise analyzes of how these dynamic developments play out.

5.1.3 Continuity

Finally, in comprehending the evolution of music platformization through continuity, I rely on a shared understanding articulated by Wasko (2014), Hesmondhalgh (2019), and Poell et al. (2022) in interpreting recent shifts, as presented by platformization, within the broader historical framework of developments related to cultural industries. Echoing Poell et al. (2022), it is crucial to highlight that contemporary tensions within the cultural landscape are not entirely novel but rather subject to being "challenged, reaffirmed, or reconfigured" within the unfolding processes of platformization (p. 131). Similarly, Wasko (2014) underscores the importance of political–economic analyses in digitalization, emphasizing that new media technologies often demonstrate considerable continuity, particularly in terms of corporate engagement, commercialization, and commodification.

In this view, Case 2 of the thesis (Article 2) should be interpreted within the context of the historical concentration of power within the recorded music industry. While global platform companies undoubtedly represent new forms of corporate ownership (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018), the dominance of record labels such as Sony, Universal, and Warner has shaped the music industry for decades (Wikström, 2013, pp. 71–84) – companies that still command roughly 70% of market share in the music industry today (Statista, 2023). The tensions between entities like Spotify as powerful gatekeepers and independent actors within the Norwegian music industry thus reflect a historical and ongoing process in the music industry, where a few powerful players dominate at the expense of the many. Moreover, the powerlessness among music industry actors highlighted in this case (Article 2) underscores the continuity in the way non-music industry companies shape the terms of music

distribution and consumption. As noted by Hesmondhalgh & Meier (2018), the music industry has historically been relatively powerless in these dynamics, whether consumption has been driven by consumer electronics or IT companies, in recent times. Furthermore, the trends analyzed in this case and the discussions around Spotify's move toward broader auditory content (the concept of auxiliary streaming) parallel historical trajectories observed in other cultural industries, where powerful companies enter new markets through acquisitions and mergers (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 212), pursuing growth and ownership over distributed content. This mirrors well-established tactics in other neighboring markets reliant on distributing copyright-protected products (see, e.g., Raats et al., 2018, on TV production). In this sense, it is crucial to acknowledge how today's music industry is characterized by traditional forms of power and ownership. As Poell et al. (2022, p. 30) persistently emphasize, "the impact of streaming platforms on the political economy of the music industry (...) should not be overestimated; legacy actors and industry practices have not altogether disappeared, and in fact, they continue to exert influence on systems of revenue, labor, and, ultimately, power."

A similar perspective is relevant in Case 4, where critiques of hit concentration and streaming platforms' potential reinforcement of the superstar economy are addressed (see Article 4). As I have previously noted, discussions on the balance between art and commerce, and the media's role in distributing musical diversity have characterized tensions within the industry for decades, echoing, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947) critique of the cultural industry. The cumulative concentration and homogenization attributed to platforms such as Spotify thus adds to a long history of studies and discussions that have sought to measure diversity in the music industry, often through quantifiable metrics of hit charts (Peterson & Berger, 1990 [1975]; Burnett, 1992; Lopes, 1992; Christianen, 1995; Dowd, 2004). While it is essential to maintain a critical perspective on how capitalist and commercial interests intersect with cultural policy ideals like diversity, as emphasized by several industry stakeholders I have interviewed, the tracing and comparing degrees of musical diversity throughout history poses challenges, e.g., when comparing today's individual stream measurements with past album or single sales. While criticisms of economic

power concentration should persist and evolve, the narrative of commercialism and the superstar economy remains a continuous theme in music and cultural industry research, warranting a central focus in studies on music and platformization.

The case that most explicitly addresses aspects of continuity, however, is Case 1 (Article 1). As highlighted in the ambivalent or negotiating view of platformization's formative force in music production, the historical lines of media and technology's subtle influence on music production are specifically highlighted. As emphasized in Katz's (2010) concept of "phonographic effects," media and technology have always shaped and influenced music production: "Recording has been with us for more than a century; [and] it will no doubt remain an important musical force, and users will continue to respond to its possibilities and limitations" (p. 221). By attributing these aspects of continuity to the negotiating view within Case 1 (Article 1), where several creators rationally describe platformization as a process, I point to how various forms of formulaic pop music production not necessarily represent something new. Rather, it takes new forms under the paradigm of platformization, e.g., through the logics of the attention economy, and the two suggested concepts of "attention-seeking" and "attention-rejecting" music (see Article 1). Central to this perspective is thus the recognition that those who adeptly navigate the creation of commercially viable yet artistically innovative music, within the confines of existing formats, are those who often achieve most success.

Lastly, continuity is also present in Case 3, which discusses national and regional media and cultural policies, and the encounter between global platformization and the concept of the media welfare state (Syvertsen et al. 2014). Discussions on globalization, cultural imperialism, and internationalization have long characterized the discourse surrounding the music industry (see e.g., Mjøs, 2022, pp. 197–199; Hesmondhalgh, 2019, pp. 408–412). However, as aspects of digitalization and platformization have certainly increased the possibility of distributing and consuming music across geographical borders, questions concerning aspects of "platform imperialism" (Jin, 2015) and the role of the nation-state have regained prominence in recent years. As argued by Jin (2013, p. 161), a small number of powerful platforms today "dominate the global order." While Case 3 of this thesis critically examines such

inquiries, focusing on how culture and media policies in Norway have responded "defensively" to specific domestic challenges, which have emerged during the last decade marked by global platformization, it is important to note how such concerns contribute to a history of discussions regarding global power and dominance (see e.g., Mjøs, 2022, pp. 9–10).

In that sense, these discussion regarding how new media and technologies have disrupted or challenged aspects of music production, economy, policy, and technology are not new. Rather, they are all continuing concerns that have permeated the cultural industries for decades, if not centuries. While emphasizing contestation and context, it is thus also crucial to recognize the significance of addressing the concept of continuity when analyzing the profound changes brought about by the rise of platformization. However, while the tensions within today's music industry exhibit a significant degree of continuity, one must not underestimate the transformative power of digitalization and the internet more broadly. Although media and technology have historically influenced the music industry, there is widespread acknowledgment today that the industry's recent transformations are unprecedented (Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Wikström, 2013; Poell et al., 2022; Mjøs, 2022). Consequently, we might interpret these persistent levels of turbulence as indicative of continuity in themselves. In conclusion, while the music industry navigates the complexities of continuity and change, it is important to acknowledge its long-term historical developments when analyzing aspects of transformation.

5.2 Conclusion

This thesis commenced with the following overarching research question: **In what ways do the dynamic processes of platformization interact with the production, economy, policy, and technological infrastructure within the Norwegian music industry?** Throughout this thesis, I have explored and analyzed these relationships through a combining and holistic approach—divided into four distinct case studies centered on music production, economy, policy, and technology. Overall, and in line with these four perspectives, my response to this research question is that the

interaction between the dynamic processes of platformization and the Norwegian music industry is ambivalent and characterized by contestation, context, and continuity.

First, the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry involves several possibilities and challenges. In response to RQ1—To what extent do platformization influence the creative processes of music production, and how do music creators respond to this influence?—the thesis demonstrates that Norwegian music creators respond to and perceive the platformization of music production in different ways. The possibilities of platformized music production are reflected in the low distribution and production barriers, which contribute to a more diverse music culture overall. The challenges, however, lie in the constrained framework the platforms possess, which have the potential to bring about a more standardized and formulaic music culture. As previously discussed, however, these opportunities and limitations reflect a continuity—and as the third ambivalent and negotiating perspective on the platformization of music production reflects, those who are best able to be creative within the given structures are those who gain ground.

Second, this relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry entails uneven power dynamics. In response to RQ2—In what ways are recent developments within the music streaming market perceived to affect the economy of the Norwegian music industry?—I argue that there generally exists an ambivalence among the interviewed actors representing the Norwegian music industry. As in recent years broader discussions concerning aspects of democratization vs. power concentration within the music industry, this resonates with both skepticism and optimism. On the one hand, this concerns how the platform companies navigate and operate on behalf of self-interests related to economic growth and expansion—and how this comes at the expense of smaller actors in smaller music industries, such as actors within the Norwegian music industry. In Article 2, this manifests particularly in a skepticism towards how Spotify's increase in exclusive ownership over the content distributed on the platforms, and the possible cultural and economic consequences these movements might have for actors within the music industry. On the other hand, this also concerns expressed opportunities related to a digital infrastructure that can foster broader diversity, export opportunities, or other content innovations. As reflected

in recent studies of the Norwegian music industry (Hagen et al., 2020; Nordgård, 2021), I thus also identify an ambivalence related to the expansions of platformization as the fourth phase of research on music and online media resonates.

Third, platformization involves specific consequences for the music industry in a Norwegian context. In response to RQ3—How does music platformization challenge the ability of cultural and media policy to achieve its goals, and how do policymakers respond to these challenges?—I therefore argue that the new, global, and digital reality opens up the previously more closed market for Norwegian music—which was more regulated by domestic cultural and media policies. Thus, I argue that traditional cultural and media welfare policies are indeed challenged. However, it is important to acknowledge how these changes also provide room for the further development of established policies. As I argue in Article 3, I believe there is unresolved potential to update Norwegian cultural and media welfare policies so that they may better address the challenges facing the domestic industry, understand why these challenges arise, and develop measures that can be implemented to meet these challenges. As discussed in this article, the digital infrastructure and maturity in Norway might hold a potential to develop policies that lies in the forefront of these developments in the future.

Fourth, within the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry, there is also a skepticism regarding the platforms' power to determine the popular musical landscape. In response to RQ4—In what ways do Norwegian music industry actors understand the relationship between algorithmic recommendation and music diversity?—I emphasize that there is a general skepticism surrounding streaming services' algorithmic ways of presenting and distributing music. The interviewed music industry actors are surprisingly united in this view, responding critically to questions about whether music streaming services promote diversity. As demonstrated in the fourth ambivalent phase of research on music and online media, it is difficult to define and measure the development and degree of diversity presented in music culture. Although I think it is important to continue to critically examine these filtering mechanisms—which arguably possess different values and ideological views on how art and culture should be presented—recent research and developments

regarding the more nuanced attitudes toward music platformization have suggested that some of these perspectives are changing (Seaver, 2022; Siles, 2023).

When read together, the answers of the four research cases ultimately manifest ambivalence. On the one hand, the platformization of music as a phenomenon offers a wide range of opportunities for creative expression and democratization. On the other hand, these conditions are also characterized by a form of power concentration and inequality that research needs to be continuously and critically addressed. This thesis has, through a combined and holistic approach, contributed to highlighting nuances and complexities in its exploration of the relationship between platformization and the Norwegian music industry. This is particularly reflected in the fourth and ambivalent phase of research on music and online media, which is both emerging and in the process of further developing a more nuanced critique of music platformization as a phenomenon. My main point in this thesis is thus that by bringing forth this complexity, we might be able to produce a more balanced and more precise discussion about the ambivalence associated with music platformization—which in the long run can contribute to pulling the overall music culture in a more fair and democratic direction. By emphasizing ambivalence, particularly through a focus on contestation, context, and continuity—the three key premises the fourth ambivalent phase revolves around—I argue that we can achieve these goals. Therefore, I encourage further research on music platformization that brings out these premises.

Returning to the last episode of Netflix series The Playlist (Spurrier et al., 2022), which I opened this thesis with, several of the underlying conflicts in the music streaming market culminate in a fictional congressional hearing in the U.S. Senate. In this proposed future scenario, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek is confronted with accusations of being monopolistic and even cartel-like. In particular, the fictional character Senator Madison Landy highlights the inextricable, yet unhappy dependency artists have developed with the platform—where intense competition for visibility and low incomes characterizes everyday life. She states the following: “For all intents and purposes, you are a monopoly (…). No artist can take themselves off your platform. No artist can risk losing exposure to your audiences. You control streaming, and you control the faith of musicians” (Spurrier et al., 2022). After promoting a series of

contested lines of conflict in which six different perspectives altogether contribute to a more complex picture of music platformization—the series lands on a critical note that underlines the power concentration within the music industry. Today, as in the past, large global companies dominate the music industry. And while my combining and holistic approach in this thesis, like the series, seeks to promote a more ambivalent view on music platformization – I here conclude by emphasizing the importance of keeping a critical eye on the continuous inequality and concentration of power within the industry. While these power dynamics represent longstanding challenges that have developed over a time horizon that stretches much further back than the emergence of platformization, terms of continuity is not an argument for refraining from criticizing unfortunate conditions. In that sense, and in line with the arguments of this thesis, I believe that a more nuanced and balanced critique of music platformization is the way to go – when looking to build a more democratic music industry.

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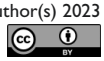
Part II:

The Articles

Article

Cultural Sociology
1–22



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(Plat)formatted Creativity: Creating Music in the Age of Streaming

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Abstract

What impact does music streaming have on the production and aesthetics of popular music? Based on 15 qualitative interviews with Norwegian music creators, this article explores how music production is executed and interpreted under the paradigm of platformization. Following the concept of 'creativity constraints' – a concept highlighting the restraining *and* enabling possibilities inherent in the complex sets of constraints surrounding creative agency – this article proposes an analysis centered around three different views emphasizing *the opportunities*, *the limitations*, and *the negotiations* that are put into play throughout the processes of platformized music production. The article finds that the music creators continuously negotiate between these three different (partly opposing, partly overlapping) views when producing music, of which an exchange between emphasizing the democratizing and creatively liberating potential of platformization, and criticizing the commercializing and creatively standardizing effect platformization (and the attention economy) pose on contemporary music culture, constitutes the analysis discursive point of gravity. In this way, the article highlights various dialectics and contradictions concerning the ways in which popular music production develops under the paradigm of platformization.

Keywords

attention economy, creativity constraints, music production, music streaming, platform effects, platformization

Introduction

> In a sense, we work backward, either consciously or unconsciously, creating work that fits the venue available to us. That holds true for the other arts as well: pictures are created that fit and look good on white walls in galleries just as music is written that sounds good either in a dance

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> club or a symphony hall (but probably not in both). In a sense, the space, the platform, and the software 'makes' the art, the music, or whatever. After something succeeds, more venues of a similar size and shape are built to accommodate more production of the same. (David Byrne in *How Music Works*, 2017).

What impact does music streaming have on the production, style, and aesthetics of popular music? In recent years, these questions have raised debate in online music culture. Corresponding with the discourse regarding the platformization of culture and society (Poell et al., 2022), numerous music critics have highlighted contemporary hit-music's inextricable connection to the *attention economy* and pointed to the *assembly-line-production* of unchallenging, bland, and functionalist music. Shorter, more effective songs, optimized to generate high volumes of streams, are reportedly dominating the charts (see e.g. Pelly, 2018). Counter-debaters argue, however, that this criticism against formulaic and commercially oriented music production rather reproduces longstanding, legacy anxieties related to the mechanical and reproducible nature of the music industry. As put forward by David Hesmondhalgh (2022), the skepticism concerning the technologies' effects on music problematically reproduces old assumptions concerning the supposedly debasing influence of commerce and 'the perceived decline in the standards of musical taste and practice in society' (see Hesmondhalgh, 2022, for an overview of this debate).

This article takes this debate as a starting point to discuss how music creators execute music production under the paradigm of platformization. In particular, it addresses Hesmondhalgh's (2022) call for a more dialectical and situated approach to study platform-based streaming's 'effect on music culture'. While these processes have been subject to much criticism and public commentary in recent years, there is, to my knowledge, currently a lack in research analyzing how artists and other music creators themselves experience *negotiating* with different 'platform logics' when producing music. By focusing my analysis on the creators' own experiences related to platform-based music production, I seek to draw attention to the negotiations taking place between the suggested effects of the platforms and the creative responses of the creators. Thus, I address the artistic opportunities *and* limitations inherent in exploring streaming platforms as a creative medium for distributing music. Empirically based on 15 qualitative interviews with Norwegian music creators (artists, songwriters, producers), this article thus addresses the following Research Questions:

> *To what extent does music streaming shape the creative processes of music production? And in what ways do music creators navigate within this landscape?*

The article opens with a critical review of prior research on music platformization, before introducing the concept of 'creativity constraints' (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015) as an analytical lens to explore the interaction between media effects and artistic practices – a concept understanding the complex sets of constraints surrounding creative agency as both creatively restraining *and* enabling. Following an account of the study's qualitative interviews, I further propose an analysis centered on three different views emphasizing the *opportunities*, *the limitations*, and *the negotiations* that are put into play throughout the processes of platform-based music production. While articulating

the complex manifestations of platformized music production, I argue how these views are not mutually exclusive, but that they rather constitute dynamic interplays, where the creators advocate continuous exchanges between what I define as an optimistic interpretation of music streaming as creatively liberating, and a critical interpretation of music streaming as creatively limiting.

Theoretical Framework

The Platformization of Music

The interaction between digital platforms and cultural producers constitutes the process Anne Helmond (2015) refers to as 'platformization'. While emphasizing the emergent cultural and social significance of online platforms, platformization refers to the processes of companies, industries, and sectors organizing around digital services (social media, online apps, streaming services, etc.) understood as hubs for transactions, communication, and exchange of information. Research on platformization predominantly puts sociocultural practices at the center of analysis, of which questions and tensions related to the platforms conditioning power to determine cultural developments, on the one hand, *and* the platforms democratizing potential, empowering bottom-up, societal participation, on the other, has come to constitute the field's decisive, discursive point of gravity (Poell et al., 2022; van Dijck et al., 2018). Consequently, studies on platformization processes emphasize *both* the platforms' inherent, accumulating tendencies towards power, capital and corporate ownership, *and* the human, cultural practices related to work, democracy, and creativity, of which the platforms facilitate.

While studies on *music* platformization have mainly focused on the financial, infrastructural, and organizational disruption of streaming platforms, emphasizing changing logics related to revenues, copyright, and musical discovery (Eriksson et al., 2019; Marshall, 2019; Wikström, 2013), scattered attempts have also been made to conceptualize the streaming platform's reformatting of recorded music's style and aesthetics.[1] As put forward in the introduction, the idea of short and *compressed* music constitutes the most common perceptions in these studies (Léveillé Gauvin, 2018; Morris, 2020). One highly pronounced characteristic of this development relies on artists 'frontloading' the opening of their songs with as much information as possible, in an attempt to avoid the user *skipping to the next song* (Maasø and Spilker, 2022). Various strategies that reformulate standardized verse-structures, in order to quickly advance to a chorus or a *hook*, are thus presented as productional tactics aimed at keeping the listener 'on-track' the first 30 seconds of a song (Spotify registers a stream after 30 seconds, making the song's opening more *financially significant* than previously). Increased tempo and significantly shorter songs are other, stylistic responses to what is described as a heightened need to streamline the music, of which an elimination of traditionally central sequences (e.g. the song's intro or *bridge*), as well as simpler and *easy-to-catch* melodies, are considered concrete measures to generate higher stream-frequencies. Some studies also find that artists increasingly orient their songs towards playlists contextualized for different moods, contexts, events, and other *scenarios* (such as *the morning-coffee*, *the training-session*, or *the deep-focus-study-mode*), a phenomenon of which Prey (2018) has coined 'the contextual turn' (see also Maasø and Spilker, 2022).

Most of these proposed adaptations are explained through the terms of the 'attention economy' (Léveille Gauvin, 2018; Morris, 2020). As a result of the increased supply of available music, the *demand* is becoming greater than the *supply* of attention, consequently increasing its *value* (Léveille Gauvin, 2018). Pelly (2018) writes correspondingly on how musical trends produced in the streaming era are inherently connected to attention, 'whether it's hard-and-fast-attention-grabbing-hooks, pop-drops and chorus-loops engineered for the pleasure centers of our brains; or music that strategically requires no attention at all—the background music, the emotional-wallpaper, the chill-pop-sad-vibe-playlist fodder'. From the strategy of *frontloading* to the tactical processing of playlist-formatted music, these formulas of 'platform optimization' – the preparation and readying of cultural goods towards 'circulation, discovery and use on particular platforms' (Morris, 2020) – forms strategic efforts to acquire and retain the affection of the audiences. As Maasø and Spilker (2022) argue, the platforms' complex, 'hybrid gatekeeping mechanisms' steer and nudge music consumption in certain directions, making these productional strategies plausible attempts to obtain advantages within the platforms' technical infrastructures.

In such a perspective, the platformization of cultural goods appears rooted in a commercial and capitalist approach to creative production, of which a heightened need to produce and adapt music, to make it stream as well as possible (within the dominant platform infrastructures of music circulation and discovery), is established as a decisive, driving motivation for producing music in the platform society. It is essential, however, to emphasize how socio-technical relationships, amid human cultural practices and platforms, do not merely constitute *top-down-processes*. The concept of platformization, as a lens to explore platforms' impact on creativity, is careful to emphasize how it is the *interactions between* the actor and the platform, of which mutually dependent, shape each other. Morris (2020) underlines that platforms in effect bring 'the conflicting agendas and motivations of platform providers, content creators, retailers, users and more into the same space' of which the result is a 'dynamic and always changing set of relationships and practices'. Contrastive to the idea of the platforms' deterministic power to reformat and commercialize cultural goods, platformization thus refers to the dynamic exchanges between the technology and the actors making use of it. Congruently, Hesmondhalgh (2022) calls for research proposing 'more dialectics, more contradiction, more situated critique' of the various platformization processes that condition cultural production. While exploring the potential for a richer and more robust, emancipatory analysis of streaming's effect on music culture, he questions the validity of the criticism against streaming-formatted music (of which he generally refers to as *simplistic*). The assumptions that platforms facilitate for *bland* and *functionalistic* music, according to Hesmondhalgh, only echoes tenacious myths (previous sets of criticism) of how capitalist values put pressures on the supposedly more 'meaningful, aesthetic musical experiences'. Instead of reproducing what he refers to as earlier eras of dismissing 'other people's music', through a 'debilitating aesthetic relativism', he requests a more dialectical reading of music streaming, directing more attention towards the diverse musical practices responding to the environment in which they exist.

Constrained Creativity

Focusing on the developmental interactions between music, media, and technology, Hesmondhalgh (2022) reviews a tradition of studies highlighting the historical *continuity* of disruptive media and technologies' ability to reformulate cultural production (Frith and Horne, 2016; Katz, 2010) – the idea that new media influence and change the current logics of creative music production is thus *nothing new*. Through his historically oriented concept 'phonograph effects', Katz (2010) describes the subtle influence of media technologies on the production of music, throughout the 20th century, of which sound recording and distribution have acted as catalysts for the pervasive and ongoing changes in music culture. Central to his premise is a relational understanding of the musicians' exploration of the given format:

> Although we often respond to technology within a context of limited options not of our own making, we must remember that, in the end, recording's influence manifests itself in *human action* [. . .] It is not the technology but the *relationship* between the technology and its users that determines the impact of recording. (Katz, 2010)

Building on this interactive perspective, this article sets out to develop our understanding of the creative practices associated with online platforms. As an analytical tool, platformization constitutes in this context a dimension of what Onarheim and Biskjær (2015) refer to as 'creativity constraints', the 'explicit or tacit factors governing what the creative actor/s must, should, can and cannot do; and what the creative output must, should, can and cannot be'. This term refers to the totality of constraints (technical, practical, social, cognitive, etc.) that conceivably affect creative agency, and constitutes the enclosing space of the more or less limiting and enabling dimensions of possibilities, the creative actor moves within. While understanding creative music production as relatively autonomous, whereby the creators' space to unfold creatively is limited by the framework surrounding him, these constraints can exist on several levels, in different dimensions. The degree of available, technical tools (instruments, recording technology, etc.) governs, for example, the creators' space to explore aesthetic expressions – the music being produced will necessarily be marked by whether it is played on a grand piano or a synthesizer, whether it is produced using analog technology in a studio, or digitally on a digital audio workstation (DAW). Moreover, sociocultural frameworks limit the normative landscape within which the creator moves. Hasegawa (2020) emphasizes, for example, how any musical style (genres, conventions, traditions), in the same way as any medium (streaming, radio, turntables), must be considered 'ensembles of constraints' which in turn require the artworks to conform within 'accepted norms'.

One can add that much existing literature that explores notions of such formatted creativity, tend to emphasize the socioeconomic logics of the music *industry*. As Hesmondhalgh (2022) points out (and criticizes), accusations concerning the debasing influence of capitalist commercialism have traditionally played a key-role in analyses critically emphasizing the standardizing and homogenizing formulas of hit-music. Following the idea of platform-optimization presented earlier, the platformization of music production similarly resonates with the idea that capitalist technologies produce

specific recipes for what is aesthetically needed to fulfill the perceived benefits of distributing music via online platforms (Morris, 2020). While platforms are, in essence, complex assemblages enabling more or less comprehensive sets of usage, the interactions between the cultural producers, the platforms and their embedded, commercial logics tend to generate, as Poell et al. (2022) puts it, 'particular *normative dimensions*' that, in the end 'guide cultural content and expression'. In that sense, platformization, as a constraint governing music production, encompasses the negotiations that occur between music creators and online platforms through which the music circulates, whereas a tension between the medium, the creative processes, and the economic conditions surrounding the creative process, becomes apparent.

Such 'creativity constraints' possess, however, a double potential as both *limiting* and *activating* in creative processes, being essential catalysts for human creativity. Hasegawa (2020) points to how creating music 'with constraints', through the emphasis on rigid compositional limitations in the design of musical creative processes, can act as artistic means to avoid the 'terror of the blank page'. Through comparisons with self-imposed dogmas in adjacent art forms (e.g. von Trier and Vinterberg's *Dogme 95 manifesto*, 1995) he explores how both voluntary constraints (by using limited palettes of pitches, sounds or instruments) and external, contextual constraints (formal, stylistic, processual constraints) can be creatively used as strategies provoking innovation and originality. As Onarheim and Biskjær (2015) underline, such self-imposed constraints exemplifies how manipulation of the creative space of action make for a resource that might 'help attain highly original creative outcomes'.

While the concept of *creativity constraints* has not yet been specifically applied to music, this study builds on this perspective by analyzing how musical practices unfold within the creative space constrained by music streaming. In that sense, the article does not aim to offer a singular definition of what constitutes creativity, nor to produce any exhaustive framework consisting of all the countless constraints framing creative work – it is solely the formatting role of platformization that forms the center of discussion. While avoiding the somewhat exaggerated dichotomy between creativity and commerce, the article moreover draws on perspectives understanding creativity and commerce as something 'co-constructed through a broader system of *creative flows and constraints*' (Poell et al., 2022: 137). Building on these perspectives, I will in the following analysis thus examine how music creators explore the possibilities and limitations inherent in creating music aimed at distribution and circulation on streaming platforms. Understood as socio-technical constructs, platformization thus constitutes the conceptual framework for exploring how constrained, formatted creativity unfolds in online music culture.

Methods

Empirically, the study involves 15 qualitative interviews with selected Norwegian artists, songwriters, and producers, consisting of 7 woman and 8 men with ages ranging from 23 to 40. Accordingly, the informants represent the Norwegian musical field, which is often referred to as an early-developed and advanced market for music streaming (Nordgård, 2016). We can roughly divide the selection into three categories: The first category includes *songwriters* operating mainly within commercial genres associated

with pop music and electronic dance music. Through collaborations with various celebrated names in Nordic pop music, they all affiliate with one of the three major record-companies (Sony, Universal, Warner), thus being professionally employed as *music creators*. This group mainly develops musical texts in the form of lyrics, melodies, and compositions. The second category involves a group of *producers*. While collaborating with several prominent Norwegian acts, this group connects to genres designated as Nordic-pop and Norwegian-language-hip-hop and enjoys recognition as tone-setting premise-providers for the Norwegian popular-music scene. As more technically enterprising, this group is more occupied with recording, mixing, and mastering music – although several see textual design (lyrics, melodies, composition) as an integral part of these processes as well. The third category encompasses *artists* who write, compose, and perform music within a range of popular-music genres (pop music, indie, hip-hop, electronica, etc.), which are all heavily involved in both the preceding processes (songwriting and production).

The distinction between these categories is, however, fluid. While some see themselves as concoctions of being artists, songwriters, and producers, others distinctively cultivate their dedicated role. In general, it is challenging to enforce a collective term that encompasses all the different functions and approaches that people who create music in online environments, professionals as well as amateurs, apply. Terms such as music *maker*, *creator*, or *practitioner* (Cunningham, 2021; Mjøs, 2013), could all function as overarching, unifying terms. Given the digital context the creators operate within, I choose to base this article on the term *music-creator*, hereby defined as *artists, songwriters and producers who create musical content with, for, and across digital platforms – be it streaming, social media or other multimedia platforms*. Although this sample's creators advocate varying degrees of belonging to this term (as several also produce music within more traditional formats, for example in the form of albums presented on LP-records), they are all, in one way or another, inextricably connected to the digital music economy.

The interviews were conducted between December 2021 and November 2022 and lasted 40–75 minutes. The data were transcribed verbatim and coded through a theme-based analysis-strategy (Braun and Clarke, 2012), which involved identifying various themes across the interviews. Through open and inductive coding, key-categories were then identified and synthesized into analytical concepts that constitute the following analysis.

As qualitative research inherently yields *discursive data*, researchers working with qualitative interviews have little authority to say anything beyond the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes the participants choose to share in the interview situation (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015). In this study, analyzing online cultural practices, a challenge arises in the distance between what the participants proclaim, *when talking about music production*, and what they actually do *when practicing music production*. Moreover, through exclusively analyzing perceptions expressed *frontstage*, it is consequently problematic to identify whether one actually uncovers genuine attitudes argued for *backstage* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). As this study implicitly addresses the aforementioned *creativity-commerce-dialectic*, one can assume that constituted, established values within the musical field inform the attitudes being expressed. Various forms of 'industry lore' (Sundet

and Colbjørnsen, 2021), a concept describing how particular industry participants make sense of field-specific developments on a collective scale, might additionally occur – potentially uncritically reproducing widespread, normative views on (in this matter) how platforms alter music production. Although prescriptive ideals associated with *the autonomy of art* have been nuanced and criticized in recent decades, it is still in this landscape this study's participants negotiate their own legitimacy. Whereas explicit questions was asked, regarding how various platform-logics were believed to be *formatting* in the participants respective, creative processes, implicit questions regarding how *commercial motives* were informative in their processes, was also raised. Consequently, the interviews risked producing variations of 'social desirability bias' (Marquis, 2015), whereby the participants shared reflections that could be perceived to be *in line* with expected ideals associated with being an artist.

Being aware of these challenges, I explained to the interviewees how the study explores how human creativity unfolds within these frameworks, carefully charging the questions accordingly. Subsequently, the analysis neither emphasizes the concrete, developing traits of 'platformized music', *per se*, nor the particular descriptions of the creators' productional practices. Rather it focuses on how the creators externally perceive and negotiate their own legitimacy, when discussing platformized music production. In that context, I have focused my interview questions on the participants' creative processes, one of which asks whether creativity can thrive within the constraints imposed by platforms. Thus, the participants' discursive reflections on the phenomenon of music platformization constitute the primary focus of the analysis.

Analysis: Platformized Creativity

This analysis proposes what I will define as a *dialectical* and *situated* understanding of streaming platforms formatting power on musical creativity. While the creators initially form a consensual notion of the ways in which streaming platforms, in general, catalyze aesthetic and productional changes in pop music (as they all refer to different productional examples and observations related to streaming-formatted optimization strategies, including several characteristics outlined in the theory section), there are, however, differing perceptions on the *power* and *influence* of these formatting processes. The creators are, first, hesitant when discussing the level of influence, they themselves experience being exposed to. Second, they tell of varying degrees of *willingness* to allow themselves to be formatted by these influences: Some claim they adapt and willingly allow themselves to be 'affected'; others are principled opponents of these developments and emphasize how they actively try to oppose the compositional trends the platforms ostensibly produce; while a third group advocate a more disarming attitude of which they understand this overall, technological development in light of a historical and continuous influence that, to some degree, always has characterized the evolution of music production.

Based on these differing facets in the understanding of the *platformization of music production*, I will in the following analysis discuss different perceptions of trends and paradoxes related to the idea of streaming-formatted, creative music production. I will specifically give an account of three different (partly opposing, partly overlapping) views

provided by the creators. These are: an optimistic view of *the creative possibilities* the platforms possess; a critical view of *the creative limitations* the platforms offer; and a more ambivalent view that enforces an intermediate position, of which various *negotiations* between the platforms' structures and the creators' autonomy, is played out. The last part will particularly highlight what I define as 'creative platform negotiations' and will be structured as the article's discussion.

Creative Possibilities

Among the creators who place greater emphasis on the creative possibilities facilitated by the platforms, one can argue that a more optimistic attitude towards the platforms and, more generally, the internet's 'democratizing potential' is enforced. Central to their analysis rests an understanding of the total, expanded space the platforms possess, of which an almost 'unlimited sea of music', consisting of all possible expressions and impressions, altogether provides a greater magnitude of inspiration and creative output. This understanding builds on the ways in which streaming platforms have come to lower the barriers for people to involve in both music production and distribution, putting forward the theoretical possibility that *anyone*, *anywhere* could *make it*, regardless of their economic, network-based, or sociocultural background. In the following paragraphs, I will point to three specific examples derived from this view, conceptualized as the *new voices*, the *new genres*, and the *new approaches* of (platformized) music production.

Regarding the *new voices* of (platformized) music production, several of the creators emphasize the low entry costs of participating in online music production, distribution, and consumption. As opposed to the idea of a legacy, conservative music industry, that to a large extent was controlled by corporate agents – predominantly in accordance with white, patriarchal sociocultural constructions (Bridge, 2020) – platformization processes are, in this view, considered as catalysts for exposing *new types of voices*, providing *new styles of music*, consisting of a more diverse origin (these include an understanding of platforms increasing the exposure of different ethnicities, nationalities, genders, etc.). For one creator, the prominent rise of hip-hop – as one of the most influential genres in contemporary, global music culture – constitutes an example of this development. As a genre originating from multicultural exchanges, primarily between African-Americans and children of Caribbean immigrants in the USA (Crossley, 2005), this creator argues how the progression of hip-hop marks the ways in which disenfranchised youth of marginalized backgrounds, are granted a greater deal of influence in the digital, platform-centric era. While this argument holds an idea that previous, gatekeeping agents (especially located around the major record companies), are losing power to determine the general popular music picture, on the one hand, platforms such as YouTube and Soundcloud are, on the other hand, highlighted as key drivers of a more democratized music industry. One creator says the following:

> For many who are creative within these frameworks – and especially for producers working within hip-hop – the availability of platforms and digital tools has been crucial. There is now a shorter path from idea to publication, for a wider part of the population. This has enabled the emergence of new exciting music that never would have been produced otherwise [. . .] In the

> US specifically, the audience that exists [within hip-hop] now possesses a greater opportunity to listen to the music they love. Many of those who could not afford CDs in the 90s, can now search music on YouTube for free. Thus, we now see more rap artists gaining bigger hits, of which contribute to push the genre forward.

The creator presents a cause-and-effect-explanation of the symbiosis between the increased availability of more diversified musical expressions, and the subsequent productions inspired by these expressions. By allowing more people affiliated with hip-hop to enter the scene, the genre flourishes and stimulates more productions of a greater variety. In that sense, platformization processes are seen in conjunction with a view illustrating the dissolution of constraints, advocating an *unconstrained* approach to creativity, promoting the idea that online platforms hold an (almost) unlimited creative potential. Correspondingly, the globalized nature of the growing platform paradigm is understood by several of the creators as beneficial for all different types of niche-based music and subcultural genres, which through international connections have a greater opportunity to reach out and find their specific audiences, across geographical and other sociocultural limitations. Accordingly, several of the study's creators talk about how music streaming platforms 'open doors' and contribute to producing 'new ways for expressing [themselves]'.

Regarding the *new genres* of (platformized) music production, several of the creators representing this optimistic view respectively emphasize how previous, cultural silos of creative expressions (styles, genres) are becoming torn down by online platformization processes. Illustrative of this is the phenomenon of 'genre-bending'. Genre-bending represents a kind of detachment from previous cultural frameworks, defined as 'the subversion of tropes associated with a particular artistic genre or the synthesis of multiple genres' (Wiktionary, n.d.). As a genre-transcending synthesis of different, previously strictly separated styles, several of the creators argued that this phenomenon represents a manifestation of how a new, rising generation of musicians has grown up being seemingly exposed to a greater breadth of musical expressions (compared to previous generations). Instead of belonging to different dedicated subcultures, which are uniform in their specific, respective identity markers (e.g. the cultures of punk, metal, hip-hop), several of the creators understand this mix of genres as an expression of a generation that has grown up having access to creative inspiration 'from all kinds of styles'.[2] One of the artists working within genres such as indie pop and hip-hop says the following:

> With the internet and such, genres have merged and blurred. Especially in the pop world, where much is inspired by hip-hop and indie music. Me and my co-producer enjoy all types of music and like to pick up bits-and-pieces from different types of genres [. . .] Genre-bending is what people are doing now. Which I believe is a natural development as you have the opportunity to record references from all possible genres, at the minute.

Contemporary popular artists such as Lil Nas X, Billie Eilish, and Lizzo are frequently put forward as examples of this trend, respectively being exponents of fusions between rap and country, goth and indie-pop, or hip-hop and rock (Shah, 2019). Among the creators advocating this thesis, these developments are considered creatively deliberating,

whereas expanded sources of inspiration are seen as innovative forces in the overall evolution of popular music. As one creator puts it:

> All these things help push things forward and I think it's incredibly exciting that everyone with a laptop now has the opportunity to produce and release music. This development helps to influence what music we listen to and the ways in which the music sounds, because you have access to several reference points.

Looking at the *new approaches* associated with creative music production, the democratizing possibilities of platformization makes itself known through what Poell et al. (2022) describe as 'grassroot' or 'bottom-up creativity', or as what Burgess (2007) labels 'vernacular creativity' – the everyday practices of cultural production performed by *ordinary* people. As extensively defined throughout the platform literature, the platformization of music culture has thus been sown on fertile ground for the emergence of an ever-growing, *amateur segment* of musical producers (Wikström, 2013). Analogous to the examples of hip-hop and genre-bending, as representing emerging voices and genres of popular music, new and innovative ways of utilizing the available tools and media at hand are subsequently unfolding, producing new aesthetic traits. In particular, different ways of playing with digital productional tools (predominantly within the formats of various DAW's), in an *uneducated* or *untutored* manner, is (as argued by some of the creators) carving ground for new musical expressions. Following the idea of *unconstrained* productional practices, making music, as one creator labels it, 'the wrong way', represents in this perspective a detachment from established, normative, and professional productional practices. One creator points out, in particular, how a type of 'incorrect' and 'playful' DIY-approach towards music production has become defining for several, emerging musical trends produced in the era of the platforms, of which a type of 'rebellion against the established' has been given a freer scope. She says the following:

> [I think the musical development in recent years] is the result of 13–17-year-olds not really knowing what they were doing. In the same way as with punk and grunge, where you made noise and did everything wrong [. . .] you now hear hip-hop-songs where the sound peaks and clips and where everything is wrong, but still sounds *dope* [. . .] If you had gone to a technically knowledgeable person, you would probably have been told that it was wrong [. . .] [But] if things had remained as they always have been, you wouldn't hear the 808-clip or the distorted guitar, because it would have been *the-wrong-way-to-do-it*. But there is always one or two 17-year-olds who say *fuck you* to the established and go on to set new standards.

As this extract reflects, this development of people experimenting, exploring, and doing things *the wrong way*, is well known in a popular music historical perspective and several of these examples are reminiscent of comparable features and trends equivalent to earlier eras in the history of popular music. Today, however, we see platforms more explicitly putting 'creator culture' at the center of their business models, by facilitating and building infrastructures for expanded production and distribution of amateur or vernacular content (see e.g. Spotify, 2022). As outlined by Wikström (2013), the divisions between who's *professional* and who's *amateur*, between who's *producer* and who's *consumer*, are slowly getting erased in the new music economy.

Altogether, the representatives of this view advocate what I argue is a more positive interpretation of how streaming platforms have acted to diversify and creatively redeem parts of the popular musical space. As more people, at the crossroads of global music culture, have gained expanded access to both produce and consume music – in all possible forms – a new generation of music creators, consisting of more diverse backgrounds, has been able to draw on a multitude of different references, in an experimental and exploratory play with the seemingly 'countless' possibilities the platforms, the digitality and (overall) the internet proposes. As one of the producers proclaims: 'Anyone, anywhere in the world could record a song today and publish it on a streaming platform tomorrow. People can say whatever they want about that, but I believe that is a good thing.'

Creative Limitations

Contrastive to the enthusiastic reading of the platforms' artistic prospects outlined in the previous section, stand the creators representing the opposite end of the scale holding a more critical outlook emphasizing the *creative limitations* of streaming platforms. In this part of the analysis, the idea of media and technology's formatting power to (especially) commercialize music culture, depicts the main argument. Inherent to this view is an understanding of the streaming platforms (and their integral logics) as mediums favoring certain musical features and genres, which over time contribute to homogenize and standardize music circulation, consumption – and hence also the creative processes of music production. As comparably described by Morris (2020), this view revolves around the platforms' technical construction of specific formulas for making music that are optimized for circulation in and throughout the platforms' technical infrastructure. Building on the understandings of the inexorable link between platformization and the attention economy, I will in this section thus outline two contrasting ways of producing music optimized for platform circulation which I refer to as: *attention-seeking music* and *attention-rejecting music*.

Attention-seeking music is, in this context, pop music that capitalizes on making use of different strategic, attention-driven sonic functions. Among the creators advocating this view, the discursive points of reference are centered around the idea that the contemporary, platformized society brings with it an informational pressure that manifests in 'lost attention', among the public, the audiences, and the users of media. As outlined in the theory section, shorter songs, high tempo, and so-called *frontloading* strategies characterize this type of music. Correspondingly, the creators tell about how they are searching for sounds that 'jumps out of the mix', how they strive to make 'hard-hitting', 'catchy', 'compressed', 'immediate', or 'overstimulating' types of music, whereas the production 'has clear functions', 'goes straight-to-the-point' (or 'right-in-your-face') and where the listener is transported 'quickly-to-the-point' (all these quotations are drawn from the data, representing a seemingly guiding mindset in the creative, platform-based productional processes).[3] Several creators link these musical features to different, popular genres such as 'hyperpop' or 'trap', and points to the self-referential approach embedded within these styles. As one creator proclaims, these types of attention-seeking music

are advocating more personal and 'relatable' lyrical functions, ultimately manifesting what she refers to as 'expressive music':

> There are many expressive genres out there nowadays and much of this music has reached a point where you have to be *hyper-relatable*, preferably in a very short time, in order to immediately perform something *human*. A lot of lyrics today, especially in American pop songs, are extremely personal: 'I-had-anxiety-at-the-pharmacy' or 'I-can't-pay-my-rent' or 'My-friends-hate-me,-but-do-they-really?' . . . These are songs that immediately try to make the music more *human* and *edible*. At the same time, you have hyperpop, hip-hop and trap where the artists like to exaggerate or even lie, and where everybody is extremely *colorful* and characteristic in how they express themselves. And this goes back to the technology, the distribution, and all the different platforms on which we express ourselves. For example, TikTok, Instagram and such.

As mentioned earlier, the *30-second-openings* reflect these tendencies in particular, whereby the music must adjust to 'capturing' and 'relating to' the audiences as immediately as possible – a tendency which TikTok and short-form video-reels are considered to be driving even further (Leight, 2019). As one creator proclaims: 'People have gone from listening to albums to songs, to *parts of songs*', while referring to the trend of particular *hooks* going viral on TikTok. While several creators adjust and deliberately exploit these aesthetic traits in their own creative processes, this accelerating, cultural development is predominantly discussed in critical terms, throughout the data (being referred to as 'formula-based', 'desperate' or even 'fussy'). One creator says the following about how the quest for attention informs his creative processes:

> I find myself getting a bit preoccupied with using sounds that *jump out of the song*. Productions that try to *grab people's attention* in a way that *sticks out* and *pops out of the speakers* [. . .] But I also try to work against it. Because you hear how desperate it sounds. I don't believe it is fertile to make art from a *desperate starting point*, or in a way that is extremely *attention-seeking*. I don't want to think that the music I make should be the most marketable version of what it can be. I rather try to make sure I don't forget that the goal is to make *art*. However, in the times we live now, I believe that this way of thinking is under some kind of attack.

Reflecting upon the ways in which these developments influence his productions, this statement suggests how music creators are, to a greater or lesser extent, occupied with tailoring music in accordance with logics associated with streaming platforms and their embedded connection to the attention economy. However, the stated resistance against getting forced to create music that mainly stimulates commercial or *marketable* requirements (in this context believed to be forces attacking the autonomy of artistic production), reflects how creatively constraining frameworks sat by platforms also drives creators to think of ways to create innovative expressions that takes both *economic* and *artistic* motives into consideration. As we will return to, these *negotiations* amid the platforms delimiting infrastructure, and the creators' autonomy, constitutes an imperative approach to the ways in which these creators think about producing music in the era of streaming.

Considering the diametrical opposite manifestation of platformized music production, *attention-rejecting music* refers to productions formatted towards specific playlists categorized according to contexts and moods. Denoted as 'background' or 'utility music', attention-rejecting music reflects a mode of musical performance in which the music is not intended to constitute the apparent focus of the listener, but rather to function as a 'sonic-wallpaper' swaying the listeners behavior or emotional response (Lanza, 2004). In this study, two creators working within the sub-genre of *lo-fi beats* are representative of this trend. Defined as a distinct *Spotify-genre*, synthesizing elements of hip-hop, boom-bap, and smooth-jazz, lo-fi beats constitutes an exclusively instrumental genre, that combines slow and relaxing beats with acoustic, analog-style instruments (Winston and Saywood, 2019). While being almost entirely mediated through the internet, the genre enjoys global success by achieving key-placements on contextualized, mood-based streaming-playlists, often labelled with names such as 'Study session', 'Lazy Sunday', 'Morning Coffee', and so on.[4] While the creators representing this genre express a genuine interest in exploring the artistic potential it holds, several of the creators discuss lo-fi beats (and other, neighboring sub-genres) in speculative terms as *cheap* approaches for *making money*. One of the creators being more critical of this trend expresses himself in the following way:

> *Soft tunes* and music that can be played in the background, is music that has won big-time on streaming. All kinds of music that is easy to listen to passively [. . .] I have a lot of producer friends starting lo-fi side-projects now, as this is music that is easy to make and because there are so many popular playlists for lo-fi beats. They think of it as a 'money-hack', where you can just release a ton of tracks, get it into a couple of playlists – and then suddenly you can generate a lot of money on the side. That kind of music wins pretty easily. It is a streaming *kind-of-thing* and constitutes its own, separate world.

While experiencing success on platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, and Soundcloud, the two creators working explicitly within this genre maintain a high distribution frequency. Building on what seems to be a well-established, genre-specific industry structure – of which apparently a magnitude of global record companies collaborates on distribution, by, among other things, constructing compilation albums and so-called 'third-party-playlists' – they advocate a strategy by releasing up to 20 or 30 singles a year. While reflecting on the success of this approach, one of the creators declares that his music has up to 100 million streams on Spotify annually and that there are continuously around 5 million subscribers to his Spotify profile. In contrast to the exponents of the attention-seeking music, of which *expressivity* and *visibility* constitutes key aesthetic components, the *artist-brand* itself seems, however, to be less important within this genre. While being among the few who make a living solely through streaming, this creator has an almost non-existent profile in the media (he almost never does interviews, never holds concerts, and has a somewhat limited social media profile). Commenting on his success on Spotify, he says the following about the public *ignorance* he experiences being exposed to:

> I have good stats on Spotify. Right now, it stands at 8 million this month [. . .] I do not follow Norwegian pop music that close, but I recently read an article about TIX [one of Norway's most

> popular artists] being the most streamed Norwegian artist in 2021. But looking at his stats I can see that he has fewer monthly listeners than me. I have a lot more.

Ostensibly proceeding in silence, the popularity of lo-fi beats seems to actually succeed over artists representing the more attention-grabbing music of the hit-charts (if this anecdotal example is to be emphasized). At a time when the battle for attention is perceived and described as more intense than ever before, this branch of platformized music thus seems to constitute a pool of music creators capitalizing on *staying in the background* by producing music that requires less activity, less attention, of the listener.

Overall, this view emphasizing the creative limitations of platformization forms an idea of streaming as creatively constraining music, in a way that produces specific formulas and recipes for achieving success on online platforms. Although the exponents of attention-rejecting music (the creators of lo-fi beats) represent an artistic willingness to experiment with the logics proposed by the platforms, the creators who represent this view hold a critical attitude towards the commercial, homogenizing tendency these (partially opposing) manifestations of platformized music represent. While discussing the trend of corporate industry players specifically requesting musical productions tailored for explicit platforms and/or pre-determined contexts (as the act of composing 'Spotify-songs' or 'TikTok-tracks', or any other 'mood-based songs', are becoming more and more common objectives, throughout contemporary, professional songwriting sessions), one of the artists says the following about the ways in which *adapting to the format* contributes to the degradation of the value of music as an art form:

> There are probably many [who adapt] and I have walked into sessions in the US where people are like: 'Hey! Let's make a TikTok-song!' And as soon as people say that a part of me dies inside. Because that's not what's important. It's such the wrong focus. These people change the order by claiming that the platform is more important than the art, and that the platforms are there to take advantage of the art, instead of promoting and elevating it. I simply hate it.

Platform Negotiations

Taken together, these two views analyzing the ways in which platformization impacts creative music production, represent an apparent paradox: The platforms' formatting power can be seen as both a space for creative *possibilities*, of which lowered barriers for participating in music production and distribution constructs an expanded, *unconstrained* space involving a greater diversity of creators and musical expressions; and as a *limitation*, of which platforms are seen as determinist forces standardizing, homogenizing, and *constraining* music, by producing specific formulas for platform-optimized music. In this analysis, however, these divergent views do not represent mutual exclusion, but rather different modes of interpreting platforms as formatting constraints guiding creative processes. As the data reveal, the creators actively advocate an ambivalent attitude towards these frameworks – they are all dynamic actors that are constantly negotiating between these different *opposing* views. While presenting a third view, which maintains an intermediate position between the optimistic interpretation of platforms as enabling creative opportunities, and the critical interpretation of platforms as limiting creative

processes, I will in the following discussion reflect on what I refer to as 'creative platform negotiations', of which *limitations understood as opportunities* constitute the discursive point of gravity. This includes what I will describe as a dogmatic and rational view on creativity, which negotiates, balances, and consciously *makes use of* formatting dimensions associated with, in particular, the logics of the attention economy.

Among the creators who are most representative of this view, we find a creative attitude towards exploring music production within the artistic potential of the given format. This view revolves around an understanding of the artist being able to creatively take advantage of the 'tools at hand'. Coinciding with the ideas of 'creating with constraints' (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015; Hasegawa, 2020), and the rife artistic tradition of using dogmas as creative catalysts, several of the creators discuss the 'creative challenge' that lies in the act of producing work that 'functions well' (both commercially and artistically) within the prevailing framework proposed by the platforms. One creator thus talks about how delimiting principles holds a potential to 'push creativity', while another understands the formatting principles of platformization as 'codes to be cracked'. He says the following:

> I know that when I release new music, it ends up on Spotify. Thus, I must deal with the fact that the format in which people encounter my music is on playlists such as New Music Friday. So, for me, [the basic question is therefore]: How do I make a [musical] expression that represents what I stand for, on a platform and in a format that I hate?

In this perspective, the instrumental formatting that occurs in wake of platformization is not necessarily perceived as creatively *problematic*, but rather as creative *encounters* testing the artistic capacities of the performing actor. As Hasegawa (2020) notes, such constraints (as imposed by the platforms) hold a potential to spur and guide musical creativity. For several of the creators, the act of experimenting with the normative conventions proposed by the platforms, thus constitute creative tactics that seek to fulfill or explore the artistic potential of producing platform-optimized music (Morris, 2020). For one creator, who has made a name for herself within alternative, electronic music, the prospects of making her music more 'immediate', hence cutting down on long, 'hovering' intros, is understood as something to be explored artistically. While envisioning a more conceptual, artistic project, that tests what today's pop conventions allow for, she states that the prevalent notion of the audiences' diminishing 'attention span' is a developmental feature that informs her artistic process.

Correspondingly, several of the creators discuss how one can 'experiment', 'investigate' or 'play with the format', and identifies several ways of exploring the potential that lies in coping with the demand for attention. In this context, various short-form publishing strategies are particularly central. For example, one creator talks about the importance of sequencing distribution strategies in ways that are able to nurture the audience's devotion over time, and emphasizes both the financial and artistic potential of, among other things, releasing chains of mini-albums – an eventually well-known strategy made famous by artists like Robyn, Kanye West and others, of which series of shorter, more effective releases together form larger, conceptual wholes (Shah, 2018). Another creator similarly recounts how she successfully produced a set of short-form one-minute music

videos in the format of Instagram-reels, when promoting her last EP. This potential, of producing small, artistic glimpses across various streaming and social media platforms, is generally highlighted by several as an opportunity to build 'larger [artistic] universes' that provide space to explore and play with one's own 'artistic identity' – preferably through series of images, videos, texts, interactions with fans, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, however, these approaches of adjusting to the format is by no means new. Throughout the history of popular music, numerous aesthetic expressions (styles, genres) have sprung up in response to constantly changing media and technological innovations, which (in this context are understood as creative *obstacles*) have pushed the creative actors to find new artistic, innovative solutions (Katz, 2010). The well-known three-minute pop single was, for example, an aesthetic response which, in its time, adapted to the capacity limitations of the 78-rpm record (Katz, 2010), while the tradition of distortion (another example representing key aesthetic components associated with rock music) developed, in turn, by experimenting with sounds that pushed the volumetric capacities of the recording and media technology of the time (Bromham and Moore, 2023). In all these cases, the interaction between the medium and the creative responses of the producer, together sets out new aesthetic directions, forced forth by the producer playing on team with the delimiting capacities of the medium. In a discussion concerning the coinciding, normative constraints that exist in (more generally) creating pop music, one creator says the following: 'The key to pop music is precisely about creating something that is both new and exciting, but which at the same time is similar enough to music you've already heard before. It must sound both fresh *and* recognizable', thus pointing to the importance of creatively experimenting *within* the limiting, normative framework in which music arises. In that sense, we might understand the formatting principles of music production as both universal and continuous, in which media and technology in a historical perspective always have contributed to expand and limit the creative possibilities for creating music (Katz, 2010). For several of the creators, platformization thus mainly represents a step further in on the ever-developing evolution of the interactions between music, media, and technology, of which streaming platforms merely represent a format one simply has to creatively 'deal with'.

This third view thus constitutes a specific idea linked to the benefits of 'creativity constraints' (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015). As an extension of what I refer to as 'creative platform negotiations', this view represents the processes of exploring and exploiting the inherent possibilities and limitations that format musical productions, targeted distribution, circulation, and consumption on online platforms. By emphasizing the socio-technical interactions (Poell et al., 2022), the dialectic relationship amid platform effects and human, creative responses, these negotiations constitute an artistic approach – a creative solution – to music production that both takes inward the critical delimitations the platforms propose and that accepts or compromises with the given condition (the fixed constraints) which the platforms facilitate.

Conclusion

Music streaming's impact on music culture manifests in complex ways. This article underscores diverse, partly contradictory modes of the platformization of music

production, unveiling three distinct views on the platforms' formatting logics. While some creators subscribe to the optimistic, democratic potential inherent of the platforms' lowered participation barriers, others critique how these infrastructures favor and limit certain production approaches. Positioned within the realm of platformization, the third view thus holds an intermediate position emphasizing the exchanges the creators (to a greater or lesser extent) are forced into, of which negotiations within the platforms' constrained space enable (and even catalyze) creative solutions – manifesting the *double potential of creativity constraints* (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015).

In this analysis, these views are not mutually exclusive. Rather they represent legitimate, fragmented responses to the platforms' influence on musical practices, of which several different flows (both upstream and downstream) converge to a multifaceted interpretation of the platformization of music production. It is thus important to note that very few of the creators locked onto one of these views, exclusively. Throughout the interviews, they all altered (and negotiated) between emphasizing the creative potentials *and* limitations of platformized music production – consequently producing what I consider to be dialectical reflections on how music streaming formats their work, demonstrating the socio-technical interactions occurring between human autonomy and media technology (Katz, 2010; Poell et al., 2022).

While not being explicitly addressed in the analysis, I underline how the data also revealed how several other constraints surrounding creativity, in dimensions beyond that of platformization, was seen as equally important formatting principles. Financial, technical, or other resource-sensitive aspects (associated with musical skills, instruments, access to software, studio etc.) were analogously highlighted as key prerequisites formatting music production. The same applies to various cultural dimensions associated with gender, different cultural or societal currents, as well as access to networks and collaboration partners. While there exists an inherent threat in reproducing one-sided, deterministic analyzes in research on both platformization and creativity constraints (through the occasionally exaggerated emphasis on the formatting significance of media, technology, or other similar constraints), I do argue that this article's emphasis on these diverse facets of the creators' autonomous responses to the platforms' constraints, helps to nuance the most deterministic claims related to streaming (and the attention economy's) effect on music culture developments. Not only do music creativity constraints exist in a magnitude of different dimensions, but also in dimensions separate from platformization. The analysis highlights how it is the *interactions* between human creativity and creativity constraints (in this study exemplified through media technology), that together form the aesthetic developments of music production.

To address the article's introductory Research Questions, I thus argue that platforms do play a role in shaping music production, albeit with different, partly contradictory implications. Indeed, the processes of platformization involves the emergence of corporate entities that, in objectional ways, perpetuate commercialization and cultural consolidation. However, online platforms also provide expanded opportunities and accessible realms for a diverse array of creators to express themselves. While cultivating their role as what I label 'creative mediators', these

creators thus continuously negotiate their creativity in a whole range of dimensions constraining creativity – restraining and enabling various artistic outcomes. Researching the ways in which these creators respond to the affordances of these platforms is thus key to understanding how the platformization of music production, in its complex ways, unfolds.

It is important, however, to emphasize how these findings are not intended to be generalized on a global scale. While the creators drew upon what could be termed global trends (evidently through their many references to, e.g. American pop music), we must acknowledge that these interpretations ultimately arise in a Norwegian context, reflecting specific Norwegian traits (i.e. those associated with being part of a small, but mature streaming market). Thus, the study offers a situated contribution, a part of what might become a broader empirical approach (an extended emancipatory critique) to the understanding of how music platformization (in diverse modes) can be experienced across, and within specific contexts. A task for future research will thus be to continue uncovering how several modes of such diverse, musical practices unfold in different contexts, cultures, and parts of the world.

This study echoes historically, well-known paradoxes regarding technology's sociocultural impact. Optimism and pessimism related to the development of new media technology have always existed, and the possibilities and limitations they bring with them have continuously sparked discussion (Hesmondhalgh, 2022; Maasø and Spilker, 2022). In music culture, the phonograph, the LP, the radio, and so forth, have all brought with them complex sets of usage possibilities and limitations, which in turn have provoked aesthetic and productional changes (Katz, 2010). In such a context, the platformization of music production only constitutes the last step of an ongoing evolution. Arising media innovations will continue to both threaten and enable new artistic processes and research will in the near future ask comparable questions about the growth of AI, Web 3.0 or other rapidly growing technologies – emerging technologies which together will provoke new creative negotiations and musical expressions. Then as now, various constraints will continue to both limit and enable artistic developments. To quote David Byrne once again: 'Complete freedom is as much curse as boon; freedom within strict and well-defined confines is, to me, ideal.' I believe this will be the case for future music creators, as well.

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Notes

1. Broadly defined, music streaming also includes several other dimensions of music distribution and consumption, such as music promotion, concerts, and other types of live-streamed music (Mouillot, 2022; Zhang and Negus, 2021). This article, however, concentrates mainly on streaming of *recorded* music.
2. The comparable trend of *collabing* is also highlighted in the interviews, whereas different creators (preferably across traditionally separated genres) strategically feature each other in order to 'tap into one another's audiences'.
3. Overall, the data reflect critical attitudes towards these tendencies. Statements concerning 'failing attention-spans', the 'clickbait-feeling-of-pop-music', or concerns about creating music that forcibly '*screams* people in the face', are all present in the data, criticizing the attention-economy's alleged penetration into music culture.
4. Comparably, other creators refer to the trend of producing different playlist-formatted versions of hit-singles, predominantly through acoustic versions tailored for relaxation and *chilling*, or through up-beat-remixes customized for dancing and clubbing.

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One More Turn after the Algorithmic Turn? Spotify's Colonization of the Online Audio Space

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One More Turn after the Algorithmic Turn? Spotify's Colonization of the Online Audio Space

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, development of algorithmic recommendation systems has constituted the main competitive factor between music streaming services. In this article, we identify how a new turn, labelled 'the auxiliary services phase', is rising to prominence. We analyze Spotify's move from being a mere music distributor, to becoming a general provider of audiovisual content – involving investments in podcasts, vodcasts, audiobooks, etc. – where expanded service offerings and exclusive content development constitute increasingly important platform strategies. Although this turn empowers innovation, it is worrisome from a music industry perspective as it challenges power balances between music industry and platform actors.

KEYWORDS

Audio-first; auxiliary services; music streaming; platformization; podcast; Spotify

Introduction

Over the last fifteen years the rise of platform-based streaming has reshaped the music industry, and, along the way, Spotify has spearheaded the development of new business models and technological innovations (Eriksson et al.; Hracs and Webster). From implementing subscription-based payment models to pioneering innovations of algorithmic recommendation systems, Spotify has become a world-leading purveyor of music distribution, discovery, and consumption – reaching over 365 million users across 178 markets, accounting for over 20% of global music revenue (Spotify, "Company Info"; Loud and Clear). Spotify is, however, a constantly changing platform: From being a dominant premise provider and content distributor of music in the past decade, the platform has, in recent years been moving toward a more universal domain, gradually providing more and more audiovisual content of all sorts. In this article, we analyze these changes, synthesizing perspectives from platform studies and music industry studies, seeking to map evolving platform strategies and the competitive positioning of Spotify in the streaming market.

We detect three new paths in the development of Spotify that have become apparent at the turn of the decade. The first concerns the focus on podcasts and other non-musical audio content (such as audiobooks, live audio, news, etc.); the second concerns the

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inclusion of human and machine-generated audio content (including the controversies associated with soundscapes, "fake artists," royalty free, and AI-generated music, surrounding Spotify in recent years), while the third entails investments in live streaming of concerts and other audiovisual content (such as music videos, vodcasts, and talk-shows). As these paths chart Spotify's move away from the "music specific" and toward the general "audiovisual" (coinciding with what has been labeled the "audio-first strategy" by Spotify CEO Daniel Ek), they tell us something about emerging logics within contemporary platform developments – where expansions of content and service offerings, the focus on exclusive content, and the move from on-demand to live streaming, are becoming increasingly important (Maasø and Spilker).

Although these moves might expand user offerings and bring promises of content innovation, they are also deeply worrisome from a music industry perspective – as they challenge power balances between music industry actors and technology platform actors. Thus, our two research questions are as follows:

RQ1: *Which strategic patterns of development characterize today's platform-based music streaming?*

RQ2: *And what might the consequences of these patterns be for music industry actors?*

The logics behind music streaming platforms have already gone through several turns, and various researchers have over the last fifteen years mapped and defined the growth of these platforms in different ways. Maasø and Spilker divide the history of music streaming into three phases. In the *first phase*, which they call "the unlimited access phase" and date from 2008 to 2011, the basic sales pitch of music streaming involved the move from limited ownership of some music to unlimited access to all music. The new services promised to cater to any musical tastes while transcending storage restrictions and various other obstacles, making endless musical discoveries possible. However, the services soon faced two main challenges: the first was how to distinguish themselves from each other when they all offered more or less the same content; the second was how to help users navigate through the vast abundance of music in their catalogs.

In the *second phase*, "the social streaming phase" (2011–2014), the services sought to meet both these challenges by introducing social media features and fostering communities among their users. Users gained the ability to befriend or follow people if they knew them or liked their musical tastes, exchange tips and recommendations, and share playlists and libraries. The main marketing terms were no longer "access" and "discovery," but "social" and "sharing." Indeed, the tight business cooperation and partial technical integration between the Facebook and Spotify platforms was indicative of the period's digital intersections. Interestingly, this strategy was abandoned after a relatively short time, partly because the new features were not used or appreciated as much as anticipated.

The *third phase*, "the algorithmic streaming phase" (2014–2022), was part of a broader technological trend across all internet-based platforms (and beyond), one referred to as the "algorithmic turn." Its new buzzwords were "personalization" and "customized services" – advantages connected to the development of "smart algorithms" and other methods for harvesting "big data" that was taking place amid intensified commercialization and competition across all internet platforms (van Dijck et al.). Most of the innovative efforts and investments of the late 2010s occurred within this field in the

interests of developing and improving algorithmic features based on musical similarity, the user's listening history, or aggregates of listening patterns.

Spotify is famous for having gained a competitive advantage by investing early and heavily in algorithmic recommendations. However, as Hracs and Webster point out, toward the end of the 2010s this advantage had been more or less zeroed out, as most services had reached approximately the same level of technical refinement. We understand the recent changes in Spotify's strategies in light of this leveling out – as indicated in the title of our article. And if we are entering *a fourth phase* in the development of platform-based music streaming – how should it be denominated? Are there any common traits in the new strategies that can be summed up and grouped together, or are they separate maneuvers that diverge in different directions?

In the next section, we will expand our theoretical framework by introducing relevant concepts from platform studies and music industry studies. Following a description of our method, we then move on to an elaboration of the three paths (presented in the introduction), which we believe are representative of Spotify's latest turn. Based on our theoretical framework, and in particular Spilker and Colbjørnsen's five dimensions of what constitutes the dynamic and multifaceted concept of platform-based streaming (a framework we will develop in the theory section), we move into a discussion about what constitutes the current dimensions of Spotify.[1] We wrap up by conceptualizing what we consider to be the next phase of platform-based music streaming.

Theoretical Perspectives and Concepts:

Platform Studies Perspectives

The concept of platformization, as it is defined by Nieborg and Poell, forms a critical lens by which to assess strategic developments of platform companies. While gravitating toward the center of contemporary media and communication studies, the concept of platformization has come to describe the ever increasing cultural and social significance of online platforms – and the ways in which these platforms affect both economic and cultural infrastructures. In line with the rapid emergence of social media and online streaming platforms (as well as the growth of digital marketplaces, search engines, and other types of platforms in all sectors of society), platformization represents the rise of the platform as the "dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web" (Helmond). While attracting attention across various research disciplines (e.g. software studies, business studies, cultural studies, and political economy – see Nieborg and Poell for an extensive overview of this literature), the platformization literature has taken a strong and critical stand by emphasizing how cultural markets have come to be dominated by the ever-growing, economic regime increasingly referred to as "platform capitalism" (Srnicek).

Consequently, large global media platforms have become the subject of growing criticism over the last decade, as a small handful of actors have taken a dominant position by "colonizing" the previously open Internet (Sujon). In contrast to the democratizing effects the Internet was thought to have on culture and society at the turn of the millennium (Anderson; Benkler), the pervasive integration of the so-called GAFAM-quintet (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) in people's everyday lives, has brought critical concepts such as "platform dominance" (Coyle), "platform power" (Van Dijck et al.), and

"platform imperialism" (Jin) – that is the continuation of American imperialism through the exploitation of online platforms (Jin 40) – to the table.

All along the field of music has been at the forefront of the development of platformization, and in the last decades, streaming platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Music have increasingly consolidated power in the industry by bringing new economic, organizational, and production logics into the market. Through a search and recommendation logic, these platforms connect audiences, producers, and advertisers by storing and distributing a wide range of content, allowing audiences to dive into "unlimited" amounts of music in exchange for a monthly fee and exhaustive user data (Gillespie, *Custodians*). By introducing subscription-based business models into an industry historically structured around the buying and selling of physical goods (LPs, CDs, cassettes), these platforms have altered the ways in which music is produced, consumed, and financed. Consequently, there is a growing body of research investigating platform effects on the music economy (Nordgård; Tschmuck), copyrights (Kjus and Jacobsen), usage (Lüders et al.), discovery (Eriksson et al.; Maasø and Spilker), production (Morris; Prey), and the distribution of power within the industry (Hagen; Marshall).

There have been ongoing attempts to conceptualize what constitutes streaming as a media industry phenomenon (Cunningham and Craig; Herbert et al.; Lotz). In this article, we build on Spilker and Colbjørnsen's definitions, which capture the concept as "dynamic and multidimensional," emphasizing how different platforms and their industrial solutions vary within and across different media industries (their study includes platforms for streaming of audiovisual, audio, and textual content as well as social media platforms with streaming features). Moving beyond definitions of streaming platforms as "sealed technological systems," they argue that streaming is an evolving concept consisting of a variety of logics that are continuously open to negotiation. They identify five key dimensions in which streaming platforms position themselves to compete with each other: professional versus user-generated streaming; legal versus piracy streaming; on-demand versus live streaming; niche versus general audience streaming; and streaming on specialized versus multi-feature platforms. Overall, these dimensions locate various platform strategies (Parker and Van Alstyne) that form the most important continuums in which today's streaming services are presented. Spilker and Colbjørnsen conclude by pointing out a series of trends in the contemporary streaming landscape at the turn to the 2020s. Some of the most relevant for our analysis include the increased focus on exclusive content, the downfall of traditional forms of piracy accompanied by the rise of new forms of piracy, the live-streaming trend, and the "imperative" of successful platforms to reach new user segments and to add new features (strategically combining, packaging, and bundling different services together). In our analysis, we will elaborate on and make use of these dimensions and trends to better identify the anatomy of Spotify's new turn and the contours of the competitive landscape of which the company is a part.

The Music Industry in the Age of Streaming Platforms

Looking at the music industry through the lens of platformization, we learn how the development of streaming disrupts established economic and distributional logics of the market, challenging and restructuring orthodox power-hierarchies of the industry. Looking at the history of the music industry, however, we learn that it contains

more or less continual disruptions and controversies over how to tackle new media inventions. From the infancy of printing and selling note sheets, through the invention of media for sound storing and retrieval, various disputes related to the illegal exploitation (and legal protection) of music copyright, have come to shape the industry (Norman). Throughout the 1900s, the rise of (and the use of music in) film, radio, and television opened unregulated territories and led to piracy phases that had to find juridic solutions in new forms of media regulation. Lessig argues that in every case, after turbulent periods, regulatory authorities (or the industries involved) managed to create laws representing a sound balance between the interest of the rightsholders, distributors, and users – without destroying the potentials of the new technologies.

In the case of the internet and the rise of what has come to be known as the "piracy wars" of the early 2000s, the industry tried to hinder unauthorized mass-circulation of music in illegal file-sharing networks, by imposing new copyright laws and digital rights management technologies (DRM) – without succeeding (Gillespie, "Wired Shut"). Although mass anti-piracy campaigns were carried out, the situation did not stabilize until actors of the tech industries introduced streaming, toward the end of the decade. (This also, importantly, involves download-for-pay services such as iTunes, which were very influential in the upheaval to get customers to pay for music online.) With the promise to provide user access to the vast reservoirs of music to which we had become accustomed, while at the same time letting the industry regain some control over its products, streaming gained traction – gradually becoming the dominant form of music distribution (Spilker).

While streaming has facilitated a new balance between the involved stakeholders, it is, however, a fragile balance with which none of the actors seem to be truly satisfied. The record companies have never accepted a business model based on renting away their catalogs, while artists complain about marginal revenues. Users, on the other hand, feel manipulated and overridden by platform politics, while the tech companies complain about the bureaucracy and rigidity of their counterparts (Spilker). While the step into the algorithmic phase of music streaming has carved ground for a more cooperative period of music streaming, as the investments in advanced algorithm development, based on big-data exploitation, have given both the platforms and the record companies unprecedented opportunities to influence music consumption (and thereby increase their revenues),this period has also led to the somewhat paradoxical amplification of what has been labeled the "superstar economy" in the era of plenty (Maasø and Spilker), ultimately concentrating power among a few, dominant stakeholders.

Studying the case of Spotify, we address what seems to be a move away from the algorithmic phase, analyzing it from both a platform-logic perspective and a music industry perspective. The changing strategies of the platform threaten to shake the balance of the 2010s. As new actors enter the scene (providers of oral and written content, as well as the live music sector), the platforms themselves move from being mere distributors to functioning as creators and owners of content. How much turbulence will we experience this time?

Method

This article serves as a case study of Spotify's recent industrial turns and the music industry's critical responses to these. The study follows a qualitative mixed methods approach, basing its empirical data on three different sources.

The first is an analysis of 1,185 press-releases retrieved from Spotify's website newsroom.spotify.com, between April 2018 and June 2022. Newsroom.spotify.com serves as the platform's press outlet, sharing press releases, news and other relevant material concerning the platform. Divided into four categories ("What's New?" "Culture and Trends," "Behind the Mic," and "Inside Spotify"), it covers various aspects of Spotify's mechanisms and developments through the launches of different acquisitions, promotions of new platform-tools, financial reports, etc.

The second source is a press coverage analysis of Spotify's presence in Norwegian media (April 2018-June 2022). Through strategic searches in the online media archive *Atekst*, we collected 667 articles, retrieved from 15 online newspapers. These include five of the most prominent media outlets in Norway (VG.no, Dagbladet.no, NRK.no, TV2.no, Nettavisen.no), five newspapers focusing on media, technology, or economics (M24.no, DN.no, Tek.no, ITAvisen.no), and five newspapers focusing on popular music culture (Gaffa.no, Nattogdag.no, 730.no, Musikknyheter.no, Ballade.no). To delimit the search, we included only articles where the word "Spotify" was present in the title or the preface.

The third source is based on qualitative interviews with 11 Norwegian music industry actors conducted in the winter of 2019–2020. These consisted of decision makers in major record companies (Sony, Universal, The Orchard), interest groups (IFPI, Creo, FONO, GramArt), copyright corporations (TONO), and publishers (Nordic Rights). Additionally, we conducted an interview with a Spotify executive. This appears as a unique source in the mapping of goals and intentions behind Spotify's strategies and constitutes a rare "insider perspective" in studies of global tech companies, as such executives are generally reluctant to participate in research like this (Sundet). Overall, the sample included 5 women and 6 men with ages ranging from 34–59 years, all of whom had a minimum of 12-years experience within the industry (thus having experience with, and professional insight into, the music industry's digital transformation). All the informants worked in Oslo, the center of the Norwegian music industry.

The press releases and the press coverage were reviewed and filtered out based on their relevance to the study before they were coded through a theme-based analysis strategy (Ritchie). This involved identifying themes across the articles, highlighting specific developments of Spotify. Through an open and inductive coding, key categories were identified and used to synthesize the analytical concepts of the following analysis (Sarker). In turn, the interviewees supplemented our discussion by bringing in critical perspectives related to the developments we had identified, highlighting the challenges these pose for the industry. As a "bounded system" (Stake), the strengths of such case studies are that they allow for detail and in-depth complexity in the phenomenon which the study examines (Flyvbjerg). In that sense, our three-source approach undertakes to obtain (and outline) a somewhat holistic perspective of Spotify's recent movements. Whereas Spotify's own communication strategically informs us about and justifies the platform's own interests, the press coverage helps to highlight and problematize various trends, controversies, and other stories surrounding Spotify, which the platform does not

cover externally. The interviews contributed, in turn, to discursive data commenting on the effects of (and the industrial challenges associated with) Spotify's strategical turns.

Altogether, our data mainly concerns the discourse surrounding the developmental patterns of Spotify, of which each of the sources complement each other, ultimately producing a more complex and nuanced analysis. The data is, however, less involved in producing understandings of how these patterns are more explicitly articulated, implemented, and used on the platform (something of which, e.g. an analysis of the platform interface or consumer usage potentially could have elaborated on). Moreover, the analysis emphasizes to a lesser extent the divergent perspectives and value positions that distinguish the different industry actors interviewed. The actors represent different interests and objectives (as the selection spans both representatives from global, powerful companies and more local, politically engaged interest organizations), and thus does not necessarily constitute a unified group. We must emphasize, however, that the material did (somewhat surprisingly) reflect a certain consensus on which the various opportunities and challenges the industry faces as a whole, according to the issues addressed in this article. Importantly we must take into account that the representative of Spotify itself thus, in turn, occupies a distinct position as a defender of the platform's strategic decisions and choice of path, that (to some extent) stands in opposition to the reflections posed by the informants representing the music industry.

The aim of case studies is often to develop concepts or theories that can form the basis for theoretical generalizations (Yin). In this case, Spotify is strategically selected as a typical unit representing a more comprehensive universe, where the study's results should be understood in a larger context and in the framework of other coinciding studies. It can be challenging, however, to derive general considerations about (and causal relationships between) such phenomena on the basis of a mere one-unit study, as several external occurrences often affects the given outcome. In this case, the "Spotify case" thus acts as one unit exemplifying one direction in which the larger and more comprehensive universe of music streaming could be developing.

Analysis:

In the following section, we present a systematic account of Spotify's move toward the general audiovisual, through the three paths we have identified. While the first path goes in-depth into Spotify's commitment to audio, the second path scrutinizes different controversies and cases of streaming manipulation, surrounding Spotify in recent years. The third path employs a forward looking point of view and discusses the possibilities for (and the challenges associated with) the platform's inclusion of video-based content.

Audio First

The most obvious and pronounced development of Spotify in recent years can be summed up through its "audio-first strategy." As early as 2015, Spotify announced that podcasts and other "self-produced content" would be included on the platform, and in 2018 the company made its first exclusive distribution agreements with well-known names in podcasting (such as Joe Rogan and Michelle Obama). In February 2019, founder and CEO Daniel EK declared that the platform's priority goal was to become "the world's number one audio

platform" (Ek). As a "moving object" (Fleischer and Snickars), the platform has thus launched a strategic transformation, from being a dedicated music platform to becoming a more general audio and entertainment platform.

In general, the audio-first strategy means that Spotify is becoming equally committed to the formats of podcasts, audiobooks, and other hybrid forms of auditory content, as it is with music. This commitment also includes everything from radio theater, news, and "live audio," to so-called "short stories," poems, and "guided meditation." (Those are the different types of auditory content to which we find Spotify referring in our data.) (Spotify, "Get Your Fill"). Spotify refers to this content as "spoken word" and to its creators as "storytellers" – a presumably strategic reformulation, which together with the word "audio" expands or blurs the boundaries of what can and cannot be included on the platform (Carraro). In this landscape, productions mixing podcasts with music (so-called "Shows with Music") have emerged as what Spotify describes as "a new listening experience that brings together music and spoken-word content in an easy and elegant package" (Spotify, "Spotify Launches"). Concurrently, users are invited to create and distribute user-generated content, exploring the intersections of previously separated media formats (e.g. by combining playlists with spoken-word through the application "Music+Talk"). While tracing various acquisitions, the mergers with, e.g. Anchor, Whooshkaa, and Megaphone all reflect Spotify's investments in podcast (Spotify, "Spotify Is"). The collaboration with Findaway, in turn, testifies to the platform's move into the audiobook market (Spotify, "Spotify to Acquire"), whereas the launching of "Spotify Live" (a discussion application similar to the platforms of Clubhouse and Twitter Spaces), the acquisition of "Locker Room" (a live-audio app facilitating online conversations about sports), and the materialization of "live podcasts," all demonstrate the company's exploration of "live audio" (Spotify, "Spotify Acquires").[2]

A key to Spotify's audio-first strategy is the effort to gain control and ownership of the content it distributes. One of the most central drivers of this development, as argued by several of our informants, is the platform's subscription-based business model, where the rightsholders' revenues are generated based on the total consumption (the total number of streams) on the platform. In the music industry, major record labels, publishers and (increasingly) other stakeholders are managing the most lucrative copyrights, and as traditionally popular catalogs of the music history (Bob Dylan, David Bowie, etc.) still constitute the largest proportion of streams on the platforms, we are witnessing today a tendency of financially prosperous investors to invest in music copyrights (Aune). In the long run, it is believed that these rights will continuously generate significant profits. As one informant points out, "If you own the rights to the Beatles' or Pink Floyd's catalogs, you have a steady and nice stream of income, over a long-term horizon."

As Spotify neither owns the music it distributes, nor has the finances to out-compete these investors in the battle for music copyrights, the shift toward audio works as a strategy providing Spotify with increased opportunities to gain control and ownership over supplementary audio-based formats. The podcast market, which until recently was considered somewhat fragmented and immature (Sullivan), was early identified as a free domain open for conquest – where both in-house productions and buyouts of podcast rightsholders, were considered a cheap way to acquire exclusive content – without having to negotiate trade-regulated contracts with established industry players. Our informant representing Spotify, confirms this:

> "[Unlike] the music industry, where record companies own the copyrights . . . there is no representation in the podcast industry: there are no managers, there are no record companies. With podcasts, we can therefore work directly with the creators. . . . It's like the wild west – anything is possible" (Spotify executive).

Through investments in podcasts, audiobooks, and live-audio formats, so-called "Spotify Originals" are therefore gaining more and more ground on the platform (Spotify, "Spotify Shares").[3] This is content written, produced, or owned by Spotify itself. By executing exclusive ownership, Spotify does not only save itself the cost of royalty payouts (through copyright buyouts or financially, beneficial agreements with rightsholders), but also takes control over several points of the distributional value chain of the content of which it disposes. In the same way that platforms such as Netflix or HBO have taken on the role as film and television studios, Spotify is thus becoming content producer, rightsholder, distributor, and promoter – on a platform where it facilitates visibility, administers revenues, and prepares for user consumption.

This way of controlling the market has met with strong skepticism among our informants, where the concern that Spotify will "financially and editorially" prioritize "exclusive and original content" (at the expense of independent content),[4] is particularly widespread. On the one hand, some informants point to how Spotify may end up operating in a space where the distribution of revenue becomes skewed between "originals" and the remaining portfolio of content. On the other hand, these biases can become exacerbated through Spotify's editorial control over exposure (the control over what content will be editorially or algorithmically recommended) – a plausible concern when one compares Spotify with equivalent platforms, demonstrably promoting its own originals (Talleråas et al.).[5] As this is considered to be an ongoing trend across different streaming platforms, one informant representing an artist interest organization sketches what he labels a "horror-scenario," imagining a future where creativity and artistic production are centrally controlled by a small handful of big tech companies:

> We now have a few players who set the terms for everything. . . . I think we must consider these aspects in the context of competitional law. Because the biggest players will keep getting bigger. And when these players grow, they will easily embrace their own interests and start doing everything "in-house." Finally, we might find ourselves in a horror scenario where all the books are written by Amazon, all the films are produced by Netflix and where all the [audio] is produced in Stockholm. (Artists organization representative)

Altogether, Spotify's audio-first strategy seems, however, to assure success. In 2021, its podcast revenues had increased by more than 300%, alone generating close to $200 million. Spotify estimates that podcasts will turn out to be a multibillion-dollar business in the following years. Based on this progress, the company states that they will continue to "add new format verticals" to the Spotify app in the future (Spotify, "Spotify Shares").

Music Second

Moving past podcasts, audiobooks, and live audio, the effects of Spotify's turn beyond music provides fertile ground for a number of other (somewhat obscure) forms of auditory content. These phenomena are neither marketed to the same extent as, e.g.

podcasts, nor part of Spotify's stated audio-first strategy explicitly, but phenomena gaining foothold on the platform by exploiting the economic potentials of Spotify's revenue models. In this analysis, we divide this content into "non-artistic content" and "non-musical content."

Non-artistic content defines content optimized for streaming (Morris), without identified (human) origin. For Spotify, the large number of "fake artists" symptomize this development. Without any presence outside Spotify's own ecosystem (no websites, no concerts, no promotional material), fake artists provide (somewhat) generic instrumental music, designed to slip into mood-based playlists, crafted for the uses of relaxation, concentration, meditation, or the like. A major investigation in 2017, suggested that fake artists had direct licensing agreements with Spotify, purposely aimed to save the cost of royalty payouts (Morris). In the same category, AI-music constitutes a rapidly growing "non-artistic" phenomenon on Spotify, and in East Asian markets various hologram artists are now conquering the pop-music culture (Spotify, "Avatar"). The AI-avatar Hatsune-Miku is an example of this, which through the software Vocaloid performs and composes music digitally, slowly becoming a prominent pop-cultural figure (through collaboration with artists such as Lady Gaga and Pharrell Williams) (Spotify, "Avatar"). Although these phenomena still occur outside Spotify's ecosystem, our press-coverage analysis shows how the platform is investing in AI production technology, and in 2017 Spotify hired computer researcher François Pachet to assist and develop tools for music creation based on AI technology (establishing the AI-production lab "Spotify CTRL") (Music Alley, "Benoit"; Ingram). Following the criticism leveled at fake artists, speculations concerning Spotify's aim to craft its own pool of AI avatars (composing and performing as Spotify Originals), frequently occur (Fergus). Through their non-human nature, AI music producers might thus arise as cultural creators without legal rights to royalties, potentially downgrading the importance of human presence in music in the long run.[6]

Non-musical content is a related phenomenon. Today, large selections of tracks, which do not contain tones, melodies, rhythms, or any other musical features, occupy large parts of Spotify's playlists. Coming in various forms of white noise, nature sounds, or even silence, these tracks serve as "soothing soundscapes" that gather millions of streams and consequently massive shares of Spotify's pro-rata-based royalty payouts (Eriksson et al.; Morris). Although most of these phenomena are not part of Spotify's stated audio strategies, we find examples of the platform promoting "non-music" on newsroom.spotify.com. For example, Spotify is highlighting different "sleep" and "meditation" playlists consisting of various atmospheric natural sounds and other sonic content (such as rippling waves, crackling fireplaces or howling winds). The related phenomenon ASMR (autonomic sensory meridian-response) is also promoted in Spotify's press releases (Spotify, "ASMR's Soft Sounds"). This is a growing genre in Spotify's universe, described as "relaxing braingasms" that follow when a voice intimately whispers in the listener's ear or when the listener hears the sound of paper curling, coins ringing, or bubble wrap popping.

Several of the challenges associated with the audio-first strategy are also relevant to the controversy surrounding this content. In our interview data, these phenomena are referred to as "royalty-free music," being described in speculative terms as methods for saving the cost of royalty payouts. Although Spotify over the years has repeatedly

dismissed the allegations concerning fake artists (Morris), Swedish media breathed life into these speculations again, in the spring of 2022. While detecting a total of 830 fake artists associated with the Swedish record company Firefly, the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* found 20 songwriters composing music for 500 artists alone (attracting 7.7 million listeners per month) (Talseth). While claiming that key people in Firefly's management have close ties to well-known Spotify executives, they ultimately claimed to reveal how Spotify specifically hires songwriters to produce instrumental music for its Chillout playlists.

Our interview data confirm that there are strong suspicions among the industry players that these practices are widespread within Spotify. One informant working within a global music distribution company went as far as to say that royalty-free content is among the biggest challenges the industry faces:

> I think the music industry's biggest competitor is other use of audio on the services. This can be sound effects like "rainforest," "thunderstorm" and other such things, which get an extremely huge number of streams. This is content that is very cheap to produce, easy to publish . . . and that ultimately steals shares from the music. People like to put these effects in the background when they sleep, or it gets played at a massage parlor 15 hours a day. (Record company representative, 14 January 2020)

One must be careful not to assume that these practices are signs verifying Spotify's move toward ownership and control, as far as these speculations are merely unconfirmed rumors. Our press coverage analysis, however, reveals that this is a much-discussed controversy throughout the industry (and the public eye in general). Representing more or less the same challenges, the investments in AI-music was, on the other hand, altogether less discussed in our data. Although this practice has not yet gained a foothold in the market, as the attempts being launched have been largely written off as a "threat to authenticity" (Modugno), several of the informants believe it is only a matter of time before this practice establishes itself in the market:

> I think it's only a matter of years before the technology becomes good enough. And when Spotify or Google then can push 20 million AI works into their catalogs, and there's not a single copyright holder left, then they have ruined the livelihood and income-base for many, many composers. (Copyright organization representative).

Altogether, the vast majority of our informants expressed distrust of the system and business models of Spotify, as the subscription-based solutions that favor quantity, are facilitating for manipulation and economic optimalization of the platform's logic (Morris). We must mention, however, that much of this criticism is directed at practices established outside Spotify, including click farms selling streams through fake accounts, or services such as Epidemic Sounds, operating in a similar manner to "fake artists" (basing their model on buying out copyrights for music optimized for contexts and moods) (Music Alley, "Epidemic"). As several of these activities maneuver in gray areas in terms of legality, one might question the extent to which the "ghost of piracy" continues to haunt the music industry.[7]

Video Next?

Spotify's audio-first strategy demonstrates the platform's imperative investments in developing the audio formats of the future. The controversies surrounding patterns of platform manipulation, on the other hand, add to the (eventually quite long) series of cases involving platform ethics and accountability, in general (Steen). Altogether, these strategies testify to Spotify's very strategy of putting audio-based media-formats, in every shape possible, *first*. Through our analysis, however, several paths of expansion emerge. Paths that lead us to question whether video is becoming the *next thing*, as different launches of new platform tools, acquisitions, and collaborations with players of both the film, television, and sport industries, are increasingly taking place.

This presumed audiovisual turn is asserting itself in several ways. One could, for example, say that the platform's exploration of virtual concerts during the pandemic was an expression of this development (an experiment culminating in a corona concert series during the summer of 2021, involving headliners such as the Black Keys, Leon Bridges, and Girl in Red) (Spotify, "Must See"). Furthermore, the platform's debut of music videos in 2018 (as Calvin Harris and Dua Lipa's song "One Kiss" was exclusively promoted on Spotify), and the launching of Spotify Canvas (the short video loops played alongside various tracks as "music visualizations"), are both examples indicating an aim to tap into the domain of audiovisual streaming – an expansion that, following these examples, might actually help to strengthen the platform's foundational focus on the product of music.

However, one could also say that the rollout of "vodcasts" represents this turn (Spotify, "Listen"). *Vodcast* is an abbreviation for "video-on-demand cast" and embodies, in the simplest terms, a video version of a podcast. Although still operating as somewhat simple measures for visualizing audio (often through single-camera, low-budget productions), more and more producers are developing this format in the direction of what we may recognize as traditional talk shows, and other known film and television genres (ultimately suggesting how Spotify is moving into video streaming, offering original shows and TV productions). A sidetrack of this development is also observed through the platform's collaborations with film and television players such as Netflix, HBO, and Chernin Entertainment, whereas the platform is increasingly opening up to parallel solutions involving music, podcasts, film, and television (e.g. through adaptations of Spotify Original podcasts) (Spotify, "Spotify and Chernin").[8] While this has not dominated Spotify's platform yet, these developments – extending the audio-first strategy – raises questions of whether Spotify ultimately is targeting a more general media and entertainment market.

While Spotify's audio(visual) turn must be considered a response to industrial demands for growth, it is, however, a strategy countering the challenges the music streaming market has combatted in regard to "platform parity" (Hracs and Webster), whereas the act of differentiating, specializing, and competing in aspects beyond that of content, price, or functionality, has posed a key-challenge. For Spotify, this compelling competition is also dictated by rival tech companies which in their base of business are "multi-purpose." Apple derives most of its revenue from hardware sales (iPhones, iPads, Macbooks); Amazon distributes and sells an abundance of products (books, movies, sports, groceries, etc.), while Google and Meta, with its colossal impact, annex to such diverse domains of online life that dedicated niche-platforms strive to compete.

Moreover, Spotify depends on these companies as their main application is offered through products and services such as smartphones and online app stores.[9]

Through this lens, Spotify's strategies might be considered plausible. As competitors draw revenue from elsewhere, subscription fees are pushed down to a level that, in the end, challenges Spotify's foundation to generate dividends (a tendency one of our informants labels "the race to the bottom"). As long as Spotify remains the biggest player in music streaming, however, actors of the music industry are at the mercy of Spotify's movements. As of 2023 Spotify still experiences growing audience traction. Thus, the costs of not being present on the platform becomes increasingly harder. For our informants, the conjunction of Spotify's expansion, and the so far static subscription fees (of approximately $10 per month) thus foster concerns about diminishing market shares for the music industry. The expansion of content represents, first and foremost, a strategy enabling Spotify ownership and a way of saving the platform the cost of royalty payouts, whereas Spotify's income grows through audiences increased use of "Spotify Originals." One informant states the following: "The fact that a listener spends half his day listening to podcasts, instead of music, has a negative impact on the amount of music to which he listens." Consequently, it is problematic that Spotify puts – as another informant states – "everything else in the $10-subscription" – where the same pot, the same subscription fees, generated by the same users, will eventually be distributed over a multitude of formats, industries, and rightsholders. One informant, representing an artist interests' organization, says the following:

> If you dilute the service by putting a lot of other things in it, without increasing the price, then there will probably be less money for music. . . . To put it bluntly: [Other content] is taking a big part of a cake that, unfortunately, is not getting any bigger. Spotify has not increased the price even though it has put new services and more content in on its platform. Finally, one might ask: What happens the day Spotify puts a TV-series or a movie on its platform as well? (Artists organization representative)

These statements testify to a concern and uncertainty about how the platform will develop. All the changes, all the twists and turns we describe in this article, that have come to characterize the development of music streaming, have made music industry players find it unpredictable to maneuver in the market. One informant representing a major record-label puts it this way: "Our competitor is *everything other than music* that may enter their universe. And I see it coming: Spotify is going to be an entertainment-platform. The question is: How do we equip ourselves then, as music-providers?" (Record company representative. 22 October 2019).

Ultimately, Spotify's audio(visual) turn should be seen in the context of a total struggle for audience time and attention – a struggle which the research literature calls the "attention economy" (Davenport and Beck). Within the framework of a larger platform-ecology, there is thus consensus among our informants that the competitors of music exist in all possible aspects of both on- and off-line life. One informant simply states, "We know we are competing for people's time – and we get paid for the time they spend on music."

Discussion:

Dimensions of Spotify

Our analysis illustrates the evolving phenomenon of streaming and the developing strategies of platform companies, as suggested in the platformization literature (Nieborg and Poell). In the theory section, we presented Spilker and Colbjørnsen's "dimensions of streaming," as constituting the most important continuums within which streaming platforms operate. We will now discuss our findings in the light of this framework.

In the dimension spanning the continuum of *professional to user-generated content*, Spotify's investments in exclusive content coincides with what Spilker and Colbjørnsen describe as a general movement toward professionalization of the entire streaming market. For Spotify, this movement constitutes an abrupt change of direction. From its origin as a somewhat "sealed platform," exclusively distributing professionally produced music through agreements with well-established record labels, Spotify actually represented a countercurrent of this development throughout the 2010s, as the platforms started integrating more and more user-generated content, by gradually lowering the thresholds for uploading amateur music (Eriksson et. al.). The introduction of Spotify Originals (as well as the permitting of "royalty-free content") thus represents a contrary focus where larger, exclusive "Spotify brands" are getting pushed into the foreground, highlighted as premium flagbearers of the platform. In our analysis, this development feature points to the challenges "other, independent content" may face in the years to come, as Spotify will be left with greater profits by promoting and boosting its originals.

When it comes to the second dimension, *legal vs. piracy streaming*, the rise of royalty-free content (and especially the fake artist controversy) provides fertile ground for discussing degrees of legality, on the platform. Whereas the purchase of fake streams, the practice of click farms or other, inexorable manipulation cases constitute explicitly illegal practices, it is imprecise to argue that Spotify's alleged practices of buying out copyrights or hiring music producers should be considered illegal. Preparing for in-house production is, as discussed above, an increasingly common practice across all streaming markets, that – at best – delineate the potential to contest global and powerful production studios and record labels. Looking at the growing presence of royalty-free music and the upheaval of fake artists, however, we believe that several of Spotify's alleged practices must be considered questionable in terms of platform accountability and ethics (Steen). When we consider big tech in general, these tendencies resonate with previous arguments proposed by, e.g. Jakobsson and Stiernstedt or Spilker that portray the mega-ventures of Silicon Valley (Google, YouTube, Meta) as "the real pirates" of the web, which through the pressuring of established media industries to negotiate new copyright agreements, have gained power and legitimacy by "moving the boarders of legality" (Spilker and Colbjørnsen). Spotify is, in turn, known for its motley entry into the music industry, and its once close ties to the illegal file-sharing site Pirate Bay (Fleischer). Altogether, our analysis thus reflects Spilker and Colbjørnsen's conclusion that piracy will, in new and innovative ways, continue to be involved in the shaping of music streaming in the years to come.

Regarding the third dimension, *on-demand vs. live streaming*, Spilker and Colbjørnsen note that, since around 2015, we have seen a "revival" of live modes of distributing and

consuming media. Where Spilker and Colbjørnsen link this dimension specifically to TV-streaming (and the discussion surrounding the "death," or rather the "resilience" of linear TV), Spotify is an interesting case as the aforementioned experimentation with live-streaming concerts and the development of discussion applications such as Spotify Live, gradually attracts attention. This trend demonstrates how live streaming possesses key affordances (actuality, presence, sociability) that on-demand streaming strives to outcompete. For Spotify, Spotify Live is now integrated into the platform's main app, coinciding with a steadily rising popularity of live podcasts, whereas the potentials of live-streaming concerts are increasingly linked to (and launched as a possible response to) challenges related to touring and climate-damaging CO_2 emissions, within the live sector of the music industry. In total, these trends thus demonstrate the rising importance of *live*, within contemporary streaming platform strategies.

On the fourth dimension, *niche vs. general audience targeting*, our analysis shows that Spotify – by radically expanding its offerings – is increasingly targeting a wider audience, at the intersection of audio and visually based media. As Spilker and Colbjørnsen denote, there is a general drive for most commercial services to expand and reach as wide an audience as possible over time, in the same way that most services test new features and functionalities – in order to innovate, grow and develop the platform's field of impact. Spotify's point of departure was somewhere in-between the niche and the general: The popular music field is itself made up of a mainstream audience, gathered by a "general" group of people enjoying the big hits of contemporary, Western culture. At the same time, Spotify has over the years turned to a niche in the marketplace dedicated to music and devoted pop-fans (unlike, e.g. YouTube which has operated in several markets simultaneously). By including podcasts, audiobooks, and other audiovisual content, the platform thus targets the sections of the population that do not follow music as closely as the typical Spotify listener – thus entering a more general entertainment market.

Finally, regarding the fifth dimension, *streaming on specialized vs. multi-purpose-platforms*, Spilker and Colbjørnsen describe what they call an "imperative" of successful platforms to (more or less uncritically) add new features and functionalities, over time. For our study, this coincides with Spotify's expansions into the audio(visual) territory. As the platform operates in an exhausted music streaming market, where all the leading players offer (somewhat) the same product, the limits of differentiation have been (to some extent) reached. In a larger platform ecology, one can thus argue that the competitive, industrial divides between different streaming markets (be it music, audio, or visual streaming) are slowly being erased. Today, various platforms, belonging to previously separated cultural domains, are becoming competitors in an increasingly intensified "attention economy," as they gradually operate within the same territories. Meta's recent video-streaming investments, Instagram's explorations of live-streaming events, and Spotify's audio(visual) turn can all be seen as manifestations of this.

Auxiliary Services: The Fourth Phase of Music Streaming

In total, Spotify's audiovisual turn constitutes what we argue is the beginning of the fourth phase of music streaming, or as we call it, *the auxiliary services phase*. As a multipurpose platform, Spotify expands its domain to embrace audiovisual media in general, whereas the act of taking control and exclusive ownership of the content it

distributes, forms a key strategy for developing into new territories, innovating new revenue streams, and differentiating its own product from rival platforms. Although we concentrate on the case of Spotify, these developments are also visible among competing services, as well as in the broader ecology of online platforms – be it streaming or social media. While gradually moving into the music streaming market, Apple, Google, Meta, and Amazon are at core multipurpose, whereas niche platforms such as Tidal, Pandora, or Bandcamp are all exploring the potentials of podcasts, spoken word, and audiovisual live streaming. Altogether, these movements account for what we consider to be the developing strategic patterns of platform-based music streaming, answering the first part of our two-folded research question.

Responding to industrial demands for growth (Gillespie, *Custodians*), Spotify's expansions (merging companies, acquiring businesses, buying market shares) illustrate, on the one hand, well-known strategic movements of the platform strategy literature (Parker and Van Alstyne) about innovating and bundling services, approaching new target-groups, while intruding into new markets in order to maintain competitive advantage. Echoing the critical conceptualizations of platform colonialism and power (Van Dijck et al.), Spotify's stated goal of annexing and gaining market and cultural dominance, throughout the space of online audio (and beyond), thus manifests a vision of controlling a larger and more comprehensive domain of online life: *the online audio space*. Spotify's prospects of involving in video-based streaming expands these motives even further. On the other hand, Spotify's recent turn testifies to a company (and an industry) that is in constant motion. As a general feature of the platform ecology, the companies involved are continually forced to look for undiscovered spaces to conquer, for novel ways of generating revenue, and to innovate strategies for attracting users – as their business models are constantly being reinvented (and re-innovated) in order to stimulate growth. For music streaming actors, it is easy to understand why these directions are staked out. We began our article by problematizing the parity of music streaming actors (Hracs and Webster), where the drive to innovate, develop, and locate competitive advantages between the services has constituted a constant challenge, throughout the history of music streaming. From the open-access phase, via social and algorithmic streaming, the auxiliary streaming phase thus constitutes a step further in the ongoing ecology of platform competition.

Our second research question was, however, *What consequences does this turn have for music industry stakeholders*? Our findings indicate that Spotify's expansions pose significant concerns for artists, record labels, and other music rightsholders. Although paving the way for content innovation (e.g. through the inclusion of the live-music sector and the prospects of live-streaming concerts), the ways in which Spotify takes ownership of exclusive content (and thus a greater control over the distributional value chain) raises questions of what role "other, independent" content will play in the future of the platform. The informants' concerns related to biased exposure reflect this, in particular, with the proposed "horror scenario" (and the worry related to how creative production are becoming centrally controlled by a small handful of global tech companies) raising questions about whether alternative content – that does not respond to the dominating platforms' inherent, commercial logics – ends up being deprioritized. Moreover, fake artists and royalty-free content are seen as an additional, growing threat as are exponents with an earning potential located outside of the music industry. Overall,

the expansion of Spotify's offerings, in conjunction with ever static subscription fees, is thus considered a threat to the music industry's market share as a whole.

As earlier in the music and media history, new conflicts between the stakeholders involved ascend in the phase of auxiliary streaming. While the representatives of the music industry worry about diminishing market shares, Spotify itself moves into territories populated by new competitors, potentially disrupting the intermediate structure of other neighboring industries (e.g. the radio, film, television, press, or book industries). As a result of Spotify's growing global presence, however, actors of the music industry more specifically depend on being present on the platform, even if declining incomes and failing living conditions (especially for independent actors) seem to characterize everyday life. There may be a hope, however, that the streaming industry's lack of sustainable distribution offers could open new possibilities for dedicated niche platforms, with a greater economic and editorial focus on music, filling in a seemingly abandoned position in the music world: the dedicated space for online music.

The contribution of this article has been to scrutinize critically the strategic developments of the streaming platform Spotify, and to identify the consequences these developments pose for the stakeholders involved (particularly emphasizing actors of the music industry). An important task for further research will thus be to trace the ways in which these consequences materialize: What role will music actually play in the future of Spotify? Moreover, there will be a need to study how streaming platforms (and more generally, the music industry) will adapt to new trends in online content distribution, of which new sets of logics (such as in the rapidly evolving Web 3.0) could be replacing the platform as the bearing infrastructure of online life. However, what seems certain is that the ever-changing dynamics of streaming and online content distribution will continue to bring headaches and sleepless nights for the parties involved. So, to paraphrase the old hit of the Beastie Boys, for the music industry, there will be no sleep till Stockholm. Or beyond.

Notes

1. The theoretical framework (the *phases* and *dimensions* of music streaming) follows two studies recently provided by Hendrik Spilker, one of this article's coauthors (Maasø and Spilker; Spilker and Colbjørnsen).
2. Spotify has made several moves toward the audiobook market, including a propositioned collaboration with the Swedish audiobook service Storytel and through the launching of various exclusive re-readings of literary classics such as *Frankenstein, Harry Potter*, etc. (Spotify, "Stars").
3. Spotify has also promoted a number of original music recordings through "Spotify studios," resulting in different, exclusive music series produced by in-house-producers (e.g. "Spotify Singles," "Studio It's Hits," "Studio Oysters," etc.) (Spotify, "Spotify Singles").
4. Here, we use the term "independent" to denote all content that is not owned or covered under exclusive agreements with Spotify.
5. Reportedly, Spotify Originals account for 6 of the 10 most streamed podcasts on Spotify (Spotify, "Spotify Shares").
6. A debate on copyright in AI-generated music is gradually developing, as this music is largely dependent on input from existing, human-made music.
7. Additionally, Spotify sells music exposure. Rightsholders are now able to both buy pop-up ads on the platform (to promote new releases), and to waive off royalties in exchange for exposure on Spotify playlists (Ebbesen). Such practices can be compared to previous gray-zone violations riding the industry, such as payola (referring to the illegal practice of record companies bribing radio stations to play their music).

8. For example, the collaboration with Chernin involves producing TV adaptations of Spotify Originals. This agreement includes 250 Spotify Original podcasts to be further developed in collaboration with players such as Pineapple Media, Amazon, and HBO (Spotify, "Spotify and Chernin").
9. In our data, Spotify's ongoing conflict with Apple is significantly covered, revolving around Apple's demands of a tax from Spotify, as the Spotify app is made available through Apple's app store (Spotify, "Consumers").

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Personalized Recommendations and Music Diversity – An Impossible Combination?

Håvard Kiberg

This is an English version of the article "Personaliserte anbefalinger og musikalsk mangfold – en umulig kombinasjon?" which was published originally in Norwegian language, in the Norwegian Journal Norsk medietidsskrift ("The Norwegian Media Journal") in 2020.

Abstract

Algorithmic curation of content has become ubiquitous features of music streaming services. From a time when record stores, music critics and other gatekeepers exercised a form of agenda-setting power, which to some extent stimulated (or inspired) specific patterns of buying and using music; automated recommendation systems, which track and measure listeners' behavior, have become the standard for organizing and making music visible. At the same time, increasingly more questions are being asked about the effects these recommendation systems have on music culture – whereas different analyses pointing towards homogenization and the loss of aesthetic diversity, have increasingly dominated academic literature. Structured around five keywords – visualization, curation, personalization, homogenization, and professionalization – this article thus discusses how today's music streaming services is believed to correspond to a cultural-policy ideal of «aesthetic expression diversity». The article is based on 11 qualitative interviews with decision-makers in the Norwegian music industry.

Introduction

Algorithmic recommendation has become a ubiquitous feature of music streaming services. From a time when record stores, music critics and other well-established gatekeepers exercised a sense agenda-setting power – which to some extent stimulated or inspired certain patterns of music consumption – automated recommendation systems, tracking and measuring listener behavior, have become standard for the organization and visualization of music. Roughly speaking, this is useful: Spotify receives 280,000[1] songs weekly, which creates an information overload subscribers need help to navigate.

Subsequently, audience's attention today acts as a commodity in a market where time is a limited resource large, global companies compete over. Hence, the abundance of content has produced an "attention economy" (Davenport & Beck, 2001), where the aim of the streaming services is to hold on to the users' attention for as long as possible. Personalized recommendation of content has thus emerged as a plausible and useful

[1] As of April 2019, Spotify receives 40,000 songs daily, 280,000 songs weekly, 1.2 million songs monthly and approximately 14.6 million songs annually. See Music Business Worldwide (accessed 20 May 2020): (https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/nearly-40000-tracks-are-now-being-added-to-spotify-every-single-day/)

strategy, where detailed information about the user and its personal preferences, tailor's the user experience (Wolf, 2016; Kitchin, 2017; Snickars, 2017). Simultaneously, increasingly more questions are being raised regarding the effects these recommendation systems have on music culture and analyzes that point towards homogenization and loss of diversity have increasingly come to dominate academic literature, in recent years (Mulligan, 2014; Maasø, 2016; Snickars, 2017; Wikström, Moreau & Borreau 2018).

Ideas about diversity and inclusion, however, increasingly form part of social and cultural policy objectives for society. As part of our everyday language, diversity is promoted as a kind of difference – often understood as something positive – which is given varying meanings according to changing contexts and purposes (Wrench, 2008; Berg & Håpnes, 2001). In music, one can e.g., talk about diversity in a demographic perspective, where one seeks heterogenous compositions of genders, age, ethnicity, etc. –both among the creators and among the audiences. On the other hand, music diversity can also refer to the form and content of the music – regarding artistic expressions, styles, and genres – a dimension described as an "aesthetic expression diversity" by the research project "Digitization and Diversity" (see e.g., Gran et al., 2019). Terms of music and diversity are therefore often considered to be a matter of cultural policy, where various regulations and provisions intended to remedy genres or musical expressions that experience failure in commercial markets, are implemented to ensure society the widest possible offer (Eidsvold-Tøien et al., 2019, p. 124). In Norway, the authorities thus aim to facilitate "production, dissemination and demand for various musical expressions" (see Government of Solberg, 2017, p. 55), and therefore supports both large and small music industry players financially, through targeted grants and scholarship schemes.

Today, actors within the music industry must deal with algorithmic, personalized recommendation of music, when they produce, distribute and market their products towards online platforms and streaming services. Through 11 qualitative interviews, this article thus investigates perceptions and experiences with algorithmic recommendations of music, that exist in the Norwegian music industry – including actors representing streaming services, record companies, publishers, distributors, interest organizations, and rights managers. Starting from a cultural policy ideal of an "aesthetically expression diversity", the article approaches music streaming through five keywords – visibility, curation, personalization, homogenization, and professionalization – which each relate to these actors' experiences with the relationship between algorithmic recommendation and the general visibility of genre breadth and diversity in music culture. Thus, the article addresses the following research question: **To what extent are streaming services perceived to correspond to a cultural policy ideal of aesthetic expression diversity, among Norwegian music industry players?**

Initially, the article will present a systematic and theoretical review of the aforementioned keywords, before a methodological account takes place. This also includes a brief discussion regarding the study's reflexivity and the ethical limitations of using identified elite sources in research. Furthermore, the keywords are put in context with empirical findings and analysis. In addition to being a descriptive account of the Norwegian music industry's experiences with algorithmic recommendation – and how this relates to the overall ideal of aesthetically expression diversity – I argue that

streaming services contribute to professionalizing the music industry rather than democratizing it, as has been argued earlier. I argue that today's increased pressure of information has created a stricter demand for resources and technical competence which lies on the side of musicians and artists' most important tasks as creators and performers of music.

Theoretical framework

In step with the emergence of platform-based music streaming, music culture has increasingly delegated the sorting, classification and hierarchization of music to algorithms. In parallel, academic interest in how algorithms facilitate the visibility of cultural content has emerged, promoting theoretical concepts such as "algorithmic culture" (Striphas, 2015), "algorithmic visibility" (Bucher, 2012; 2018), "algorithmic relevance" (Gillespie, 2014) or "algorithmic accountability" (Diakopouplos, 2015), and more. Regarding music streaming, there has been a particular interest in how different playlists, charts, radio functions and other presentation surfaces are made visible to the audiences. In this article, I identify five keywords that each have been significant in the discourse surrounding algorithmic filtering of music – namely, visibility, curation, personalization, homogenization, and professionalization.

Visibility

As stated by Bucher (2012), "one of the core functions of the media pertains to that of making something or someone *visible*." So is the case with a music streaming service. By deciding on what should and should not be seen, between who can and cannot see who, algorithmic streaming services help "configuring the visible" (ibid). Just as with different quantifiable measures – such as "clicks" or "likes" – which drives the agenda in social media or other online news platforms, "streams" catalyze the visibility on music streaming services. In that sense, algorithmic music culture, pertains to a game of power where technological and architectural infrastructures play a decisive role in determining what kind of content that is promoted and what is not (ibid).

The experiences of how algorithms play a role in making music and genre diversity visible is, however, ambivalent. The report "What Now?" (Eidsvold-Tøien et al., 2019, p. 11) finds that Norwegian artists, on the one hand, appreciates how the greater availability of music on online streaming platforms expands the diversity of music, in itself. The perception of what is promoted and made visible is, on the other hand, considered as being too narrow (ibid). The visualizing of music thus relates to what Tallerås et al. (2019) labels "relative availability" (see the term "contingent availability" in a different but related article, Colbjørnsen et al., 2021), meaning that although you have basic access to *everything*, the surfaces for what is made visible are clearly limited. Thus, the algorithmically driven visibility in the music streaming services points to a phenomenon that is increasingly making itself known, "never have we been able to listen to such a broad range of music, while the proportion of people listening to the same music is growing" (Eidsvold-Tøien et al., 2019, p. 8. See also Maasø & Spilker, 2022).

Curation

In that sense, visibility can concern the ways streaming services sort, filter, and present their vast catalogs of music to the audiences. The quality of streaming services as providers of music recommendations has therefore gained increased academic interest, in recent years (Chodos, 2020; Snickars, 2017; Seaver, 2019). The streaming service's turn from being (in its purest form) an open distribution platform of cultural content, to becoming a recommendation machine – offering audiences guidance and direction – represents a so-called "curatorial turn" (Eriksson, et al., 2019; Chodos, 2020), which helps the audiences putting "the world in order" and relieving us from "the burden of choice" (see Maasø, 2016; Kiberg, 2018).

In today's music streaming services, different strategies are thus used to curate the content of the catalogs they manage. Both what we call algorithmic and editorial recommendation systems characterize services such as Spotify, Tidal and Apple Music. These systems can come in the form of playlists, radio functions, rows of new releases, or "auto complete" in search engines – and are either generated by an algorithm or put together by an editor. In that sense, streaming services exercise a form of agenda-setting power (Kiberg, 2018). With a legitimacy founded on aggregate user activity, they report in real time on what is most played, liked, popular, etc. Often, these algorithmic and mechanical ways of driving automated recommendations is contrasted with more human-driven, editorial recommendations, which are often understood as more authentic and knowledge-based (ibid).

Personalization

Bucher (2012) points out that “examining new modalities of visibility becomes a question of how rather than what is made visible.” Today, the most widespread ways of algorithmically curating content increasingly relate to various personalization strategies. Personalization is a curatorial way of tailoring the presented content to each individual user. For example, a playlist such as Spotify's "Discover Weekly" can process a user's individual taste profile, both through the tracking of usage history, and through enormous semantic and sonic analyzes of online music content (Morris, 2015). Spotify reportedly uses a type of acoustic analysis software to classify music based on various sonic factors. For example, the algorithm takes into account the song’s key, tempo and more culturally abstract categories such as “danceability” or the extent to which the song is suitable for a “workout” or a “party” (Prey, 2018). This is paired with an identification of keywords and *tags* from blogs, music reviews and other web-related content, which can, in one way or another, say something about the artist's genre, style or form. This collection of contextual information enables the services to suggest links and associations between songs and artists, personalized to each individual user.

However, the ways in which such services personalize has been met with criticism, particularly regarding its effects on terms like the diversity of aesthetic expression. Among the most alarming is the idea that personalization creates “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011). This refers to a state of intellectual isolation that occurs when algorithms filter and highlight content based solely on usage history. Instead of being presented with a breadth of genres and styles, one gets “more of the same" (Snickars,

2017). Pariser (2011) claims that there are a number of unintended consequences of ending up in a filter bubble, where in particular the limited exchange of ideas, perspectives and content that deviates from one's own preferences, in the worst case, acts as a threat to democracy (see Bozdag, 2013; Gillespie, 2016; Pariser, 2011) or ends up creating devaluing effects on cultural production (Wolf, 2016).

Homogenization

These keywords – visibility, curation, and personalization – and especially the idea that streaming services holds the potential to develop filter bubbles, points to the notion of that the abundance of information we are facing actually manifests as an information poverty. This idea is not new. Herbert Simon already wrote in 1971 about how information consumes the public's attention and how a high pressure of information produces "a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it" (Simon, 1971). In such a perspective, the streaming services represent a paradox, where the limitless possibilities in their enormous catalogs result in forms of concentration and homogenization (see more about "The streaming paradox" in Maasø & Spilker, 2022). This is also visible in other curatorial playlists, which are not based on personalization strategies, but rather create quantitative measures of what is collectively the most popular content in the service. Such “trending lists” can be seen as extensions of traditional hit charts, which have also taken part in music culture in what we can call a pre-algorithmic era. Gillespie (2016) refers to these as "barometers of public's interests", which, through carefully designed measurements, holds the potential to capture, direct, or nudge users toward certain directions (see also Maasø & Spilker, 2022).

Alongside claims regarding filter bubbles, some researchers are therefore pointing towards what has been called a cumulative homogenization of content, which is based on a theory of that algorithms construct self-reinforcing effects – where increased exposure breeds use and vice versa. On the one hand, Maasø (2016) has linked this to the idea of so-called “Matthew effects”, where popular songs that reaches a certain streaming threshold are given cumulative advantages that push them up the charts. Wolf (2016) and Arola (2010), on the other hand, have expressed concerns about how cultural content might end up being “disciplined” through subtle dictates of what fits within the “templates” of the given platforms. The way e.g., shorter songs today gain ground in the music streaming services – simply because they can be played more often than lengthier songs – is one such example. These effects can be considered problematic, especially when it comes to niche-based music that does not adapt to mainstream listening practices in the same way (Wikström, 2013, p. 67).

Professionalization

Basically, the digitalization of the music industry has given a wider range of artists and players of the music industry, the opportunity to distribute music. Today's market is thus characterized by the fact that, in theory, there is no lower threshold for sharing the content you have produced. In traditional media, which were characterized by capacity and technical limitations, visibility was therefore a scarce resource in itself. With

streaming services, which do not face the same limitations, the availability to market oneself is theoretically unlimited. This has led to an idea that the music industry is "democratized", where record companies' (and other players') control over what is sold and made visible has been replaced by consumers and their interconnected interactivity. Among others, Wikström's (2013) description of the new digital music economy has pointed to how the industry has gone from a state where established and professional industry players controlled the music market, to becoming a culture of "connectivity," where there are expanded distribution opportunities for non-professional artists (pp. 5-6).

In this way, the availability to distribute one's own music, without a professional intermediary, has created a larger amateur segment in the field. However, Wikström (2013, p. 126) also points to how the music companies has intensified and adjusted their marketing budgets in recent years – which may point towards a professionalization of the industry, where those with the most resources and technical expertise are those who are best able to cut through the noise. Consequently, the idea of the democratized music economy is increasingly referred to as a "myth" among researchers (Lilleslåtten, 2020).

Method

This article aims to describe how Norwegian music industry actors talk about algorithmic recommendation in streaming services and builds empirically on 11 qualitative in-depth interviews with actors from record companies, distribution companies, streaming platforms, interest organizations and music publishers. Only one interview, conducted with a representative of the Swedish streaming service Spotify (Johan Seidefors, head of content), is not to be considered uniquely Norwegian – but as an interview with an actor with a weighty role in the Norwegian music market. All the informants have been strategically selected and represent experience and practical professional knowledge through years of involvement from various roles and positions within the music industry.

The interviews were conducted in the period October 2019–March 2020 and are between 50-90 minutes long. With a semi-structured starting point, the interviews touched on several streaming-related topics related to the informants' experiences with making content visible, through both editorial and algorithmic recommendation systems.

#	NAME	GENDER	AGE	PLACE	ROLE	ORGANIZATION	COMPANY TYPE
1	Larry Bringsjord	Male	60	Oslo	Chair	Fono	Interest organization
2	Herman Foss	Male	49	Oslo	Advisor	Tono	Copyright organization
3	Kerstin Mangert	Female	54	Oslo	General Manager	Arctic Rights	Publisher
4	Live McKay	Female	33	Oslo	Commercial Director	Universal Music	Record company
5	Inger Elise Mey	Female	50	Oslo	Assistant Director	Tono	Copyright organization
6	Lena Midtveit	Female	49	Oslo	Senior Manager	IFPI Norway	Interest organization
7	Marius Øvrebø-Engmoen	Male	43	Oslo	Managing Director	GramArt	Interest organization
8	Hans Ole Rian	Male	51	Oslo	Head of Union	Creo	Interest organization
9	Sveinung Rindal	Male	43	Oslo	Country Manager	The Orchard	Agency
10	Johan Seidefors	Male	45	Stockholm	Head of Content	Spotify	Streaming platform
11	Marte Thorsby	Female	47	Oslo	Managing Director	IFPI Norway	Interest organization

Table 1: The Participants*: An overview over the participants of the study.*

Such an interview study will always have some ethical, epistemological, and reflexive limitations. On one hand, none of the actors are neutral. They are all strategic decision-makers, who may need to justify their decisions and opinions in different ways – especially regarding issues that deal with different values or, in this matter, cultural policy attitudes. This also concerns the role of the actors in the industry and which ideals they usually advocate. The sample of participants – which includes a wide range of actors from global and powerful companies (Spotify, Universal, Sony) to more local, opinion-leading interest organizations (Fono, Creo, Gramart) – will at all times be characterized by the cultural policy and value-based positions defended by the companies and organizations they represent. On the other hand, the interview situation and the analysis will also be characterized by the viewpoints that I, as a researcher, may bring with me. The implications of using identified, named interviewees mean that I thus run the risk of becoming too dependent on my sources, allowing myself to be shaped by their interests – ultimately ending up being too cautious or uncritical. With an anthropological distance to the research objects, where I have primarily from the outside observed the field in question, this article, however, seeks, to convey how music industry actors can interpret the world. It shows one side of a truth that will always be much larger and more complex than one article can account for.

Findings and analysis

This analysis will primarily present what the music industry refers to as the biggest opportunities and challenges with algorithmic recommendations. This will involve a descriptive account of how the actors experience working with music streaming, in the year of 2020. In light of the different roles the informants exercise, and hence the different interests they represent, I will discuss the following: How **visibility** relates to a cultural game of power, managed by the architectural and technical structures of the streaming services; how **curation** or a curatorial turn represented by the streaming services help to shape both cultural production and distribution; how **personalization** both provides room to adapt content (through new, unconventional parameters and

target groups), while at the same time running the risk of constructing intellectual isolation or filter bubbles; how signs of **homogenization** in music streaming makes niches and narrower content experience failure in today's market; and how an increased **professionalization** of the field points towards a reassessment of the widespread idea of a democratized streaming economy.

Visibility

In principle, online music distribution holds a theoretically equal and unlimited potential for "everyone" to become visible. Compared to music media of the past, the inherent advantage of streaming services is that there are no technical limitations to the storage or distribution – one can get on-demand access to anything, at any time. In a way, this strengthens the aesthetically expression diversity in itself. With all music available, on one and the same platform, all forms – all styles and genres – are also likely to be represented.

This matches the cultural policy ideals outlined at the beginning. Tallerås et al. (2019) state that "access to culture is a fundamental prerequisite for democratic societies" (authors translation) and that the Norway society holds to "a heavily subsidized media sector, whose privileges are balanced against obligations on content diversity, quality and access for all" (ibid). This is also reflected in the marketing discourses of the music streaming services themselves, when they e.g., proclaim how they offer access to anything, anywhere, anytime – marketing their services as catalogs without any restrictions (ibid). In parallel, the Spotify representative and actors from the major record companies in this study, highlight this unlimtied access as a democratic strength:

> Record stores had a limited surface: they presented what they knew would sell the most (…) We have made it easier for all creators and artists to both create and publish music themselves, in a way that enables the public to find, discover and listen to it (Johan Seidefors, Head of Content, Spotify, 17.01.2020).

> Record companies cannot be gatekeepers in the same way as before. (...) You don't have to have a boss in a record company who has to like your music for it to be released. There are many paths to the goal. I think that's a good thing (Live McKay, Commercial Director, Universal Norway, 07.02.2020).

Seidefors and McKay refers to a state before streaming services and piracy. When Spotify was launched at the time, they were competing against illegal and free platforms that offered everything for free, and the idea of a type of universal availability offered a competitive advantage that the physical record store could not compete against. However, accessibility also relates to concepts such as information overload and poverty (Simon, 1971). So, even if the content is available, it is not necessarily visible, it is "relatively available" (Tallerås, Colbjørnsen & Øfsti, 2019). As a natural consequence of the huge catalogs the services manages, large parts of the content are therefore drowned. Consequently, the algorithmic visibility relates to a game of power where technological and architectural infrastructures play a role in what is highlighted and what is filtered out (Bucher, 2012). In that sense, availability and visibility might be seen as in conflict between a cultural policy ideal and a commercial ideal, where the

idea of the widest possible offer collides with the idea of what is "commercial and salable". Marte Thorsby, from the Norwegian major companies' interest organization IFPI, believes there should be room to discuss whether everyone has a "right to an audience":

> Basically, you have to think that you have no claim to an audience. There is something about that if you don't have an audience, *then you don't have an audience*. (...) If the audience doesn't want you, is it right to think that you *must* be able to make a living out of music? I'm not so sure (Marte Thorsby, Managing Director, IFPI Norway, 28/10/2019).

With the idea of the democratized digital music economy, Thorsby highlights the consumer's power to determine the music market. It is the audience's collective attention that shapes the visibility. However, as the distribution possibilities and the number of players increase in parallel, the barriers to reaching through are strengthened. How the services curate their content through the technological and architectural frameworks, in which the algorithms configure visibility (Bucher, 2012), can thus be decisive for the extent to which the aesthetically expression diversity is made available.

Curation

The relationship between accessibility and curated visibility is, however, ambivalent. On one hand, one could highlight how visibility in a streaming service is only a manifestation of a market governed by user preferences – quantified measures of what we collectively listen to the most. On the other hand, however, one could highlight the structural ways in which the services curate their content, as a way of controlling or steering the audiences use. As well as being a distribution platform with infinite access to music, the services represent, as mentioned, a curatorial turn. Central to this shift is both the creative and active role of the services as organizers of the content, but also – ultimately – as cultural agents who have the potential to shape the production of both artistic content and cultural value (O'Neill, 2007).

Basically, a music listener must – in one way or another, in or outside the platform – be presented with a piece of music before it is selected. Although the need to filter information in a catalog containing 50-60 million titles is obvious, one might ask questions about the real power the services have to highlight something, above something else. Johan Seidefors, representing the streaming service Spotify, acknowledges how the way they curate music can play a role in how the public uses the service. However, he is unsure regarding the real power they have to shape aesthetic preferences. He underlines, on the one hand, how they have the power to influence what the public is exposed to, both through algorithmic and editorial curation. However, he claims, on the other hand, that it is the users themselves who make active choices about what they want to listen to. Seidefors emphasizes that these are aspects they constantly consider and decide on, underlining how they particularly take into account more demographic dimensions of diversity:

> We can e.g., see that a hip hop playlist is very male dominated. Then we try to increase "female representation" in that target group. These are sensitive questions, but we try to work in artists that the users might not have chosen. This is how we want to change behavior over time, because we

> believe that there is a fair aspect to it, which trumps the immediate choice (Johan Seidefors, Head of Content, Spotify, 17.01.2020).

In this way, one might argue how Spotify is involved in the production of cultural value. In a constructivist way, they work with leaders who, in this case, strive for a more egalitarian music culture. When it comes to genre and the aesthetic expression diversity, however, Seidefors is more reserved:

> We have no agenda that a certain genre of music should be heard more than another. This is controlled by the users. But we try to make sure that we have playlists in many different genres, and to be fair between major and independent labels, so that you as an independent artist also can have the opportunity to reach out (Johan Seidefors, Head of Content, Spotify, 17.01.2020).

Seidefors thus points to how the service's infrastructures can function as drivers of cultural policy, by e.g., highlighting female artists or different musical genres. Moving beyond algorithmic recommendation, we can thus also see how editorial human-driven operations is involved. Extending the ideal of highlighting aesthetic expression diversity, several informants thus emphasize the value of making manual, editorial priorities – often because narrower genres of music have fewer listeners, fewer points of data and which therefore might be more difficult to algorithmically process. Sveinung Rindal, who represents the distributor The Orchard, believes that it is essential to have "a voice" that can recommend titles, especially when you "move away from the charts and further down, into the breadth". Although he initially believes that algorithms can provide good recommendations to the user, he is missing the editorial recommendations served by a human-driven, professional expertise – which can both strengthen and highlight narrower content in the services and stimulate to greater music interest, among the public:

> I think e.g., new releases under the classical genre, on the various platforms, show neither competence, will nor progressiveness. (...) When we have replaced all editorial features, all interviews, and reviews in Norway's newspapers – all those who wrote about Norwegian music 10 years ago – I find it disappointing that we have not got these features back in a channel where we use music (Sveiung Rindal, Country Manager, The Orchard Norway, 14.01.2020).

Rindal, which through his role in The Orchard works to distribute the music of independent artists, believes there is an unfulfilled potential to strengthen the services' curatorial efforts to make more of the aesthetic breadth visible. A similar line of reasoning can be found in Larry Bringsjord's argumentations, who through his position as chairman in the interest organization for independent Norwegian record companies (FONO), works purposefully to "increase knowledge of Norwegian music within all genres".[2] He believes that, as editorial expertise is reduced, knowledge from those who follows music most closely, disappears – meaning, those editorial voices who are "up to date" on both local and international music culture, and who knows what is being released and therefore can provide expert guidance to an audience that needs help orienting themselves, in an ever-expanding musical landscape:

[2] See FONO's most important issues under the "About FONO" tab on their website fono.no (available 20 May 2020): https://fono.no/om-fono/

> The positive thing about editorial [human] curation is that there are living people who evaluate and think out loud – people who love and who don't love music. They have preferences and a high degree of knowledge. (…) I hope that the platforms strengthen their [human] editorial efforts on music (Larry Bringsjord, Chairman of FONO, 25/11/2019).

Both Bringsjord and Rindal are calling for a greater cultural policy responsibility among the larger platforms, where Spotify in particular is considered being the largest and most dominant player. In this study, several examples of such policy measures are highlighted, intended to remedy commercial failure in the market. In particular, the licensing requirements in radio are highlighted – where a piece of legislation today regulates the proportion of locally produced content that radio stations must promote. The same concerns parallel provisions in neighboring industries, where e.g., international audiovisual streaming services, such as Netflix and HBO, are required to produce a certain percentage of locally produced content.

> One can think of e.g., imposing a greater editorial, local anchoring on Spotify and other platforms, than they have today, and I think we must resort to working with the politicians (Larry Bringsjord, Chairman of FONO, 25/11/2019).

As a representative of FONO, whose interests run on behalf of smaller and independent record companies, Bringsjord thus raises the idea that a humanly driven, editorial effort still trumps the algorithmic ones, and that cultural policy solutions are needed – in terms of priorities that can highlight the aesthetic breadth of expressions.

Personalization

In itself, the enormous pressure of information from the streaming services creates a need to filter. As mentioned, personalization of the services – where algorithms identify recommendations based on the audience's usage history – is therefore to be considered a necessary strategy. This experience is largely shared among the informants, regardless of the positions they hold in the industry; some form of curation must take place if a user is to have any chance of navigating the vast sea of titles made available. Live McKay, representing the major record label Universal, claims that new personalization strategies primarily offer a potential for more accurate marketing of the artists – which does not generalize the audience according to traditional, demographic sizes:

> In terms of marketing, it is an advantage that you do not need to segment on the classic, old parameters: gender, age, place of residence. Now you can work in several different genres and several different niches at the same time, because you can find the audience based on interests or completely different parameters (Live McKay, Commercial Director, Universal Norge, 07.02.2020).

McKay points out that this also increases the opportunities to work with a wider range of genres and niches, because you don't have to direct the content towards larger mass target groups. Initially, predictive personalization strategies are often recognized for the way they can precisely predict a user's behavior or needs or desires – and personalized playlists such as Spotify's Discover Weekly or Apple Music's Replay 2020 are often highlighted as accurate recommendation systems that the audiences appreciate (Pasick, 2015).

In parallel, however, these strategies run a risk of constructing filter bubbles. A recurring theme in this study is concerning the ways in which the participants fear that being presented with alternative content – unknown content that can surprise and challenge the user – ends up in conflict with the commercial considerations of the services, which in a competitive market prioritize recruiting and retaining their audiences by offering content with the highest possible relevance (Primo & Zago, 2015; Thurman & Schifferes, 2012). Seaver (2019) conceptualizes these practices as various forms of "traps" and describes the tendency of American algorithm developers to refer to their personalization strategies as ways to "hook" or lure users into permanent use of the services – a manner of speaking he compares to anthropological theories of animal captivation. Moving beyond the filter bubble theory, there thus exists a fear that one reduces the user's index of content presentation to primarily having a personal meaning, which more than anything reinforces one's own taste and preferences (De Vito, 2016; Sandvig, 2014). In a larger picture, questions can then be raised as to whether the platforms at all make it possible for one to encounter content, information or ideas that deviate from one's own (Bozdag, 2013, Gillespie, 2016; Pariser, 2011). These are aspects that initially seems more imperative when talking about news or the distribution of political messages, but which is nevertheless worth discussing with a view to terms of diversity, distribution of power or financial concentration, within the cultural sectors. Kerstin Mangert, representing the music publisher Arctic Rights – a publishing company which is particularly concerned with the conditions of local and Norwegian-produced music – is skeptical regarding the algorithms' favoring of "sameness." She fears that the streaming services serves the public a one-sided palette where users "enjoy what they hear but are not being challenged". Similarly, Thorsby (IFPI) compares music streaming services with social media and their distribution of news and politics:

> It becomes like on Facebook: eventually you only read the same thing. The algorithms just tweak you into your own political genre. You don't get to see the whole world picture, just a small strip. I think that makes us narrower (Marte Thorsby, Managing Director, IFPI Norway, 28 October 2019).

This relates to the idea of intellectual isolation, which has also been linked to concepts such as "small world" or "information poverty" (Salganik, Dodds & Watts, 2006; Maasø, 2016; Simon, 1971; Wolf, 2016) – offering an important framework for understanding how cultural content is distributed. These concepts mark the public's natural tendency to favor those and what is similar to themselves, consequently pointing to how personalization strategies can defy the exposure of unfamiliar content. In his study on radio functions in Spotify, Snickars (2017) similarly finds that Spotify's algorithms push the audiences into a "more of the same" circulation. Wolf (2016), on the other hand, argues in her study of YouTube content how personalization can be worrisome in light of cultural production. Because, as she argues, even if we initially "prefer similarity, difference is when new ideas are encountered."

Similarly, Hans Ole Rian, representing the artist organization Creo, points out that although many people think "it is nice to just listen to Dire Straits, it is not very interesting from a cultural policy point of view." He wants the industry to stimulate curiosity to a greater extent. Rindal (The Orchard) and Bringsjord (FONO) similarly highlight how the personalization of music (and other cultural content) is problematic,

because basing quantified recommendations on a set of abstract and cultural variables, is difficult.

> The algorithms are not good enough today. If you listen to a rapper, then according to the algorithm, it means that you like American rappers. Even if it doesn't match, they are the ones you get recommended. Maybe you really wanted to listen to French hip hop? (Larry Bringsjord, Chairman of FONO, 25/11/2019).

> I'm actually really fond of algorithms, if only they had worked better. Algorithms in music are more difficult than in other fields, that is very easy to see. If you buy a TV on Elkjøp [a Norwegian electronics retailer] and the website recommends an HDMI cable. And then you've sort of hit the spot – simple additional sales. But if you say: "I see you listened to Nordstoga, here is Hekla Stålstrenga" [two Norwegian artists], then it is not certain that it is a match at all (Sveinung Rindal, Country Manager, The Orchard Norway, 14.01.2020).

Both Bringsjord and Rindal express a belief in that the algorithms "can become better" but holds that they still provide a type of recommendation that risks "apophenia" and perceive patterns or connections that do not really exist (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Because the streaming services are based on the conceptualization of the individual music listener, they can be understood as prediction machines that constantly create and define a theory about who the user is and what they want to do next. Rindal comments that the public often identifies themselves to be more complex than the streaming services perceive them to be and that the algorithms thus tend to "put the user in a booth they don't necessarily feel at home in". Because we, as audiences, are no longer identified based on measurements chosen by ourselves – but on the basis of a set of behaviors and choices whose consequences are uncertain – one loses the control over one's own musical identity. For example, one might claim that one loves jazz, but if one only listens to pop music, that claim will not have anything to say (see Finn, 2017, p. 109).

Homogenization

Alongside personalized and limited presentation surfaces within the services, several of the participants express a concern about how terms of a homogenized music culture – which threatens "aesthetic expression diversity" – is emerging with music streaming. In recent years, a significant proportion of studies have pointed to how a "superstar economy" has gained better conditions in an algorithmically driven streaming economy. Alongside aforementioned studies, such as Maasø's (2016) work on cumulative advantages and "Matthew effects", Lynskey (2018) finds that the number of artists and variety in genres has decreased markedly on British charts, over the past 25 years. Wikström et al. (2018), on the other hand, sees a significant reduction in what they call "local and acoustic diversity" in the same period. Wikström (2013) points out that the pressured economy within the industry have led music companies to invest in fewer, prioritized artists, who with wider audience appeal more easily gets "heard through the media noise" (p. 131). Elberse (2013) also argues that the streaming services reinforce the kind of "superstar economy" that the democratization of the industry was initially supposed to counteract, primarily because mainstream listeners are used to a pattern of consumption where a limited number of pop stars, made visible through various charts, circulate. Her arguments are based on an analysis of various top lists and their share of

total consumption, and lead to gloomy claims such as Mulligan's (2014) "death of the long tail."

All the informants, regardless of their roles within the industry, hold that they value genre diversity and advocate a view in which diversity is viewed exclusively as positive for the music culture. Among others, Lena Midtveit, representing the major company Sony, points to this. Although she represents a company that is often associated with the broader music culture (Wikström, 2013, p. 67), she points to how they also manage catalogs that go beyond popular music:

> We must have a breadth, even if we do not fully live up to it as of now. There must be room for niches. Often, we, the majors, stay in the middle, with the big, broad, popular music. But we also have a large classical and jazz section – we have everything (Lena Midtveit, Senior Manager, Sony Music Norway, 22 October 2019).

Wikström (2013) argues that there are greater expectations of hit production and viral attention in today's streaming economy, and that an increasing intention to create content that can be communicated across multiple media, in the long term, damages the recruitment of niche artists (p. 117). This is reflected in our material, where niches are understood as variations within genres such as jazz, classical, rock, metal, etc. Bringsjord (FONO) describes today's niche market as "extremely complicated" and implies that there are financial motives behind the streaming services' promotion of hit charts: "The playlists the platforms make visible are quite narrow in genre. Although you also can find blues and jazz playlists, the services promote what they make the most money from." This also affects artists and record companies that had a more sustainable economy before the digitalization of the industry. Inger Elise Mey and Hermann Foss, who represent the rights management company TONO, say that niche players who used to be able to base their finances on decent record sales are struggling to make themselves visible on the new, digital platforms:

> Take Kari Bremnes [a well-known Norwegian artist]. She has had to do everything herself because her record company, Kirkelig Kulturverksted [a well-known Norwegian record company], was hit hard by the changeover to the streaming economy. It becomes hard to keep up production in a segment that is quite narrow. Esoteric *Norwegian-in-Norwegian* [that is, Norwegian artists singing in Norwegian] with a spiritual twist, is not Kygo [another well-known Norwegian artist, within the EDM gerne] – it is Kari, right? (Inger Elise Mey and Hermann Foss, Department Director and contract consultant in Online Media, TONO, 13/02/2020).

This observation can be linked to another aspect that relates to how the streaming format not only changes how music is distributed, but also how it is produced. In Mark Katz' (2010) book "Capturing Sound", which refers to how the media's role as distributor is involved in how music is created, we see how music culture has always developed in step with technology. Through a historical review of music media, he introduces the term "phonographic effects," and explores how spatial and temporal possibilities and limitations shape creative production. E.g., the LP had a temporal capacity that favored music of a certain length. Correspondingly, Rindal (The Orchard) also links the streaming services to a (more or less) media deterministic way of thinking, where the music that wins, always constitute a sign of media development:

> I think that when the 78 record became the single record, when the LP became a CD, we got rid of artists. Perhaps not as violent as what we see now, but it is quite clear that Kurt Foss and Reidar Bø [previously famous artists in Norway] did not join the transition from the 60s to the 70s. We did not take with us the music Åse Kleveland [famous Norwegian artist] released in vinyl format in the 70s, it was never actually released on CD. Finn Kalvik [another famous Norwegian artist] is one of Norway's most talented folk singers, but many also stopped listening to him before he made a well-deserved comeback in the CD age. I think that we have to live with the fact that some artists now see that their careers are not that profitable anymore, simply because time has passed (Sveiung Rindal, Country Manager, The Orchard Norway, 14.01.2020).

Several studies today find phenomena related to the temporal reservations in the LP record, where songs that to a greater extent demands repetition turn out to have an advantage in the streaming services (Kiberg, 2018; Lamere, 2014). The way algorithms quantitatively manage visibility, through stream frequencies, thus suggests that there are challenges related to visualizing music that is not adapted to the format. McKay (Universal) recognizes this and sees it as a challenge to work with niche-based music in what she refers to as the streaming services "volume model". She argues how shorter pop songs becomes more visible on streaming platforms, both because they can be played more often and because they have a wider range of use:

> It is in the nature of things that you need a broad pop song more often: you listen to it at a party at the weekend, you can listen to it in training or while cycling to work. Unlike a black metal song, it will get more streams just because of the uses it has. (…) It quickly becomes the genres where you use the songs over and over again that wins (Live McKay, Commercial Director, Universal Norge, 07.02.2020).

McKay also refers to how a song's area of use has become more important through the introduction of streaming services. In today's attention economy, it has become imperative to capture the audience's time, and the streaming services thus facilitate for an aesthetic that first and foremost is experienced as relevant and accessible to the user – by being quick to propose new opportunities and recommendations curated for any moment (Finn, 2017 , p. 101): "There should be a playlist for whatever you do during the day", Seidefors (representing Spotify) proclaimes. Similarly, Thorsby (IFPI) points to how the transition from unit price sales of CD's to subscription-based streaming, problematizes the conditions for "niche-based music" that does not generate repetitive usage:

> Niche music has worse conditions than it had in the CD-age. By selling 5-10,000 CDs, you would have recouped the expenses and received an ok salary. But it requires a large number of streams to reach the same turnover on equivalent sales of 5-10,000 CDs. (...) Today, you have to have the repetitive usage for the music to generate significant income. There is no doubt that this challenges niche music. (Marte Thorsby, Managing Director, IFPI Norway, 28 October 2019).

Thorsby's reasoning also relates to how affordances in the service's interface can influence user behavior, through mental triggers and specific signals that can work persuasive for the user (Finn, 2017, p. 113). Among others, Maasø (2016) argues that the streaming service's affordances and design might play a role in how we search, skip, discover and rank music. This is particularly demonstrated through findings that show how the first song on an album is becoming more valuable, as it is played more often than the other songs on an album (Maasø & Spilker, 2022). Another example emphasizes how the skip function in Spotify forces modes of impatient listening

patterns, where the immediately catchy songs is prioritized over the longer and more challenging types of music (see e.g., Lamere, 2014). Bringsjord sees these structures as signs of a type of "genre discrimination", where e.g., those who work within the gernes of "jazz, folk or classical music are losing ground" – simply because they often have songs of 10–20 minutes. As part of a cultural policy campaign, Bringsjord works in collaboration with, among others, Hans Ole Rian (representing Creo) and Marius Øvrebø-Engmoen (general manager of the interest organization GramArt,) with introducing more "counting points" which can provide longer songs higher playback frequencies:

> A consequence of streaming and playlists is that everything is very much formatted towards that model. The extreme example is classical music: you still only get paid for the first 30 seconds, even if the piece is 30 minutes long. A number of other genres also suffer from this: electronic music, metal, jazz, etc. (Marius Øvrebø-Engmoen, CEO, GramArt, 07.11.2019).

In this way, the Norwegian interest organizations in particular, which work with cultural policies to highlight the breadth of Norwegian music, stand in opposition to the algorithmic models used by the streaming services.

Professionalization

The presumptive democratization of the music industry can be seen as an overarching dimension, which relates to all the above-mentioned keywords: visibility, curation, personalization, and homogenization. Basically, the democratization of the industry points towards an idea that greater accessibility, and lower barriers for the production and distribution of music, enables more actors – at the crossroads of aesthetic and gerne-related features – to be given the opportunity to be discovered and heard by the audiences. In this way, record companies, retailers, critics, and more, do not control how music is sold, used, assessed, or experienced – as they did in the old, pre-digital music economy. Today, it is the users and their interconnected activity that determine the musical landscape (Wikström, 2013).

This view is shared by Seidefors which emphasizes that Spotify has contributed to "democratizing the music industry, more than anyone else has ever done before". As we can see, however, criticism is also directed towards how the new, digital regimes of visibility shape the content distributed by the streaming services. The trend of the aforementioned homogenization points to music being generated today through a subtle form of dictation, according to what fits the framework of the given distribution platforms, where those who can best use the technical tools they have at hand are the ones who win ground (Arola, 2010; Wolf, 2016). Apparently, therefore, it is those with the most resources and technical expertise who best make themselves visible. Although online music distribution in itself has opened up a larger amateur segment, several highlight how it is more difficult to be small and unestablished today. Bringsjord (FONO) believes that being "computer-savvy" and "being able to master an adequate analysis tool" now trumps being "music-savvy". Rindal, on the other hand, points out that an increased requirement for technical competence does not "democratize", but "professionalizes" the industry. This contrasts with the pre-digital music economy:

> With all the metadata, organization, and creativity to be channeled out, there is a professionalization of this field that is different from what it was 10-20 years ago. Back then, as an amateur, you could find out who pressed CDs, send it to the media, be played on the radio, get a review and sell 1000 records by being a complete amateur (Sveiung Rindal, Country Manager, The Orchard Norway, 14.01.2020).

Today, stronger demands are thus placed on resources and competence, in order to reach through the noise within the streaming services. These traits become all the clearer by turning our gaze towards the biggest players of the industry. Both Midtveit and McKay, who represent major record companies, point to a shift in expertise in terms of data and information knowledge, and an increase in expertise that requires a sharper use of resources:

> Before we bought large, heavy campaigns in television and the press. But now it is much more resource intensive. We buy less such campaigns, but it requires much more manpower from us. Before we were 24, now we are 43 employees (Lena Midtveit, Senior Manager, Sony Music Norway, 22 October 2019).

In the gap between democratization and professionalization, several perspectives thus emerge. In itself, professionalization can strengthen how we perceive artists, musicians and other actors in the industry, and work as a counterweight to the growing amateur segment that digitalization has made possible. On the other hand, professionalization can also relate to a form of "commercialization", or economic concentration, where only those with enough financial or digital means "win". Professionalization can thus problematize what lies in the understanding of "the democratized music industry". In the same way as the concept of diversity, the concept of democracy is often referred to as something undividedly positive, without necessarily conceptual clarification of what entails at the given time. The democratic music economy is founded on the idea that digitalization creates equal conditions for all actors, where a collective audience jointly decides on what to be promoted and made visible. Such a view is appropriate in itself but takes little account of the aforementioned structures and contextual guidelines that affect visibility.

Gillespie (2012; 2016) has discussed this duality previously. In his investigations of trending phenomena on Twitter, he demonstrates how certain algorithms are designed to identify waves of attention, where the various interactions the public has with an object are weighted and ranked into trending lists. In the same way that there are information practices that claim to represent the public's wishes (such as political elections), the various algorithmic practices are strategies that, with their own techniques, assess, highlight, and report on the public's interests. In that sense, these strategies are variable and not necessarily complete, as they always will be characterized by the decisions, structures, or values that the creators of the strategies might carry. In that sense, the form of homogenization we can trace in the streaming services is not new. Rather, we should question the perception of algorithms as being mechanically objective (ibid).

Conclusion

In total, these perspectives revolve around how the curation and visibility of content in music streaming services corresponds to the cultural policy ideal of an aesthetic

expression diversity – where homogenization and professionalization are effects of the personalization strategies the services use. As mentioned at the outset of this article, cultural policy is often associated with a type of governance, regulation, or distribution, with the purpose of facilitating a qualitatively richer cultural life (Hylland & Mangset, 2017). In this article, I argue that the current situation, where large global streaming players largely set the conditions for the production, distribution, and consumption of music, does not necessarily correspond to this ideal: it is still those with the greatest resources, and those with the ability and willingness to adapt to the format, which manages to cut through the noise that digitalization has caused.

At the same time, with the information overloads we face, the content of these enormous catalogs must somehow be sorted. The potential loss of diversity has therefore opened up discussions about how algorithms can be programmed in the direction of facing more diversity and greater breadth. With different media actors advocating different social responsibilities, methods are therefore emerging to curate content in new ways. This has particularly been discussed with a view to neighboring media industries. Among other things, so-called "public broadcaster algorithms," which both entertains, challenges, and enlightens the user, has been launched for streaming of film and television (see e.g., Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018; Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018). Bennett (2016) has particularly supported this idea, emphasizing how curating and making cultural content visible can open up rather than narrowing down our horizons. He envisions that a public broadcaster algorithm can function in the following way:

> If you liked Top Gear, here's a programme on environmentalism and fossil fuel, or Woman's Hour. If you liked a music documentary, here's a sitcom (Bennett, 2016).

In the Norwegian music industry, artist Hanne Kolstø (2018) has in parallel advocated for the creation of functions in streaming services that recommend content diametrically opposed to what one's usage history suggests. In the chronicle "The Filter Bubble [*Filterbobla*]" she writes the following:

> I think Spotify should invent a button where you could be exposed to the music that is at the opposite end of your algorithm. They could, for example, call it the "challenge button".

What results such functions would in reality produce is uncertain, as long as the system is constructed in ways that promote what the majority gathers around. With large, global players exercising ever more power in this expanding market, many of these questions will in reality revolve more around who has the influence to do something about these inquiries, or who sets the conditions for how recorded music is to be curated and made visible. Although enforcing an ideal of aesthetically expression diversity can be problematic from the perspective of a commercial actor, it may be worth discussing further how cultural policy can work to highlight the richness of Norwegian musical life – to a greater extent than is done today.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Qualitative Interview Study 1

Translated Information letter for participants in qualitative interview study number 1: "The Platformization of Music Production".

Request for participation in the research project "The Platformization of Music":

This is a request to participate in an interview survey that examines how and to what extent artists and music producers adapt to digital and online music platforms when creating and producing music. In this document, you will receive information about the aims of the project and what participation will entail for you.

Purpose of the research project:

In what ways do digital and online platforms affect the production and circulation of music? How do artists and music producers creatively adapt to the changes brought about by digitalization? The music industry has always been at the forefront of digital development, and in the past 15 years, streaming platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Music have increasingly gained power in the industry by introducing new economic, organizational, and production logics into the market. Although we already know a lot about how digitalization and streaming platforms have affected the economy and organization of the music industry, we know less about its significance for production and creative work. Therefore, the purpose of the project – "The Platformization of Music" – is to gain new insight into how artists and music producers adapt and creatively respond to rapid and constantly changing technological and distributional changes. The project thus focuses on artists and their creative work in creating music and asks the following research question:

In what ways does platform-based distribution change the creative processes of music production, and how do artists respond to these changes?

The interview survey is part of a doctoral project that broadly examines the cultural, economic, and industrial consequences that have emerged in the wake of the digitalization processes the music industry has undergone in the past 15 years. This survey will encompass approximately 15 interviews with Norwegian artists, songwriters, and music producers.

Who is responsible for the research project?

Ph.D. candidate Håvard Kiberg, along with supervisor and associate professor Audun Beyer at Kristiania University College, is responsible for the research project. Ole Johan Mjøs and Jan Fredrik Hovden, at the University of Bergen, also supervise the project and will have access to the material collected.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate in this interview survey because through your work as an artist, musician, or music producer, you possess valuable information and knowledge about how music is produced and created, and about how artists and music producers use digital and online platforms. At the same time, you work with a genre and type of music that is perceived as relevant for the study, as it seeks to gain more insight into how music production and distribution are evolving in line with digital and technological developments. Your experiences and perspectives on being an artist in a time where digital platforms are central to both the production and distribution of music are therefore valuable information in this project.

What does it entail for you to participate?

If you agree to participate in the survey, we will arrange a suitable time and place for the interview. The interview will last between 45-60 minutes and can either take place face-to-face or over video link (e.g., on a platform like Zoom). The interview will proceed as a conversation where the interviewer asks questions about your experiences with music production and how you work with various digital and online platforms. Interviewers will record audio and take notes from the interview. The recording will subsequently be transcribed and stored at Kristiania University College.

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without providing any reason. All your personal information will then be deleted. It will not have any negative consequences for you if you do not wish to participate or later choose to withdraw. We will only use the information about you for the purposes we have described in this document.

We treat the information confidentially and in accordance with privacy regulations. Only those responsible for the project (mentioned above) will have access to the material collected. The material will be analyzed and later published as research articles in relevant scientific journals and in connection with the aforementioned doctoral thesis. You can choose to remain anonymous, although we would like the option to be able to name our informants in our publications.

What happens to your information when we finish the research project?

Information about you will be deleted when the project is completed, and the doctoral thesis is submitted – which is planned for January 31, 2024. Only those responsible for the project (mentioned above) will have access to the material until the project is completed. We process information about you based on your consent.

On behalf of Kristiania University College, NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project complies with privacy regulations.

Your rights

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have the right to:

- access which information we process about you, and to receive a copy of the information
- have information about you that is incorrect or misleading corrected
- have personal information about you deleted
- lodge a complaint with the Norwegian Data Protection Authority about the processing of your personal information

Contact information

If you have any questions about the study or want to know more about or exercise your rights, please contact:

- Håvard Kiberg - Ph.D. candidate at Kristiania University College, Department of Communication. Email: havard.kiberg@kristiania.no
- Audun Beyer - Associate Professor at Kristiania University College, Department of Communication. Email: Audun.Beyer@kristiania.no

If you have questions related to NSD's assessment of the project, you can contact:

- NSD- Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS by email (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by phone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Kind regards,

Håvard Kiberg

Appendix 2: Interview Guide 1 (Music Creators)

Translated Interview Guide in Qualitative Interview Study Number 1: "The Platformization of Music Production".

1. **Background**
    a. **Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background as an artist/producer/songwriter?**
        i. Do you consider yourself as an artist, producer, songwriter, or musician? A combination?
        ii. How would you define being a "music creator" today?
    b. **Can you describe the music you work with?**

2. **Production**
    a. **Can you describe your process when creating/writing music?**
        i. To what extent do you collaborate with others (producers, other artists, songwriters), and what are the advantages/disadvantages of collaborating when writing music?
    b. **Can you describe your process when recording music?**
        i. What recording tools (software/hardware) do you use and why do you prefer these tools?
        ii. What role do instruments, bands, or other musicians play in your recording processes?
        iii. What type of studio (professional studio/home studio) do you record in, and why do you prefer recording in this way?
        iv. How do you approach the mixing and mastering stages of your music? How involved are you in this process?
        v. To what extent do you adapt to playlists and contexts (streaming) when writing and recording music? Is this something you consider? And if so, how do you adapt?
        vi. In what ways (if any) does producing music intended for circulation on online platforms affect your creative process?
    c. **Does music streaming (or other music platforms) influence how popular music *sounds* – how it is created and experienced?**
        i. To what extent do you think the medium you produce music for (such as music streaming platforms) constraints of liberates your creative process?
        ii. Do you find that producing music for digital platforms is creatively limiting or liberating?
        iii. Can limitations trigger creativity? Dogmas, etc.

3. **Distribution and Marketing**
    a. **Can you describe the process of releasing your music?**
        i. Which phases of the release process do you receive (professional) assistance with, and which phases do you handle yourself? What are the advantages/disadvantages of getting (professional) help when releasing music?
        ii. What are your thoughts on the organization/composition of your releases? (Do you release albums? Singles? EPs? Pros and cons?)
        iii. How strategic are you regarding the order of songs (in a release period or an album) or other aspects?
    b. **Can you describe the types of releases you make? Digital vs. physical.**
        i. Can you explain why/why not you release music physically/digitally?
        ii. Are there any streaming services/platforms that are more important to be on than others? Why?
        iii. Why/why not do you release physical products (LP, CD, cassette)?
    c. **How do you promote/market your music?**
        i. In which phases of the promotion process do you receive (professional) assistance and which phases do you handle yourself? What are the advantages/disadvantages of getting (professional) help with marketing music?
        ii. Which social media platforms are you on, and why is it important to be on these platforms?
        iii. What strategies do you have for working with social media? How do you work to share and spread your music on social media?
        iv. Thoughts on these processes in general?
    d. **Data, Algorithms, and Recommendation Mechanisms:**
        i. What are your thoughts on various recommendation mechanisms in streaming services? How well do you feel you understand the mechanisms behind how algorithms (or other recommendation mechanisms) work?
        ii. What tricks/strategies do you use to make yourself as visible as possible on a streaming platform or on social media?
        iii. How can one work purposefully to get their music onto a playlist? (Any production strategies?)
        iv. How important are song/album titles, genre tags, and other metadata to succeed in becoming visible as an artist on digital platforms?
        v. To what extent do you use data and statistics about your music that are available in platforms like Spotify for Artists? (Also, regarding production?)
        vi. To what extent are you aware of legal/illegal services that offer to "boost" the play frequency of your music? Have you ever bought or been asked to buy plays?

4. Apparatus/Industry Connection

a. **Can you describe the apparatus around you as an artist?**
    i. To what extent do you receive professional help for your artist career (record labels, promotion agencies, distribution, manager/agent, booking agencies, etc.)?
    ii. What are the advantages/disadvantages of managing your own career and releases compared to getting (professional) help?

5. Thoughts on genre affiliation

a. **What kind of music do you listen to, and what kind of music inspires you?**
b. **What do you think is necessary for a song to succeed on a streaming service?**
c. **What makes you succeed/not succeed?**

Appendix 3: Information Qualitative Interview Study 2

Translated Information Letter for Participants in Qualitative Interview Study Number 2: "Streaming the Cultural Industries"

Background and Purpose

The University of Oslo is currently conducting a study on streaming in the cultural industries in collaboration with OsloMet and NTNU. The study is part of the research project "Streaming in the Cultural Industries" (STREAM), funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project utilizes various approaches (user data, industry data, document analysis, and interviews) with the ambition to examine streaming in TV, music, film, and the book industry at the intersection of technology, economics, and usage.

Why are you being asked to participate?

Your position and expertise make us keen to conduct a research interview with you on this topic. We are particularly interested in understanding the central opportunities and challenges that streaming presents for the industry you work in, and how streaming affects key business models and value chains in the industry.

What does participation in the study entail?

Participation in the study involves a research interview. The interview is estimated to last approximately 30-45 minutes. We prefer to conduct it face-to-face, but it can also be done over the phone. If you agree to participate in the interview, we will ask to use a recorder to ensure accurate representation of the interview.

What happens with the information about you?

The interview with you will be transcribed and stored (along with the audio file) on a server where access is protected by username and password. Only project participants have access to the material. Once the material has been analyzed, it will be used for scientific and popular scientific publishing and dissemination, including online publishing and teaching. When published, your name and title may be included, but all quotes from you – both direct quotes and where your name is indirectly mentioned – will require your approval before use. The date of the interview will always be provided, ensuring clear context for your quotes.

What happens to your information when we conclude the research project?

The project is scheduled to conclude on 01.01.2022, although some publications may occur after this date. When the project is completed, the audio file of your interview will be deleted.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without providing any reason. All information about you will then be deleted. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your Rights

As long as you can be identified in the data, you have the right to:

- access which personal data is registered about you,
- have inaccuracies in your personal data corrected,
- have your personal data deleted,
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- lodge a complaint with the Data Protection Officer or the Norwegian Data Protection Authority about the processing of your personal data.

What gives us the right to process personal data about you?

We process information about you based on your consent.

Who is responsible for the research project?

The University of Oslo is responsible for the project. The project is conducted in collaboration with OsloMet and NTNU.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the study, please contact us:

- Researcher Vilde Schanke Sundet: phone 91632127 or email v.s.sundet@media.uio.no
- Associate Professor Terje Colbjørnsen: phone 99565890 or email terjec@oslomet.no

All participants in the study will be offered to receive findings from the study when the material has been processed and is ready for publication. The study is registered with NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS.

Appendix 4: Interview Guide 2 (Music Industry Actors)

Translated Interview Guide in Qualitative Interview Study Number 2: "Streaming the Cultural Industries"

General

1. Name and title?

Opportunities and Challenges with Streaming

2. What do you/your company see as the biggest opportunities with streaming in the short and long term - i.e., within the next year and in a five-year perspective?
    a. Follow-up: What do you consider your company's main advantage?
3. What do you/your company see as the biggest challenges with streaming in the short and long term - i.e., within the next year and in a five-year perspective?
    a. Follow-up: What do you consider your company's main weakness?
    b. Follow-up: What new skills/expertise does this require?
4. Do you perceive others in the industry sharing these perceptions regarding the central opportunities and challenges with streaming?
    a. Follow-up: Sector-specific considerations?
5. In your opinion, are there any good solutions to these challenges?
    a. Follow-up: Industry and/or political solutions? What solutions?
6. Norway is often highlighted as a country that is digitally advanced. What is your view on this, and what consequences does being an early adopter in a digitization process potentially have?
7. Are you interested in learning from other industries than your own, and which industries do you think are most relevant to draw experiences from?
    a. Follow-up: Do you perceive people from other industries to be interested in learning from the industry you represent?

Business Foundation

8. In what ways would you say streaming affects the business foundation in the industry you are part of?
    a. Follow-up: What are the consequences for the company you represent?
9. Who do you perceive as your company's biggest competitors?
10. Does streaming change the audience's willingness to pay, and if so, how?

Narrow vs Broad Content, Local vs Global Content

11. Do you perceive streaming to make it harder or easier to showcase narrow/niche content?
    a. Follow-up: Do you perceive it to be within your company's "mandate" to facilitate narrow content?
    b. Follow-up: Does the company you represent have any strategies to promote this type of narrow content?
12. Do you perceive streaming to make it harder or easier to showcase Norwegian content?
    a. Follow-up: Do you perceive it to be within your company's "mandate" to facilitate Norwegian content?
    b. Follow-up: If harder, does the company you represent have any strategies to promote Norwegian content?

Algorithms, Editors, and Recommendation Systems

13. What would you say characterizes a good algorithm?
14. What are the biggest advantages and disadvantages of algorithmic recommendations in streaming services?
15. What are the biggest advantages and disadvantages of editorial recommendations in streaming services?

Questions to Streaming Services

17. How are algorithm-based systems developed in your company?

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