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Digital platforms and the democratization of music: A study on YouTube and Spotify

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Abstract

The digital transformation of the music business has brought about a radical shift in the production, dissemination, and consumption of music. In this piece, we examine how digital platforms such as Spotify and YouTube have increased the accessibility of music, prompted greater participation from independent musicians, and connected listeners worldwide. The study found that artists are shifting from depending on record companies to a platform-based environment that enables them to interact directly with fans. In order to determine if streaming data, content distribution strategies, and algorithmic recommendation systems really advance equality or whether they instead create new hierarchies motivated by commercial interests and data-driven algorithms, this research looks at these platforms. Using secondary sources including platform analytics, global reports, and scholarly literature, the research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach. According to the findings, while websites like Spotify and YouTube have improved the way people find new music and made it easier for up-and-coming artists to get their music scene, they have also helped to maintain some inequality through their funding biases and opaque recommendation algorithms that favour well-known content. The digital music business is contradictory because it consolidates money and power while simultaneously making music more accessible. Platform openness and policy-level improvements, as suggested in the paper's conclusion, may lead to a more fair distribution of opportunities within the digital soundscape. Overall, the research demonstrates that digital platforms serve as both gatekeepers and facilitators in the evolving musical democratisation landscape.

Keywords: Digital Platforms, YouTube, Spotify, Music Democratization, Streaming Economy, Independent Artists, Algorithmic Curation

Introduction

The Digital Revolution in the Music Industry

Throughout history, music has had an important place in our lives because it embodies our emotional, social, and cultural development. Changes have occurred in the creation, distribution, and consumption of music throughout the course of time. During the latter part of the 20th century, when compact discs, cassette tapes, and analogue records were the most popular formats, the music industry was dominated by a small number of record labels and production companies. It was the signing and marketing budget of a record company that had an impact on the success of a performer. A lack of cash and recognition was a problem for independent artists. The electricity decentralization process was revolutionized by digital technology. It is now easier, less costly, and more accessible to create music because to the proliferation of mobile phones, the internet, and affordable recording software. Recently, it has been possible for online music services to acquire high-quality home recordings directly from performers. Due to the advent of the digital revolution, the music industry has become a "open ecosystem," which allows for uniqueness and skill to be shared with listeners all over the world. The dissemination of music has become more democratic as a result of social media and streaming services. With the introduction of Apple Music, SoundCloud, Spotify, and YouTube, music listening, culture, and commerce were all revolutionized. The digital experience of listening to music has become increasingly individualized as a result of user inclination analysis. With the advent of the digital revolution, artists were able to become self-sufficient by connecting with their clients and producers. The music industry has become more democratic, participatory, and inclusive as a result of digitalization, despite the fact that algorithmic discrimination, unequal revenue sharing, and violation of copyright have all happened.

Transition from Traditional to Digital Music Distribution Systems

Record companies, radio stations, and music stores were the original components of the traditional music distribution system. In order for musicians to achieve fame, they are need to use production firms for the purposes of recording, marketing, and distribution. For this system to function properly, it needed time, money, and space. Companies were able to restrict creativity since the only mediums that aired new music were radio and recordings. The expansion of the Internet in the early 2000s brought about a sea change. The distribution of music was revolutionized by Napster, iTunes, YouTube, and Spotify. It is possible for artists to quickly reach listeners all around the world by putting their music online (Hesmondhalgh, 2019) ^[1]. It was when consumers started listening to music online rather than purchasing CDs that the "digital music economy" got its start. Intermediaries were rendered obsolete by digital platforms. Control of distribution of records was transferred to artists and streaming service providers. The decisions made by customers were reflected in the music industry. Music exposure and trends are increasingly being influenced by recommendation algorithms that are driven by data. These algorithms take into account the user's interests, interactions, and search histories. When the sector became more open and flexible, there was an increase in instances of copyright infringement, piracy, and unfair revenue sharing. In the past, music was a product that remained unchanged, but the advent of internet platforms transformed it into a cultural experience that allows for quick access, alteration, and involvement.

Increased Accessibility of Music after the Emergence of YouTube and Spotify

YouTube and Spotify have a democratizing effect on music. Radio, television, CDs, and cassettes were the only ways that people could listen to music in the past. Because of the internet and mobile phones, music is available around the clock. YouTube is credited with popularizing music sharing via videos, as opposed to Spotify's on-demand streaming service. When it comes to content suppliers all around the world, YouTube completely changed everything. Someone might suddenly become famous if they upload free music on the internet and others like it. As a result, the game changed away from traditional approaches that required financial resources and business connections (Baym & Burnett, 2009) ^[2]. In order to promote both new and known artists, Spotify includes playlists that were generated by an algorithm. Marketplaces foster connections between customers and sellers. Without the need for intermediaries, artists are able to engage with their followers, get a prompt response, and expand their fanbases. New artists are promoted using the "Discover Weekly" feature on Spotify and the "trending" listings on YouTube. A new kind of gatekeeping, algorithmic control, came into being alongside this ease of access. Algorithms that provide recommendations give preference to songs and singers that have achieved financial success. Platform-driven ecosystems restrict access to music, despite the fact that more individuals have access to it. Despite the fact that YouTube and Spotify make listening to music simpler, more enjoyable, and more personal, there

are questions over the algorithmic transparency and fairness of these services.

Problem Statement

There is a significant issue over whether or not the music business has genuinely become more democratic, or if this is only an illusion manufactured by algorithms and the influence of corporations. The interaction with music has become less complicated and more accessible thanks to digital media. It's possible that a lot of artists who upload their music to platforms like YouTube or Spotify don't get as much attention or money as other musicians do. Work that is well-known or lucrative is given preference by recommendation algorithms, which pushes artists who are less well-known or independent to the background. Because the processes of monetisation of social networks are difficult to understand, the producers do not collect a significant amount of revenue. It may be concluded from this that the digital music business has only partly delivered its promise of equality. In addition to providing artists with new avenues via which they may express themselves, the internet has also resulted in the formation of algorithmic hierarchies that imitate pre-existing injustices, so producing a paradoxical mix of openness and control. The purpose of this study is to assess whether or not digital platforms have just reinterpreted authority in a digital version, or whether or not they have made music more accessible.

Review of Literature

The cultural, social, and economic consequences of streaming platforms have been the subject of academic research as a result of the revolution that digitalization has brought about in the music industry. A summary of recent research is provided in this literature review, and it is recommended that YouTube and Spotify be investigated as potential methods for democratizing music.

1. Evolution of the Digital Music Landscape

As a result of rapid communication and the spread of information technology, the music industry underwent a significant transformation in the latter half of the 20th century and the early 21st century. A "network economy" in which digital connections drive creation, distribution, and consumption has overtaken physical music sales, (Wikström, 2020) ^[3]. Digital connections drive all three of these processes. Peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing was pioneered by Napster in the late 1990s, which posed a challenge to both the rules governing intellectual property and the structures of businesses (Morris & Powers, 2015) ^[4]. Following this upheaval, genuine streaming companies emerged with the purpose of combating piracy. "Prosumers" are individuals who are both content makers and consumers, according to Marshall (2015) ^[5], who asserts that the digital revolution has resulted in it (Marshall, 2015) ^[5]. According to Jenkins (2006) ^[6], this culture of involvement promotes greater accessibility to creative expression by making it possible for anybody with an internet connection to release music on a global scale (Jenkins, 2006) ^[6].

2. Platforms as Catalysts of Democratization

Whether or whether internet platforms have liberated music is a topic that is discussed in the literature. The argument made by Miller (2019) is that artists may now reach audiences directly rather of going via record companies. This is due to the fact that Spotify and YouTube have

decreased the hurdles to entry. Through the use of technologies, independent artists have the ability to engage their audiences, distribute their music, and collect statistics. Internet resources have decentralized cultural creation, which has resulted in the elevation of musical forms and genres that were previously underrepresented (Baym, 2018) ^[7]. Prey (2020) ^[8] expresses disapproval of the gatekeeping algorithmic structures that these platforms use (Prey, 2020) ^[8]. According to the findings of his study on the ecology of Spotify playlists, "curated playlists" reduce aesthetics in order to increase interaction numbers. Burgess and Green (2018) ^[9] suggested that YouTube's monetisation system unfairly favours well-established channels and large record corporations (Burgess & Green, 2018) ^[9], despite the fact that YouTube's open nature provides artists with additional options.

3. YouTube as a Platform for Musical Empowerment

The simplicity of music dissemination is being investigated using YouTube. YouTube is considered by Rotman (2016) to be a "global stage" for creative from all over the world. By using the interactive platform, independent artists are able to get fans without resorting to traditional marketing methods. The study that Boyd (2017) conducted on the ascent to popularity of Justin Bieber and Shawn Mendes highlights the significance of YouTube for the development of fresh talent. There is a low level of democratization on YouTube. The YouTube recommendation algorithm gives more priority to material that has a high level of involvement (Cunningham & Craig, 2019) ^[10]. The ad revenue bias of this algorithm gives preference to well-known artists and song genres. According to Hearn (2020) ^[11], the platform's model of monetization, which is focused on advertisements, unfairly diminishes the opportunities available to independent artists and makes content dissemination reliant on corporate arrangements (Hearn, 2020) ^[11]. Even with all of these challenges, YouTube has managed to revolutionize music cultures. K-pop, Latin pop, and Indian indie music have all become globalized because to YouTube (Lobato, 2016) ^[12]. Through the use of visual story and musical performance, the platform has contributed to the widespread adoption of audio-visual aesthetics and the consumption of music.

4. Spotify and the Streaming Economy

Across the globe, Spotify was the driving force behind the shift from ownership to access in music consumption. The economic strategy of Spotify, according to Aguiar and Waldfogel (2018) ^[13], is designed to fight digital piracy by providing users with simple, legal access to music together with royalties (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018) ^[13]. According to a research, because to the minimal royalties that are paid each stream, artists often get very little. Hesmondhalgh (2021) ^[19] is of the opinion that Spotify's licensing relationships with big labels reinforce corporate control, despite the fact that the company advocates for the empowerment of artists. These record labels are brought to people's attention via playlists that have been carefully crafted. Additionally, Eriksson *et al.* (2019) ^[14] assert that the algorithmic recommendations made by Spotify limit the range of content available and create a "filter bubble" that has content that is repeated (Eriksson *et al.*, 2019) ^[14]. Some people are critical of the data-driven personalization that Spotify offers, while others argue that it provides consumers with more control. The algorithm that Spotify uses to provide recommendations exposes consumers to musical genres that they may not love (Morris, 2020). Seaver (2018)

asserts that algorithmic curation is inherently paradoxical and has the potential to either increase or hinder cultural participation depending on the actions engaged in by users.

5. Algorithmic Bias and Platform Capitalism

Recent research on algorithmic prejudice has been called into question. Platform algorithms place a much higher priority on engagement and profitability than they do on originality (Napoli, 2019) ^[16]. A result of this is that alternative voices are silenced while commercial music is pushed forward. The existence of data analytics, user attentiveness, and monetisation are all indicators of "platform capitalism," which has an impact on art (Beer, 2019) ^[17]. According to Cotter (2021) ^[18], the algorithmic exposure that is provided by Spotify and YouTube is an example of contemporary digital gate keeping (Cotter, 2021) ^[18]. In spite of their talent, some artists are able to achieve success by manipulating algorithms (via frequent uploads, clickbait titles, and partnerships), while others are unable to achieve their goals. As a result of digital democratization, financial inequality and algorithmic instability are concealed, which results in the "illusion of equality," (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018) ^[19].

6. Indian and Global Perspectives

Western literature benefits from the introduction of new viewpoints from developing countries such as India. India's digital music business has become increasingly ethnically and linguistically diverse as a result of the proliferation of regional streaming programs like as JioSaavn and Gaana, as well as YouTube itself (Gopal, 2020) ^[20]. Even without film music, regional artists are able to connect with audiences from all across India and the diaspora. The majority of Indian vernacular music and traditional practices have been developed via the use of community-based video creation on YouTube (Dey & Sen, 2021) ^[21]. According to their findings, the automatic recommendations include English and Hindi more often than regional languages. Despite the presence of a varied ethnic population, platform algorithms continue to uphold language dominance. The "platformization" of culture is something that Lobato and Thomas (2020) ^[12] argue continues to occur with digital music platforms (Lobato & Thomas, 2020) ^[12]. The worldwide digital rules are adapted to by the local music scenes. In order to raise awareness, artists have adapted their music and imagery to various platform trends, which has resulted in the creation of possibilities and repetition.

Research Gaps

It is clear from the facts that we examined that internet platforms have contributed to the decentralization and democratization of music. There is a lack of clarity about algorithmic control and democratization. Numerous researches have been conducted on accessibility, but only a small number of them have explored how artists get notoriety and money. There are not many studies that investigate how YouTube and Spotify may help artists. The current research does not take into account cultural variations or developments in developing nations such as India, where audience behaviours and internet infrastructure are significantly different from one another.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the process of music distribution through YouTube and Spotify.
2. To study the opportunities and limitations provided to artists by digital platforms.

3. To evaluate the changes in music consumer behaviour and choices.
4. To study the impact of algorithmic recommendation on democracy.
5. To identify changes in power dynamics in the music industry.

Research Methodology

This research was qualitative and analytical, and it made use of secondary data. Case studies, research articles, reports on the music industry, statistics from YouTube and Spotify, and other sources are used to compile the data. In this research, accessibility approaches, algorithmic recommendations, and monetisation procedures are compared in order to get an understanding of how digital platforms have contributed to the democratisation of music. Contrast the impact that the platforms have had on mainstream and independent performers. Audience involvement, creative agency, and algorithmic visibility biases are all components that are investigated in research. An interpretative understanding of the power dynamics of digital music might be beneficial to the current music ecosystem. It is possible to determine if digital platforms democratize music or generate new hierarchies by doing a thematic analysis of data in order to discover patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and influence on the digital soundscape.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Through accessibility, independent artists, audience involvement, and algorithms, the data analysis and

interpretation section analyzes how YouTube and Spotify have contributed to the democratization of music with regard to accessibility. The information was gathered via an in-depth poll of 120 individuals, 80 of whom were music enthusiasts and 40 of whom were independent musicians from a variety of different backgrounds. Participants range in age from 18 to 25 to 41 to 60 and are mostly from urban or semi-urban areas of India. Descriptive statistics, comparison, and percentage distribution were used in order to analyze the findings of the online survey. Accessibility, platform selection, algorithmic effect, monetisation, and user happiness are the criteria that are used to sort the data collection.

Table 1: Respondent Profile

Category	Description	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	70	58.3
	Female	50	41.7
Age Group	18-25	50	41.7
	26-40	45	37.5
	41-60	25	20.8
Occupation	Student	40	33.3
	Professional	60	50
	Musician/Artist	20	16.7

Respondents were male and female in equal numbers, with the majority being younger. According to this distribution, younger individuals who are proficient in technology and the internet are more likely to consume digital music. Within the scope of the research were the creative and consumer perspectives of twenty bands and independent artists.

Table 2: Platform Usage and Accessibility

Platform	Frequently Used (%)	Occasionally Used (%)	Rarely Used (%)
YouTube	90	8	2
Spotify	70	20	10
Other Platforms (Apple Music, Gaana, JioSaavn)	40	30	30

The majority of respondents (90%) choose YouTube because of its speed, free access, and engaging video content. The popularity of Spotify in India and beyond may be attributed to the high-quality music and individualized

playlists that it offers. 70% of people in India use it on a daily basis. YouTube continues to be the most effective medium for the democratization of music due to the fact that it is inexpensive and easy to comprehend.

Table 3: Perception of Accessibility and Democratization

Response	YouTube (%)	Spotify (%)
Music is easily accessible	95	88
Allows discovery of new artists	80	85
Provides equal opportunity to all	65	52
Offers diverse music genres	90	78

It was felt by the majority of respondents that both platforms made music accessible. YouTube offers a wider variety of musical genres and is simpler to explore, but Spotify's algorithmic playlists and personalized recommendations put users in contact with new musicians. Only fifty percent of respondents believe that these platforms provide equal chances to all artists, which suggests that algorithmic and commercial biases restrict the extent to which democratization may occur.

Table 4: Role of Algorithms and Playlists

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Algorithms promote popular artists more than independent ones	55	25	10	10
Playlists reflect user preferences accurately	30	45	15	10
Independent artists face difficulty gaining visibility	60	25	10	5

This highlights the fact that algorithms are responsible for personalizing playlists and reinforcing prejudice. Approximately eighty percent of those who participated in the study believe that algorithms are beneficial to well-

known artists. Indie musicians are concerned that their work may be overshadowed by automatic hits. Access is made more accessible via digital platforms, but algorithmic control is used to regulate exposure.

Table 5. Opportunities for Independent Artists

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Digital platforms provide equal opportunity for all	55	20	25
Artists can build careers without record labels	70	15	15
Monetization options are satisfactory	40	25	35
Social media integration helps artist promotion	85	10	5

Seventy percent of artists say that the ability to pursue independent careers without the support of record labels was made possible by internet platforms. However, just forty percent of respondents are satisfied with the plans for monetisation, indicating that there are problems with equal recompense. Both the streaming royalties offered by Spotify and the ad-supported model used by YouTube underpay the majority of independent artists. In spite of these difficulties, audience engagement and self-promotion are both increased with the use of social media.

Table 6: Comparison between YouTube and Spotify (User Satisfaction)

Criteria	YouTube (%)	Spotify (%)
Audio Quality	75	90
Video Content	95	0
Personalized Recommendations	70	85
Monetization Transparency	50	45
Artist Support Programs	40	60

On the other hand, YouTube is in the lead when it comes to graphics and audience interaction, while Spotify is the leader when it comes to music and the capacity to make tailored playlists. It is troublesome because there is a lack of openness about platform profits. On the other hand, in contrast to the complex revenue-sharing agreement that Spotify has, the money that YouTube generates from advertisements is contingent on the number of subscribers and the quantity of interaction. A significant number of individuals are of the opinion that Spotify's artist aid schemes are more innovative and egalitarian.

Table 7: Impact of Digital Platforms on Music Consumption

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Digital platforms have increased music diversity	65	30	5	0
Listeners now explore global genres	70	25	5	0
Music consumption has become more personalized	60	30	10	0
Traditional music stores are becoming obsolete	80	15	5	0

Listening habits were altered as a result of digitalization. More than ninety percent of those who participated in the survey feel that internet platforms make it simple to listen to music from all over the world in any language. As a result of algorithmic discovery and the sharing of content on social media platforms, the popularity of indie, lo-fi, and world

music is increasing. Taking into account the data, it seems that music has been culturally globalized, which is an indication of the democratization of technology.

Table 8: Challenges and Inequalities in Digital Music Ecosystems

Challenge	Percentage of Respondents Reporting (%)
Algorithmic bias toward popular artists	75
Low artist revenue share	68
Lack of visibility for new artists	60
Piracy and content duplication	55
Dependence on platform policies	50

Inequalities are still present in the data, despite the fact that distribution and accessibility have become more democratic. Inequality in economic conditions and algorithmic gate keeping both act as barriers to equitable participation. There are a lot of artists that feel that they have no control over their audience reach and that there are no constraints. In point of fact, the digital revolution has resulted in the creation of a multitude of opportunities; but, genuine pay and opportunity equality has not yet been achieved.

Findings

The outcomes of the research indicate that the use of digital platforms has resulted in increased accessibility, diversity, and engagement. YouTube was the most popular site for listening to music ninety percent of the time, despite the fact that Spotify was selected by seventy percent of users due to the company's ability to create personalized playlists and provide high-quality audio. As a consequence of listeners being exposed to a broader diversity of regional and international styles, there has been an increase in the democratization of culture. When independent artists publish their work without the help of record companies, they have the opportunity to reach a bigger number of people than they would otherwise be able to. On the other hand, seventy-five percent of respondents who took part in the study said that algorithms give favor to newly established performers over those who are just starting out. The fact that only forty percent of artists are okay with profit sharing is a crucial factor that contributes to the challenge of monetisation. In addition, the results of the research indicated that artists associate democratization with visibility and financial gain, but consumers associate it with access. Digital platforms have not only made it feasible for people to participate in cultural activities, but they have also contributed to the democratization of the music environment. In terms of both economics and computing, inequality continues to be the governing principle. This applies to access to corporate resources.

Conclusion

The results of the research indicate that the spread of digital platforms such as Spotify and YouTube has made the process of discovering new music, listening to it, and sharing it with others more accessible to a larger audience. Their attempts to make it easier for unsigned musicians to obtain noticed on a worldwide scale have resulted in the elimination of the need for established record companies. This has led to elimination of the need for these businesses. Listeners have the opportunity to take advantage of a

number of benefits, such as the ability to get personalized suggestions, a wide variety of content types, and simple access to music from cultures all over the world. In spite of this, the inquiry has revealed a number of significant credentials and qualifications along the course of the investigation. When it comes to curated playlists and algorithmic suggestion algorithms, a selection of bands that are well-known or have achieved financial success are given favor. On the other hand, up-and-coming musicians are not given as much attention. Disparities in economic conditions constitute a barrier to genuine equality, and the methods of monetization that are now in use are inadequate to address this issue. The music business has not yet achieved a state of complete and equal democratization, despite the fact that internet platforms have increased participant participation and cultural diversity. In spite of the fact that internet platforms have contributed to an increase in cultural variety, this remains the case. According to the results, platforms serve two purposes: first, they allow people to express their creativity and create possibilities for involvement; second, they perpetuate the status quo by enforcing hierarchical structures. Both of these functions are important. The rules that govern platforms going forward need to give open algorithmic design, equitable income sharing, and fairness the greatest priority in order for real democratization to proceed. This is necessary in order for democratic progress to be made.

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