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ARTICLE

What Do Musicians Think of Digital Platforms?

David Hesmondhalgh and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye

School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
Corresponding author: David Hesmondhalgh; Email: D.J.Hesmondhalgh@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Drawing on focus groups conducted with musicians based in England, we discuss how musicians with backgrounds in different genres evaluate the effects of a range of music-related digital platforms on musicians and music culture. Alongside criticisms, some of them familiar from recent public debate and academic research, we identify a number of more ambivalent and even positive perspectives on the platformisation of music. We analyse the divided responses of our focus group participants under three main headings: attitudes towards music streaming platforms and record labels; attitudes towards social media and short video platforms, in particular, their use as promotional and branding mechanisms; and attitudes towards the abundance of data available to musicians from these various kinds of digital platforms. In our concluding comments, we consider the possible objection that musicians' ambivalent and sometimes positive appraisals might represent misguided or mistaken perspectives concerning the effects of platformisation.

Keywords: digital platforms; music industries; music streaming; focus groups; social media; short video platforms

1. Introduction: Concerns about digital platforms, music, and musicians in the platform era

In recent years, a new system for the distribution and consumption of music has emerged, across much of the world.[1] Music streaming platforms (MSPs) have become central to the business of music: the vast majority of revenues generated by recorded music now derive from streaming (IFPI 2025). Over 750 million people subscribed to MSPs worldwide as of 2024, and hundreds of millions more use 'free', advertising-supported services. While, of course, this system takes different forms in different nations and continents, its key elements are widely shared (Hesmondhalgh 2025). One is that MSPs offer users with the necessary devices and connectivity relatively affordable access to a vast amount of music. Another is that they allow musicians and businesses to upload music cheaply and fairly easily, meaning that more and more musicians can make their music internationally available. However, musicians and intermediaries still need to make audiences aware of their products, even of their very existence. This involves some further key elements that are now becoming familiar to most people with an interest in contemporary popular culture and that echo developments apparent in other cultural forms, such as film, television, and

[1] We use the term 'system' here in its everyday sense as a set of interrelated parts that make up some kind of whole.

video games. MSPs, like digital platforms in general, are heavily reliant on the collection and analysis of data; in the case of music, the data concerns musical sound, production information, and genres, as well as user behaviour. Drawing on such data, MSPs make pervasive use of algorithmic recommender systems that shape the experience of users, including the degree to which they discover new, innovative, and challenging content. Importantly, MSPs also intersect with a different set of digital platforms, conventionally labelled as social media, such as Facebook, X, and Instagram, as well as audiovisual platforms with social media features, such as YouTube and TikTok, for promotion and consumption.

The system is 'new' in terms of how revenue is principally generated from music (from streaming) and how people mainly access music (through platforms and apps on mobile devices and laptops). But of course, many elements also remain in place from previous systems for the consumption and distribution of music, such as the system centred on radio and on sales from retail outlets of physical objects (vinyl records, cassettes, and CDs) for playing on domestic devices; that system prevailed in many Western countries from the 1950s to the early 2000s. Radio and television remain important ways through which consumers discover music, and by which music and musicians achieve success.

The new musical system centred on digital platforms has been the object of some public concern, and some of the anxieties expressed in public debate have also been the subject of academic research. Echoing public debate, the tone of much of the latter has been one of anxiety, scepticism, and pessimism (Drott 2024). As we explain below, we share many of these concerns. However, much of the critical academic research pays little or no attention to the views of musicians (or audiences), and we felt it was important to build on the research that listens to musicians' views (and we explain below how we hope to go beyond that earlier research).

In reporting on focus groups we conducted with musicians in England in 2023, we report the antipathy expressed by musicians about various features of platforms and some of their impacts. But we also report musicians' responses to the platformisation of music that are more ambivalent, nuanced, and even positive. We demonstrate that musicians recognise significant advantages of digital platforms for musicians and that such attitudes are apparent across a range of musical genres.

In Section 2, we begin by discussing the main concerns that have been expressed about the impacts of digital platforms on musicians and music culture, in academic research and in public debate, and explain in greater detail how our perspective here builds on, and departs from, previous research on musicians and digital platforms. Section 3 then discusses our research design and method, addressing the benefits of focus groups and justifying our choice of genre as a way of organising the groups. In Section 4, we analyse the divided and ambivalent responses of our focus group participants under three main headings: attitudes towards MSPs and record companies; attitudes towards social media platforms and short video platforms with social media features; and attitudes towards the abundance of data available to musicians from all these different kinds of platforms. In our concluding comments, we briefly discuss what the views of our participants mean for research on cultural production and distribution in the digital era. Do musicians' ambivalent and sometimes positive appraisals mean that they are being 'duped' into misreading the effects of platformisation? Might such positive views represent a kind of 'false consciousness'?[2]

[2] 'False consciousness' is a term used in certain kinds of left political activism to describe a way of thinking that prevents people from seeing or understanding the reality of their situation. In using it to explore musicians' views, we do not endorse or refute any particular conceptualisation of ideology.

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2. Research on musicians in the digital platform era – and public debate about them

From the 1970s onwards, a rich body of research on the music industries emerged from sociology, cultural studies, and popular music studies (e.g., Frith 1981, 2000; Negus 1992; Peterson 1997). By contrast with media coverage of the music business, much of this work emphasised the role of 'ordinary' musicians, including amateurs (Finnegan 1989); it was often based on studies of music-making, in particular localities or 'scenes' (Cohen 1989). As revenue from recorded music collapsed from around 2000 onwards, interest in the music industries and related technologies exploded, becoming a topic of interest to researchers from many other disciplines, largely because music was seen as one of the first business sectors where the impact of digitalisation was being felt. For example, there was increasing interest from economics and management studies (Tschmuck 2003), geography (Leyshon 2013), as well as from journalists and trade publishers (Witt 2015). In much of the literature, there was a strong emphasis on disruption and crisis, and on threats to the copyright systems that serve as the basis of recorded music industry revenue (Sun 2019).

In this distinguished body of research on the impact of digitalisation, interest in the working conditions of musicians – for example, their incomes, the work they were required to do, their struggles to make a living from their creativity, and the effects on their well-being – was relatively muted. However, during this same period, the growing neo-liberal 'gig economy' and an international trend in public policy towards boosting the 'creative industries' helped fuel critical research interest in cultural work, which pushed back against what it saw as a dubious framing of the creative industries as a source of 'good work' by advocates of such economically driven policy (Banks *et al.* 2013). Musicians featured prominently in this 'turn to cultural labour', because they were often seen as prototypical of a growing precariousness in working conditions in Western economies, for example, in Andrew Ross's early influential account (Ross 2000). The most advanced music industry research began to centre more on musicians and their working conditions (e.g., Stahl 2013). As digital platforms emerged as the basis of new systems of music distribution and consumption, campaigns by prominent musicians helped to raise public awareness of poor remuneration for musicians (see Dredge 2013). Media coverage seemed to encourage growing solidarity with musicians on the part of music audiences and political activists. Such concern is reflected in hundreds of online articles and social media posts bemoaning the impact of streaming platforms on the working conditions of musicians (some of them summarised in Hesmondhalgh 2021). It is also reflected in much of the academic research on musicians in the streaming age (Marshall's 2015 article on musicians' attitudes to Spotify was an important early contribution). Such concern only increased when the COVID-19 pandemic eliminated vital income from live music for many musicians (Arditi 2021). Musician well-being has become a notable research topic (Gross and Musgrave 2020). A recent significant collection of critical music industry research (Arditi and Nolan 2024) is indicative of an important shift in research: musical labour and exploitation is the subject of the first section, consisting of 10 chapters, and these topics feature prominently throughout that book.

Initial excitement about the possibility that digitalisation might bring about 'democratisation', by bypassing traditional industry mediation, has given way to a pronounced disquiet about the problems faced by musicians in making a living from music in a new system dominated by streaming and social media platforms. This includes the sheer amount of non-musical work required of musicians to achieve success in the new musical system (Everts *et al.* 2022). Empirical evidence from the past decade shows the ways musicians often feel compelled to engage in entrepreneurial activity, accidentally or reluctantly, while still seeking to prioritise musical work (Coulson 2012; Haynes and Marshall 2018). In addition, some commentators have argued that the dependence of MSPs on data, and their

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interconnectedness with social media and other platforms, means that digital platforms bring pressure to understand success and failure in terms of numbers – a tendency known in some research approaches as *quantification* (see Maasø and Hagen 2020 for discussion).

Another issue of controversy and concern regarding the working conditions of musicians in the platform era is the systems of recommendation, both automated and humanly curated, that are so important on MSPs and social media platforms (Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2023). These have some power to shape success and failure but appear to be poorly understood, even within the music industries themselves (Competition and Markets Authority 2022). An important topic in computer science research on music recommender systems is how recommender systems might merely reinforce the popularity of what is already the most popular content (see, e.g., Abdollahpouri *et al.* 2021). There are widespread complaints about the complexity and opacity of these systems (Ferraro *et al.* 2021, pp. 573–74).

A further set of concerns and controversies revolve around the impacts of digital platforms on music culture – on everyday musical experiences and practices, and on music itself. One striking example of such a concern is that musicians might be distorting their natural creativity, by 'optimising' their outputs to conform to demands generated by platforms (Morris 2020). Some studies of digital content creators claim to reveal various 'cultural optimisation' strategies that make content 'more searchable, discoverable, usable, and valuable in both economic and cultural senses' (Morris *et al.* 2021, pp. 162–63). Recent empirical research suggests that musicians are divided on whether to 'optimise' their music for platforms or push back against optimisation (e.g. Morgan 2022; Siles *et al.* 2022). Often, concerns about optimisation relate to wider concerns about how platforms may also be harming music culture in other ways, for example, by diminishing people's attentiveness to music and placing function and mood above deeper, richer aesthetic experiences (Hesmondhalgh 2022). The automated and 'human' recommendation systems discussed above also have implications for music cultures, for example, in terms of how algorithmic systems may impact the diversity of musical content consumed on MSPs, and what kinds of music consumers will be enabled to discover music (Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2023).

Many of these concerns are surely valid. Just as cheap clothing depends on low wages paid to workers elsewhere, often in the Majority World, the low prices paid for access to millions of tracks, whether through subscription or advertising, means that rights-holders will be paid relatively little, and musicians even less, usually depending on contracts they have signed with rights-holders (Bataille and Perrenoud 2021; deWaard *et al.* 2022; Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2021; Watson *et al.* 2023). The long-standing precariousness of musical labour for most musicians, established in this literature, seems indisputable.

Understandably then, musicians who are highly critical of the musical system based on streaming have tended to feature very prominently in public debate about the new system, and the role of digital platforms within it. Musician perspectives on the digital and social media platforms that are at the centre of the new system have undoubtedly featured in recent research (Freeman *et al.* 2024; Mühlbach and Arora 2020), including on the 'fairness' or otherwise of the system (Ferraro *et al.* 2021). Nevertheless, in our own previous research on streaming and when talking informally to musicians in recent years, it seemed to us that a more varied set of views often emerged than in public debate and research. In particular, we became accustomed to hearing ambivalent and positive views as much as negative views – yet it seemed that the former were rarely captured in recent research and commentary. Moreover, very little of the research on musicians' views of music platforms was based on interactive discussion among musicians, in the way that focus groups can facilitate (an exception is the chapter based on focus groups in Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2021). This is in spite of the well-recognised advantages that focus groups can bring to issues of controversy, discussed in Section 3. So, we decided to convene a set of focus groups, to explore the above issues via the following research questions. How do musicians understand the

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platform-based musical system that has emerged in recent years, and these and other concerns associated with it? How do they understand the problems *and* benefits of MSPs and the more general system of which they are part? What range of perspectives is apparent among musicians? We were also curious, because of our interest in musical values, discourse, and ideologies, about what role genre might play in shaping the varying perspectives taken by different musicians. We expand on our choice of research strategy in the next section.

3. Research design and method

Where the perspectives of ordinary musicians have featured in recent research concerning the effects of digital platforms, the studies have tended to rely on a particular group of methodological approaches, mainly interviews (e.g., Ferraro *et al.* 2021; Jones 2021) and surveys (Bataille and Perrenoud 2021; Haynes and Marshall 2018), and on very rare occasions personal diaries (Everts *et al.* 2022) and ethnography (deWaard *et al.* 2022). Focus groups have been employed to understand user perspectives on music streaming (e.g., Hanrahan 2018; Jansson 2021; Siles *et al.* 2020; Spilker 2017) and industry perspectives (Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2021) but not musician perspectives. Our use of focus groups, rather than individual interviews, helps to tease out consensus and dissensus among musicians about the key issues discussed above.

Focus groups prioritise interaction between participants 'to open up epistemological assumptions about the subject matter' that may 'offer a more critical or reflexive framework for research on the very nature of attitudes' (Waterton and Wynne 1999, p. 4). In this study, we are interested in understanding musicians' espoused attitudes, values, and beliefs about the new musical system and the conditions they face there. We also seek, with an inductive focus, to consider, on the basis of participants' discourse and immersion in public discourse on related issues, what aspects of the economic, cultural, and political context might explain why those views are held. Focus groups might allow music industry researchers to access valuable 'musician talk' (Wilson and MacDonald 2005), revealing the extent to which musicians talk to each other from positions of mutual understanding, respect, and curiosity. Focus groups are an ideal setting to elicit musician talk, compared to participants presenting their subjective views in isolation to an interviewing researcher. To take advantage of musician talk in our focus groups, we encouraged participants to respond to each other, debate strategies, and share differing opinions.

We designed our facilitation guide to be concise with minimal intrusion from the facilitator to maximise interaction among participants, and we asked participants to respond to the following discussion prompts:

- What digital platforms did participants use as music creators and why?
- How, if at all, did participants use data from digital platforms to inform their creative and commercial practice?
- In what ways had digital platforms shifted participants' interactions with audiences and to what extent did they believe that those interactions were influenced by algorithmic recommender systems?
- How, in their view, had the rise of streaming impacted the cultural conditions for musicians?

Importantly, we deliberately did not ask questions about remuneration and the economics of streaming when designing our facilitation guide but rather waited to see whether these concerns would emerge spontaneously from the discussion. While these are unquestionably important issues that impact musicians' lives, our intent was to foreground *cultural* aspects of the new musical system to complement previous studies

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with musicians that focus on the economics of music streaming (see, e.g., Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2021).

We conducted a pilot focus group in March 2023 with seven participants in person to test the facilitation guide. For practical and logistical reasons, following the pilot, we conducted the remaining five focus groups virtually via Zoom from April to July 2023. After overcoming the initial awkwardness of meeting for the first time in a virtual environment, participants managed to establish a natural flow of conversation when responding to our discussion prompts. In total, we recruited thirty-four participants across six focus groups. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 65 (see Appendix). The majority of participants (22) identified as cis male and just over half identified as *white* British (19). Some participants were not actively releasing music at the time they were recruited, and most (20) reported earning less than 50% of their income from recording royalties and other music-related activities (e.g., live performances, merch sales, and music lessons). Focus groups were recorded and transcribed using Rev, a secure automated transcription service. Transcripts and audio recordings were then imported into NVivo for coding and analysed following a grounded approach to inductive qualitative thematic analysis (Charmaz 2006).

We sorted participants into focus groups roughly according to self-identified genre. We purposely targeted people who identified as local jazz musicians for the pilot, with recruitment assistance from the organisers of a local annual jazz festival. All subsequent participants were asked to provide three main genres that they associated with the music they made and released during the participant screening process, and from the responses, we created five further groupings: jazz (seven participants), rock (eight), pop (five), hip-hop (five), electronic/dance (EDM) (five), and classical (four).

We attempted to be broad in specifying genres for the groups to bring some diversity to the groups to whom we hoped to listen regarding their attitudes and beliefs. This differentiates our approach from that of Everts and Haynes (2021) who compared musicians' perspectives in two different markets by recruiting interview participants from roughly similar genre backgrounds. As we discuss below, while some noteworthy genre distinctions did emerge during the focus group discussions, it did not prove possible to make any direct comparative claims about how, for example, jazz musicians understand conditions as opposed to rock musicians. Instead, genre ended up functioning as a way of ensuring diversity among the musicians we interviewed. Future research may seek to identify differences that might derive from ideologies formed within the particular genre communities to which the participants professed to belong.

4. Musicians discussing digital platforms

We divide our discussion of musicians' views into three headings derived from our facilitation questions and refined through our thematic coding: attitudes towards MSPs and record labels, attitudes towards short video platforms with social media features, and attitudes towards data. In each case, we show that as well as having criticisms of different aspects of the new musical system centred on platforms, musicians from all genres also expressed more ambivalent and even positive attitudes.

4.1. Attitudes towards MSPs and record labels

The central question driving this study was to understand how musicians viewed the digital platforms on which we argue the new musical system centres. Initial responses when we asked our participants what they thought about MSPs often tended to be negative. A common theme across the six focus groups was that MSPs were a welcome development

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for music consumers, but problematic for music producers in terms of remuneration. As one participant in the EDM group summarised:

> Ella (38f, EDM)[3]: As a listener, [streaming] is a positive because it's so accessible … You can have [music] wherever you want and listen to any song in the world at any time … As a listener I love it, but as an artist it's a bit shit ….

Ella elaborated that streaming was 'a bit shit' for artists because of remuneration rates and revenue models. This opinion, echoed in other focus groups, reflects the belief that MSPs are making conditions more unfair for musicians (Dredge 2013), an issue that, as we pointed out above, has been an object of public debate and academic research (see, e.g., Hesmondhalgh and Sun 2025). As noted above, we did not specifically ask about remuneration, but because this is such a central issue that affects their lives and livelihoods, the topic still came up repeatedly in nearly all of the focus groups:

> Ray (41m, rock): I think the amount of money that musicians are making is possibly less now [Agreement from others]. I don't know exactly the statistics on it, but from my perspective as an artist, it's pretty abysmal unless you're in the millions and millions of streams. So that's probably a negative.

> Jonah (65m, pop): When I'm listening to stuff I use Spotify. I'm a bit aggrieved because they don't pay us musicians much money, but I happen to be a member [i.e. a subscriber]. It's just easy.

It is understandable that these individuals, who were not generating millions of streams from their recorded music, would find it difficult to set aside concerns about payments in these discussions. But not everyone expressed positive feelings about MSPs in terms of music consumption, and while many participants were positive about what MSPs offered them as consumers, some felt negatively about even this aspect:

> Cici (28f, EDM): A lot of people will literally tell you 'I just listen to what's out there'. They don't have specifics. I just think we've all become a little bit lazy with how we respond to music at the moment because of it being so accessible.

This aligns with popular critiques of the new musical system that it both encourages homogenous musical experiences and 'lean back listening', a term used to describe a passive, disengaged approach to music consumption (Pelly 2018).

The focus group setting allowed participants to debate certain aspects of MSPs that some viewed as positive and others as negative. One example was paid promotional tools on MSPs. Participants in the jazz focus group brought up Spotify's Discovery Mode, a feature introduced in 2020 that initially allowed labels to pay to have their music given higher priority on algorithmically recommended feeds (Dredge 2020). Discovery Mode has been likened to payola, where labels would (illegally) pay radio stations or broadcasters to promote their songs (D'Souza 2024). In 2023, around the time we conducted our focus groups, Discovery Mode was made available to more artists in specific territories for the price of a percentage commission on streaming revenues (Spotify 2023). Two participants shared this exchange about Discovery Mode and musical quality:

[3] We indicate the age and self-identified gender of each quoted participant, along with the focus group in which they took part.

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> Gus (26m): [Discovery Mode] is gonna help with pushing numbers, but is the quality gonna be there? That's the question. Like is this Discovery Mode just gonna be a load of people that are just hoping to get ahead in their career?
>
> Andy (24m): So, on the quality thing, because this burns me in the chest, what do you want then? Do you want quality musicians, or do you want everyone to have a chance? Because I think if we go back to 'quality musicians' then we go back to the monopoly of the music industry of like, sorry to say, old white men sat in a room in London somewhere in a dark dungeon saying 'No. Yes. No'.
>
> Gus (26m): No, that's facts. I hear it. It's totally subjective. [...] When I'm saying quality of music ... I think we all can agree there's a standard. People that are willing to pay for or work with mixing or master engineers are of a certain quality. You don't have to be like a major label artist or anything. But you are willing to put some money into making your music sound good. Not just a phone recording that you put on Spotify. I mean quality in that sense. Someone who has put some thought into it. But if people are just like 'yeah, I want to be on Discovery Mode' that's gonna be a vast majority of people that just want to be big in their career.

This interaction illustrates musicians' ambivalence towards one controversial feature of MSPs in the new musical system. On the one hand, Gus' frustration that signed artists or wealthy independent musicians can pay to influence recommendations is understandable. He spoke as an independent artist competing with better-resourced individuals trying to develop their commercial careers. On the other hand, Andy's contempt for the old musical intermediaries and their appraisal of what is or is not 'quality' music, is grounded in suspicions of what he sees as illegitimate concentrations of power. Giving more musicians opportunities to enhance the visibility of their music can either widen the pool of music or potentially dilute its quality, depending on one's perspective. Discovery Mode requires the capital to pay for it upfront and the ability to afford earning reduced revenues from streams, which in the musical context means it is still more likely to be used by record labels or by self-releasing musicians with considerable resources.

One area where ambivalent rather than strongly negative views were apparent concerned the role of record companies. Labels still dominate the global musical market in the streaming era, but there are now many more pathways to be a self-releasing or DIY artist (Everts *et al.* 2022; Jones 2021). Entertainment media occasionally highlight well-known musicians who break with their label and give an insider account of why they have decided to opt for DIY, such as the pop/R&B artist Raye. Participants in the pop focus group shared how those kinds of stories had affected their view towards signing with a label and here remuneration issues discussed above were also apparent:

> Rami (23m): I don't know if you have seen there was an interview with Raye. She just escaped from Polydor and was talking about how horrific the music industry is for her. She sat down with other top 40 writers and talked about how they were struggling to pay rent. I found that insane <laugh> that you could be that successful and not see the fruits of your labour <laugh>.
>
> Jonah (65m): It depends what you sign.
>
> Rami (23m): I think that they get signed quite young now, that's the problem. They don't really know what they're doing.

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> Jonah (65m): Well, it's always been like that. In my day you had to just make sure you stick to your guns and get a music business lawyer ....

This inter-generational exchange between Rami and Jonah raises long-standing issues about precarious working conditions for musicians and the role of dubious record contracts (Arewa and Stahl 2023; Stahl 2013). Yet some participants saw labels more positively, for example, as potentially addressing challenges associated with being a self-releasing artist. Self-releasing might carry benefits such as greater creative autonomy, but it also requires artists to perform the extra labour involved in promoting and marketing new releases (an issue we return to with regard to social media below). Niko in the jazz group told the following story:

> Niko (32f): I'm dyslexic and neurodivergent. I find it really difficult to pitch my stuff [to playlists] whenever I want to release it. I struggle with that. Recently, I put out an EP with a label and they were able to pitch it. Obviously, they have more experience. They were able to pitch it to the gods at Spotify and then it got put onto the Release Radar [playlist] ... I think there needs to be more support for people who struggle with being able to pitch themselves who don't have a label.

Niko's reference to the 'godlike' quality of major MSPs like Spotify, and their algorithmic systems, conveys her sense of them as inscrutable, powerful, and potentially unmovable. However, a label was able to provide assistance in dealing with the challenge of dealing with these all-powerful forces.

In the aforementioned conversation about labels in the pop focus group, after discussing variable successes and failures of different prominent artists, the following exchange took place:

> Tara (37f): I think [labels] have to be a lot more transparent now.

> Adrian (44m): Exactly. And I think, stories are coming out that are making labels seem less appealing to unsigned artists. On the one hand there are reasons that I do wanna be signed. But on the other hand, I think it's a lot easier for independent artists to thrive now ... I would actually fear signing with a label if the opportunity arose.

As well as the above negative and ambivalent positions, we also heard plenty of more positive appraisals, acknowledging various advantages or benefits to making music in the age of MSPs. First, many participants commented that distributing music had become easier and more accessible. Similar to Adrian's comment above about independent artists, a participant in the jazz group characterised the lowered barriers to distributing music:

> Leo (36m, jazz): ... the greatest thing that music streaming has done. Now anyone can get music into the 'record shop', right?

Perhaps a little more surprisingly given public concerns about platform recommendation systems (Competition and Markets Authority 2022), a number of participants felt that 'algorithmic' recommendation was providing opportunities for emerging artists:

> Emil (24m, rock): It's easier to make music now. You can just be in your room on your phone and make something acceptable ... You can just put your song on social media and Spotify can recommend your songs to people that listening to that genre. I think it's a very good thing for younger artists ...

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> Zoey (33f, rock): I think that streaming platforms have certainly made artists more recognisable... It's easier to reach an audience. I don't think they're a bad thing.

As we have already seen, our participants generally viewed MSPs as more positive for music consumers due to the unprecedented access they afford to recorded music. That positive attitude was as evident among younger participants who mostly grew up in the new musical system as it was for older participants who transitioned into it, as this exchange illustrates:

> Theo (21m, rock): I don't really remember what it was like before Spotify, to be honest. I remember that I had an iPod shuffle. That was pretty primitive to me, but it was probably quite advanced for some people in this room compared to what they had at my age. I think [streaming] just makes music so much more accessible. You can listen to so much more for the same price. I do think it devalues individual songs slightly, but you can access more for the same price, so it's good for users.

> Marisol (50f, rock): Yes, to continue that. I remember the exposure to music we had growing up was MTV, radio <laugh>, or you had to go out and buy a CD, before that a cassette <laugh>. Things have really changed. There's a lot more exposure for the artists, how easily they can put their music out there and it's available around the world. And with the algorithms you get exposed to the new artists and other songs you might like so much easier. I think it's changed for the best.

Marisol here links what she sees as exposure of audiences to greater musical diversity to opportunity for musicians – cutting against the criticisms made by other participants above. Maria in the classical group went a step further, asserting that MSPs were helping introduce new audiences to classical music:

> Maria (32f): Streaming gives everybody the opportunity to listen to classical at home. Not everybody is gonna go to a concert. It seems like a lot of people (in the UK) have preconceived ideas about classical music. Like, 'oh, it's for posh people' ... I really think [MSPs] have helped a lot of young people to know more about [classical music]. You can listen to it and discover it on your own and you've not got that peer pressure, like 'oh, that's not cool'.

Our focus group discussions, then, teased out an array of attitudes towards MSPs and record labels. While participants did have frustration to vent about the economics of streaming and the potential effect of streaming on listener culture, they were more divided about the influence of paid promotion and the role of labels in the new musical system and surprisingly positive about algorithmic recommender systems. We return to the question of whether they were right or not to hold these more positive views at the end of this article.

4.2. Attitudes towards short video platforms with social media features

We asked musicians to share perspectives about other digital platforms besides MSPs that they used to promote themselves and their music to audiences. Participants mentioned social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, but by far the most frequently mentioned were short video platforms (with social media features) such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Short video platforms have become increasingly relevant to musicians and the music industries in the years since TikTok's dramatic rise to popularity

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in 2020–21 (Kaye *et al.* 2022). Promoting new releases and an artistic persona on short video platforms is now among the additional 'non-musical labour' that musicians must balance with making, rehearsing, and performing music (Everts *et al.* 2022; Haynes and Marshall 2018). Our participants expressed concern about the felt requirement to promote their music on digital platforms. As participants in the EDM group lamented:

> Ella (38f): It's pretty sad that these days you feel like you can't be a successful artist without being on your social media game. Really it should just be about the music, but it's not anymore. And that's a shame, but that's just the way it is at the moment.
>
> Cici (28f): I agree with Ella, it does seem like we've gone into this culture where it's more about 'look at me' than the actual art someone has to show … unfortunately [social media and music] do go hand in hand in this day and age.

Although, as we explained at the beginning of this article, the new musical system of music consumption and distribution centres on MSPs, social media platforms were somewhat fatalistically perceived by our musicians as inextricably linked to commercially successful musical careers; 'they go hand in hand' and 'that's just the way it is', even if both participants here wished that was not the case.

Some participants attributed the putatively problematic forms of consumption discussed above to short video platforms when discussing how disengaged listening affects their work as musicians. Participants in the jazz focus group, for example, shared feelings of disappointment about the makeup of audiences at certain live music events:

> Blake (26f): I do a lot of box office shifts and like whenever an artist comes in that is big from TikTok … the people in the crowd are not music fans. They are 'social media consumers'. It is a completely different atmosphere at the gig. On the big choruses all the phones are out, everyone's having a great time. But the rest of the time? No atmosphere. People don't know how to be at a music event. That was bizarre to me.
>
> Leo (36m): I've only experienced that for the first time recently. And it's really demoralising as an artist to be in one of those crowds.

Many of the musicians to whom we listened expressed a mixture of feeling lost, overwhelmed, or confused when using platforms like TikTok, often intercut with encouragement or reassurance from their peers. However, views of social media in relation to music were not always so fatalistic or disappointed. Participants who were more enthusiastic about non-musical labour on digital platforms took the opportunity afforded by our focus groups to share advice with their more negative or ambivalent peers. For example, Rami in the pop group mentioned seeking peer support in dedicated music production discussion forums on the social messaging platform Discord or following producers who live-streamed production sessions on Twitch. Emil in the rock group suggested searching Google Trends for trending topics or key terms before posting music online.

Participants shared ambivalent attitudes towards promotional activity whenever the conversations turned to TikTok or short video platforms. In the hip-hop group, Raphael suggested taking a more narrowly focused approach to promotion to help avoid burnout:

> Raphael (42m): You don't have a machine behind you, bro. You spread yourself too thin. It's wasted energy. The general rule is pick two social media. Obviously have a presence everywhere but pick two and focus on those two. That's it.

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> Stevie (39m): My music's not very TikTok-able so I wouldn't waste time with that.
>
> Raphael (42m): Shouldn't think that way, bruv.
>
> Stevie (39m): Well, maybe. But I'm not gonna do TikTok videos. I've gotta be realistic about what I'm gonna do, right? I guess the two that I use most are Instagram and Twitter. And that's because no one's using Facebook anymore. My Instagram does link to Facebook, but I'm not doing anything on Facebook. That's just the way the world's gone, right? Like just old people are on it.
>
> Raphael (42m): It's for the parents and the soccer moms. But if you're making music for them, then you need to be on Facebook. <laughs>

Musicians across the focus groups found various aspects of TikTok particularly appealing compared to other social media platforms, though several did not use the platform. In the initial years following its international release, TikTok was widely viewed as a platform for teenagers that was disregarded or in some cases even stigmatised by older users (Kaye *et al.* 2022). Often when a younger participant brought up TikTok in the group discussion, one or more older participants would confess that they did not use the platform, had limited knowledge about it, or were averse to using it, as this exchange in the pop focus group illustrates:

> Tara (37f): I've done a few videos on Instagram and TikTok, but they're something I do for friends <laugh> it's more of a friendly 'testing the water' sort of thing.
>
> Adrian (44m): I am yet to embrace TikTok. I haven't really had a promotional cycle yet since TikTok has blown up and I'm dreading that if I'm honest. I feel like there's an expectation and a need to constantly create content. I'm not particularly fond of doing that.
>
> Jonah (65m): Me neither. I'm not into [TikTok]. I'm just a songwriter <laugh> people don't wanna see an old git like me when you've got all these young guys on there. I make the melodies and lyrics. I don't get involved in that side of things.
>
> Rami (23m): [...] I think the trick is to just post unrelated content with the song. The video content will go viral and then you have the song going viral because it's attached to the video. It's annoying because the video has nothing to do with the song that you're promoting.

However, participants frequently described algorithmic recommendations on short video platforms as being better for musical discovery and connecting with audiences than other social media platforms. The home page of TikTok, called the 'For You Page (FYP)', is an endlessly refreshed feed of algorithmically recommended content. The chances of appearing on the TikTok FYP are no more knowable than on other platforms, but it was often compared favourably with other platforms when discussing the role of algorithmic recommender systems in connecting with audiences:

> Mia (24f, EDM): TikTok is the platform where I'd say I've reached the most new listeners [...] I'm looking for a specific group of people. Instagram is probably one of the most difficult apps to get the algorithm to put you in front of the right people. It's almost like they're playing their own game. Twitter can be so-and-so if you have that network [...]

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> YouTube can be good if you get the right video. I feel like if you are looking for new listeners, TikTok has made their algorithm in a way that entices people.

In the rock group, TikTok was presented as a favourable contrast to Spotify or YouTube in terms of the likelihood of being discovered:

> Ray (41m): One aspect of Spotify or YouTube is on your homepage they have artists that are recommended or featured. Originally, when those platforms were new, it felt very much like anyone could be featured. But now it feels like it's gone back to how things were pre-streaming, where it's run by record companies.

> Theo (21m): [...] If you want to get discovered as an amateur, I think TikTok is the place to go. We've used it in the band a bit. It's good for views, not great for interaction, but I think a lot of amateur artists go on there now.

Theo and other younger participants positioned TikTok as advantageous, if unpredictable. As with the debate about Spotify's Discovery Mode in the previous section, one participant suggested that TikTok was a useful means to circumvent traditional gatekeepers in the music industry:

> Shay (33f, pop): I think TikTok is now playing a big part in what is on the radio. It's not just labels that paid for a spot. It's now that a song is really popular because of how many millions of views it has gained. It's easier, like [Rami] said, to create a video with your song in the background than to get any sort of radio promotion or even a leg in the door. You're better off going onto TikTok.

4.3. Attitudes towards data

Finally, we demonstrate ambivalence in musicians' views towards the quantitative engagement metrics and audience data abundantly available to musicians on digital platforms. We intentionally worded the discussion prompt about data to be open-ended, so participants could provide their interpretations of what they think of when they think of 'data'. As we explained above, critical research about datafication often focuses on issues related to privacy and security (Dencik 2020; van Dijck 2014). Our participants spoke mainly about data in terms of 'metrics', or quantitative measurements of audiences and performance statistics. Analytics tools developed by MSPs are often marketed as vital tools that help musicians understand audiences and make informed decisions (Hagen 2022). But some of our participants used strong language to describe their personal antipathy towards having to deal with 'analytics':

> Jake (33m, EDM): I have quite a large listenership in the Philippines for some reason. It was the Philippines and 21- to 25-year-old women in Dublin apparently. But yeah, while it was useful, I hated doing that as an artist. For me personally that side of things just makes me lose my mind. It was a necessary evil. One of the reasons I was very much looking for label representation is I'll happily take less money not to have to deal with [analytics]. I'm riddled with ADHD and find the whole thing to be confusing.

In other words, Jake was willing to seek professional assistance from a label to help interpret data analytics at the cost of revenue and likely some degree of artistic autonomy. But he also portrays data as an unavoidable fixture in the new musical system. A participant in the hip-hop group expressed a similar disdain, but justified in terms of preserving artistic integrity:

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> Ava (26f, hip-hop): I don't pay too much attention to the data necessarily. I feel like [music] is always changing. It's a cycle. I try not to focus too much on that. I do my own research in terms of what people I listen to, the quality of the songwriting. I try to understand what people like about music nowadays. But I never want to compromise what I do. At the end of the day, it's my art. There will always be an audience out there. Real music will last. <laugh>

In the jazz focus group, participants spoke about the way that venues use streaming data to make decisions about booking:

> Leo (36m): We were booking a tour for my band recently and a couple of venues who I contacted asked if they could have streaming stats and breakdowns for the last few months to use as a kind of barometer for whether they should book us, which I've never had before.
>
> Gus (26m): It's pretty common.
>
> Andy (24m): Yeah. Like a lot of hip-hop venues that I've gone to and talked to the promoters just like in the last three months say if it's not like over 5,000 [streams] in their area, [the show] is not happening. Because they don't want to take the chance.

Here is an instance of differing views that might relate to participants' professional roles. Andy also works as an artist manager, and Blake co-runs an indie label. They were perhaps more willing to accept the reality of datafied decision-making in the new musical system than the touring artists in this group, Leo, Gus, and Niko, who expressed frustration that booking decisions were being made solely on numbers from MSPs or ChartMetric, perhaps seeing it as a kind of surveillance mechanism.

Others expressed uncertainty and anxiety about how to engage with data:

> Tara (37f, pop): I've looked at the data and just get overwhelmed with it. You're not sure how to process it and what to do with it. I mean, even if you are getting a certain demographic then thinking it's not good enough, or you then you start to reflect and maybe think you've gotta change it. So, I'm not sure it gains anything for what you're doing. Unless the data is saying it's basically crap <laughs> Then I give up and restart. It's really hard to gauge it.

These responses highlight a potential distinction in attitudes towards branding and marketing strategies between musicians, on the one hand, and influencers or other 'content creators', on the other. Even though more data analytics tools are available to musicians in the new musical system, participants in our focus groups who described themselves as particularly invested in the quality of their art (to the extent of downplaying commercial concerns, at least in how they talk about these matters) were less likely to base creative decisions on what is popular or trending at a given moment. This perhaps sets them apart from other types of digital creators or influencers who are more focused on earning money and are therefore more flexible with the types of content they produce (such as the influencers discussed by Arriagada and Bishop 2021).

There was discussion in some groups of how data can contribute to instability in the working lives of musicians, for example, when certain 'numbers' attract a flurry of attention from industry actors only for that attention to quickly evaporate. Here is one participant's experience:

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> Gus (26m, jazz): There was a time where my song was doing really well and I got bombarded by labels, A&R agents, managers, and lawyers. I was like, 'what's going on?' Until a manager told me that I triggered some sort of algorithm on ChartMetric. These websites are tracking your social media following to see how fast it is growing in a set period of time, how fast are your stream numbers going up. They'll approach you saying, 'Oh, your music's amazing. I heard it on a playlist'. But the likelihood is they just saw you on a website <laugh>. I find that fascinating. There are people that will sign someone based on numbers and based on those metrics.

Overall, however, and echoing attitudes towards other aspects of the new musical system discussed above, attitudes toward data were mixed rather than uniformly critical or hostile. Here is an excerpt from the pop focus group responding to the question about the degree to which data shape their creative output:

> Rami (23m): I think [audience data] is just a cool thing to look at.
>
> Adrian (44m): I would agree. I think that it hasn't influenced my creativity at all.
>
> Shay (33f): Yeah. Same. At most, it's interesting, but it hasn't changed or influenced anything that I do creatively.

There were also some more positive appraisals. In the EDM group, data were viewed as a way to help plan and facilitate live performances. Our participants generally denied undertaking the kinds of 'cultural optimisation' that have been speculated upon in a great deal of the critical research (Morgan 2022; Morris *et al.* 2021; Siles *et al.* 2022), whereby creative outputs, such as music itself, are supposedly modified to meet the perceived affordances and requirements of digital platforms. Instead, they emphasised the usefulness of data for promotional, marketing, and touring purposes. For example, one participant in the EDM group discussed using geographical data for planning tours:

> Mia (24f, EDM): I like to see geographically where my listeners are … For example, I have a big listener base in Manchester and Birmingham but I'm based in London. Having that information lets me know if it would be good to collaborate with a producer from somewhere like that. On a global scale, my second largest listenership is in Australia. Having that information helps me to know where I should be thinking about touring when the time comes … the analytics really help with that.

The main usefulness identified by musicians was the kinds of geographical data discussed by Jake above (who also humorously points to its strangeness). But even when not quite as vociferous in their doubts as Jake, knowledge and time requirements seemed to be a barrier to engaging more. As one of the musicians in our sample signed to a record label, Jake's willingness to sacrifice earnings in order to focus on making music speaks to the role that labels continue to play in the new musical system.

Clearly, there are pressures to use data in the new musical system. The major MSPs and digital distribution platforms offer analytics tools or dashboards to creators that are marketed as keys to success. Some participants in our groups were bashful that they were not getting the most from their metrics. Following the discussion about the uses and usefulness of data in the EDM group, Simon confessed that he felt he needed to learn more about how to use metrics:

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> Simon (36m, EDM): For me it's interesting to hear everyone's perspectives. Admittedly, I don't really use my [data analytics tools] how I should. Right now, the stage that I'm at, but perhaps I should be using them more like some of the other artists here.

Mia, however, assuaged his fears while recognising the challenges involved in achieving an appropriate level of detachment from data:

> Mia (24f, EDM): If I was to give advice, I'd say don't be afraid of it. It's just data to help you understand. Try and detach yourself from it. That's the most difficult thing to do as an artist. The best thing you can do is zone out and create your art. Or do whatever it is you're doing. We're supposed to be artists, not bloody content creators.

We read Mia's statement as a supportive message to a fellow musician and a firm statement of resistance to the incorporation of musicians into a datafied, platformised system (indicated by 'content creators'). But it is also a pragmatic statement, about the potential usefulness of data, and the need not to let it dictate one's practice as a musician.

5. Conclusions

Across various elements of what we have characterised as a new musical system of consumption and distribution centred on, but by no means confined to, streaming, we have shown that our focus groups suggest a wider and more ambivalent set of perspectives than might be apparent from the strongly negative recent treatment of the effects of digital platforms on music and musicians.

Is it possible that the ambivalent, and at times even positive, views of platformisation and data apparent among the above musicians reflect a form of 'false consciousness' on their part? Are they, in other words, *mistaken* in failing to see developments in the very dark colours painted by recent critics (e.g., Drott 2024)? We would prefer to think of their perspectives instead as reflecting the immersion of people in the ordinary pleasures and challenges of their working and creative lives. We reported how many of our musicians, even those with more positive views of the effects of platforms on their work, were keen to stress the benefits of platformisation for music users. The undeniable abundance and convenience afforded by platforms may be thought of by some critics as a kind of seductive compensation for their downsides. But we believe that a less dramatic appraisal is in order. Many of the problems surrounding the effects of platforms on music are difficult to capture, as they reflect long-term historical and structural developments. Our musicians showed intelligence and insight in identifying and reflecting on these problems, but to some extent, they 'make do' with the conditions they face. Their reflections are not so different from how some other groups of workers discuss their conditions, for example, how university lecturers and students often talk about the contemporary university: riddled with problems and inequalities, but also still offering *some* spaces of freedom, autonomy, and possibility. What we heard in our focus groups should by no means invalidate critique of the new musical system, but it serves as a warning against assuming consensus among those most affected by platformisation in the realm of music – those seeking to make a living out of it.

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Appendix: Focus group participants

Name[a]	Age	Gender	Group
Blake	26	Female	Jazz
Gus	26	Male	Jazz
Leo	36	Male	Jazz
Andy	24	Male	Jazz
Rex	22	Male	Jazz
Niko	32	Female	Jazz
Bill	24	Male	Jazz
Zoey	33	Female	Rock
Alex	27	Male	Rock
Emil	24	Male	Rock
Ray	41	Male	Rock
Liam	58	Male	Rock
Amina	23	Female	Rock
Marisol	50	Female	Rock
Theo	21	Male	Rock
Adrian	44	Male	Pop
Shay	33	Female	Pop
Jonah	65	Male	Pop
Rami	23	Male	Pop
Tara	37	Female	Pop
Ava	26	Female	Hip-hop
Kim	28	Male	Hip-hop
Raphael	42	Male	Hip-hop
Stevie	39	Male	Hip-hop
Taylor	29	Male	Hip-hop
Ella	38	Female	EDM
Jake	33	Male	EDM
Simon	36	Male	EDM
Cici	28	Female	EDM
Mia	24	Female	EDM
Joss	22	Male	Classical
Enzo	22	Male	Classical
Maria	32	Female	Classical
Joel	45	Male	Classical

Abbreviation: EDM, electronic/dance (EDM).
[a]All names listed are pseudonyms.

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