

ISTANBUL TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY ★ GRADUATE SCHOOL

**PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF
THE MUSIC INDUSTRY: THE IMPACT OF SPOTIFY IN TURKEY**



M.Sc. THESIS

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**Department of Science, Technology and Society
Science, Technology and Society M.Sc. Programme**

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İSTANBUL TEKNİK ÜNİVERSİTESİ ★ LİSANSÜSTÜ EĞİTİM ENSTİTÜSÜ

**PLATFORM KAPİTALİZMİ VE MÜZİK ENDÜSTRİSİNİN
DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: SPOTIFY'IN TÜRKİYE'DEKİ ETKİSİ**

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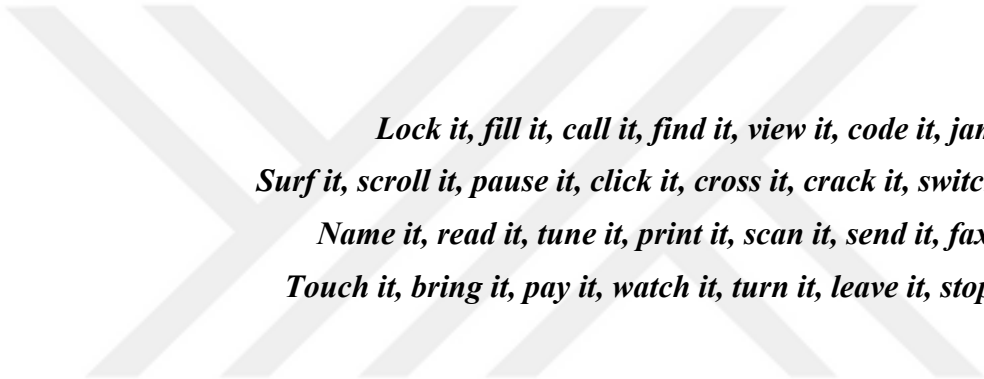
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*Lock it, fill it, call it, find it, view it, code it, jam, unlock it
Surf it, scroll it, pause it, click it, cross it, crack it, switch, update it
Name it, read it, tune it, print it, scan it, send it, fax, rename it
Touch it, bring it, pay it, watch it, turn it, leave it, stop, format it.*

— Daft Punk, “Technologic” (2005)



FOREWORD

While writing this thesis, I matured significantly and gained a wealth of knowledge. While trying to grasp the part of life that I was curious about academically, I also gained a lot of experience from life as a whole, with all the ups and downs. As a researcher and a musician, I am pleased to be able to transform my observations and curiosities into an academic study through this thesis. It is gratifying to contribute to this field by deeply examining the complex intersection of music, technology, and society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my dear advisor, Assoc. Prof. Ebru Belgin Yetişkin Doğrusöz, for inspiring me with her ideas and opinions on this path. Her guidance helped me find clarity when I felt lost, and her belief in the value of this project never wavered, even when mine did. Her patience and wisdom made this work possible. In addition, I would like to thank my professors, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aslı Erbil, Assoc. Prof. Aslı Çalkıvık, Assis. Prof. Sevil Hatice Baltalı Tırpan, and Assoc. Prof. Murat Ergin, who has supported me throughout my graduate studies. Each of them contributed something unique to my understanding and approach.

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May 2025

Mert Sarıkaya

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANT	: Actor-Network Theory
A&R	: Artists and Repertoire
CD	: Compact Disc
CMI	: Computer Musical Instrument (Fairlight CMI)
CRB	: Copyright Royalty Board
DAW	: Digital Audio Workstation
DIY	: Do It Yourself
DSP	: Digital Service Provider
MP3	: MPEG-1 Audio Layer III
MÜYAP	: Turkish Music Industry Association
P2P	: Peer-to-peer
PFC	: Perfect Fit Content
PR	: Public Relations
RPM	: Revolutions Per Minute
SCOT	: Social Construction of Technology
STS	: Science, Technology and Society
TL	: Turkish Lira
TV	: Television
UGC	: User Generated Content
UMAW	: Union of Musicians and Allied Workers
UNESCO	: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



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PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MUSIC INDUSTRY: THE IMPACT OF SPOTIFY IN TURKEY

SUMMARY

This thesis explores the music industry's transformation in the era of platform capitalism, focusing on Spotify. The study investigates how the digital streaming platform Spotify acts as a mediator, and how it changed the power dynamics, production practices, and consumption patterns by shaping the music industry through its technological infrastructure and business practices. Departing from Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies and using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a theoretical framework, this research explores the complex relationships between human and non-human actors within this network, including artists, listeners, algorithms, and infrastructures. This thesis uses a mixed-method approach combining primary and secondary methods. In the qualitative phase, primary data collection method is semi-structured interviews with music industry workers in Istanbul. With the interviews, the research aims to explore how these global dynamics translate into local contexts. The quantitative component includes descriptive statistical analysis of personal Spotify user data, examining algorithmic categorization through taste profiles and streaming metrics. Secondary research methods involve critical analysis of existing literature, media coverage, industry publications, and platform documentation. The research findings reveal the impact of platform capitalism. Spotify's algorithms have created new forms of “hybrid agency” which makes musical preferences become entangled with machine learning. These algorithms generate “taste profiles”, digital fingerprints of musical preferences that create “filter bubbles” limiting musical discovery. Platform dynamics have also transformed production practices where artists increasingly design their music to perform well within algorithmic systems. Thus, this thesis explores how platform capitalism has transformed the music ecosystem by creating new power dynamics, dependencies, and challenges for artists in Turkey. The findings reveal a paradox: features that appear to democratize music distribution actually create new barriers.

Keywords: platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, music industry, digital streaming, actor-network theory



PLATFORM KAPİTALİZMİ VE MÜZİK ENDÜSTRİSİNİN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: SPOTIFY'IN TÜRKİYE'DEKİ ETKİSİ

ÖZET

Bilim, Teknoloji ve Toplum (STS) çalışmalarından temel alan bu araştırma, platform kapitalizmi çağında müzik endüstrisinin dönüşümünü Spotify odağında incelemektedir. Çalışma, küresel platform dinamiklerinin Türkiye'nin kendine özgü kültürel ve ekonomik bağlamında nasıl tezahür ettiğini ve sanatçılar, üretim pratikleri ile tüketim kalıpları üzerinde ne gibi etkiler yarattığını incelemektedir. Araştırma, dijital yayın platformu Spotify'ın gerçekleştirdiği aracılık işlevini ve bu platformun teknik altyapısı ile iş pratikleri aracılığıyla müzik endüstrisini nasıl şekillendirdiğini analiz etmektedir. Bu bağlamda Spotify'ın güç dengeleri, üretim yöntemleri ve tüketim alışkanlıklarını değiştirme biçimlerini incelemektedir. Bu dönüşüm, müziğin nasıl üretildiği, dağıtıldığı ve metalaştırıldığı konularında önemli değişimleri temsil etmektedir. Araştırma, bu dönüşümün tüm yönlerini kapsamlı bir şekilde ele almaya çalışmak yerine, stratejik olarak algoritmalar yönetimi ve İstanbul'un müzik ekosistemine dair ortaya çıkan platform bağımlılıklarına odaklanmaktadır. Temel amaç, Spotify etrafında dönen sosyo-teknik sistemdeki insan ve insan-olmayan unsurlar arasındaki karmaşık ilişkileri keşfetmektir; bu unsurlar arasında sanatçılar, dinleyiciler, yapımcılar, algoritmalar ve teknolojik altyapılar yer almaktadır. Aktör-Ağ Kuramı (ANT), bu araştırma için özellikle değerlidir çünkü failliğin yalnızca insan aktörlerde veya teknolojik sistemlerde bulunmak yerine ağlar boyunca nasıl dağıtıldığının analizini mümkün kılar. Bu kuramsal yaklaşım, algoritmik sistemlerin ve insan aktörlerin "hibrit faillik" olarak tanımladığımız biçimler aracılığıyla çağdaş müzik ekosistemini nasıl birlikte ürettiklerini anlamak için eşsiz bir perspektif sağlar. Bu doğrultuda, araştırmanın amacı platform dinamiklerinin yerel bir bağlamda nasıl işlediğini keşfetmektir. Metodolojik yaklaşım olarak, nitel, nicel, birincil ve ikincil veri toplama yöntemlerini birleştiren karma yöntem benimsenmiştir. Birincil veri toplama süreci, İstanbul Teknik Üniversitesi'nden etik onay alındıktan sonra, Mart-Nisan 2025 aylarında Türkiye'deki 12 müzik endüstrisi profesyoneli ile yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşmeler şeklinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcılar arasında bağımsız ve plak şirketi bünyesindeki müzisyenler, ses teknisyenleri, menajerler, yapımcılar, müzik gazetecileri, dijital pazarlama profesyonelleri ve plak şirketi çalışanları yer almış, bu da Türkiye'nin müzik ekosisteminin temsili bir kesitini sağlamıştır. Yaklaşık 45 dakika süren görüşmeler, katılımcıların Spotify ile doğrudan deneyimlerini anlamaya, özellikle algoritmik yönetim, algoritmik olarak başarılı içerik yaratma baskısı, finansal bağımlılık ve platform bağımlılığını pekiştiren pratikler konularına odaklanmıştır. Nicel boyutta, ikincil veri toplama kişisel Spotify hesap verilerinin analizi üzerine dayandırılmış, "zevk profilleri" ve akış geçmişi analize dahil edilmiştir. Bu veri setlerini görselleştirmek ve yorumlamak için betimsel istatistiksel analiz uygulanmış, platformların kullanıcı tercihlerini nasıl sınıflandırdığı ve metalaştırdığı ortaya çıkarılmıştır. Ayrıca, müzik endüstrisinde platform kapitalizminin etkileri, dijital müzik ekonomisi ve Spotify'ın algoritmik yönetimi konularında literatürün sistematik incelemesini de içeren ikincil veri toplama yapılmıştır. Genel kuramsal çerçeve, çeşitli aktörler ve sistemler arasındaki etkileşimi

analiz etmek ve bunların müzikal pratikleri ve deneyimleri nasıl şekillendirdiğini göstermek için öncelikle ANT'dan yararlanmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım Spotify'yı tarafsız bir aracı olarak değil, güç dengelelerini yeniden yapılandıran aktif bir aracı olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Araştırma bulguları, Türkiye'de müzik ekosisteminde platform kapitalizminin etkisinin dört temel boyutunu ortaya koymaktadır. İlk olarak, Spotify'nın öneri algoritmaları yeni "hibrit faillik" biçimleri yaratmıştır. Bu durum, müzikal tercihlerin makine öğrenmesi ile iç içe geçtiği bir ortam yaratmaktadır. Hibrit faillik kavramı, insan niyeti ve teknolojik sistemlerin ne yalnızca insan ne de yalnızca algoritmik eylem yoluyla var olabilecek müzikal deneyimleri nasıl birlikte ürettiklerini açıklamaya yardımcı olmaktadır. Bu algoritmalar, dinleyicilerin müzikal tercihlerinin her etkileşimle giderek daha ayrıntılı hale gelen dijital parmak izleri olan " zevk profilleri" adı verilen veri kümeleri üretmektedir. Bu profiller kişiselleştirilmiş deneyimler sunarken, aynı zamanda gerçek müzikal keşfi sınırlayan "filtre balonları" yaratmaktadır. Bu algoritmik çevreleme, sosyal öneriler, müzik eleştirisi ve radyo programcılığına daha çok dayanan önceki müzik keşif biçimlerinden önemli bir kaymayı temsil etmektedir. İkinci olarak, platform dinamikleri, sanatçıların algoritmik sistemler içinde iyi performans gösterecek şekilde müziklerini tasarladıkları üretim pratiklerine yol açmıştır. Bu, şarkı sürelerini kısaltma, atlamaları engellemek için nakarat bölümlerini başa yerleştirme, dikkat çekici başlık kullanma gibi unsurları içermektedir. Türkiye'deki müzik profesyonelleri ile yapılan görüşmeler, "Bu Spotify'da nasıl duyulacak?" sorusunun sanatsal kararlardan daha önemli hale geldiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bu, yaratıcı seçimlerin sanatsal değerlendirmeler yerine algoritmik gereksinimlerden giderek daha fazla etkilendiği bir dönüşümün göstergesidir. Üçüncü olarak, araştırma platform bağımlılığının etkilerini de ortaya koymaktadır. Spotify kendini herhangi bir sanatçının çalışmasını dağıtabileceği demokratik bir alan olarak sunarken, bu araştırma daha karmaşık bir gerçekliği ortaya koymaktadır. Platformun demokratikleşme iddiaları, akış gelirlerinin az sayıdaki en popüler sanatçılar arasında artan yoğunlaşmasını gösteren bulgularla çelişmektedir. Türkiye bağlamında bu durum, Spotify'nın editöryal ekibiyle doğrudan ilişkileri olan yerel ofislere sahip dağıtıcıların ayrıcalıklı konumu nedeniyle daha da karmaşık hale gelmekte, gerçekten bağımsız sanatçıları dezavantajlı duruma sokan yeni kapı bekçiliği mekanizmaları yaratmaktadır. Algoritmik sistemler çoğunlukla zaten popüler olan sanatçılara fayda sağlamakta, bağımsız müzisyenlerin önemli pazarlama bütçeleri veya Spotify'da editöryal çalma listelerine yerleştirme olmadan görünürlük kazanmalarını giderek zorlaştırmaktadır. Bu bağımlılık, sanatçıların "Spotify for Artists" gibi araçlar aracılığıyla sağlanan ölçütlere dayalı olarak yaratıcı ve pazarlama kararları almaları anlamında veri odaklılığa kadar uzanmaktadır. Dördüncü boyut olarak, araştırma müziğin değişen finansal modellerini ortaya koymaktadır. Akış başına ödeme modeli (yaklaşık 0,005 dolar) çoğunlukla yüksek akışlı ve büyük bir kataloğa sahip olan sanatçı ve plak şirketlerine fayda sağlamaktadır. Bağımsız sanatçılar artık sosyal medya platformlarında giderek artan ölçüde reklam yatırımı yapmak ve sürekli olarak algoritmaların gereksinimlerine uyan üretimler yapmak zorundadır. Türkiye'de bu ekonomik dinamikler, daha düşük abonelik ücretleri nedeniyle daha da dengesizleşmekte, bu da sanatçıların yalnızca yayın gelirleri aracılığıyla ekonomik olarak ayakta kalmalarını neredeyse imkansız hale getirmektedir. Sonuç itibarıyla, bu araştırma platform kapitalizminin Türkiye'de müzik ekosistemini nasıl dönüştürdüğünü, sanatçılar için ne tür yeni güç dinamikleri ve bağımlılıklar yarattığını detaylı şekilde incelemektedir. Çalışmanın katkısı, küresel platform dinamiklerinin Türkiye'nin spesifik kültürel ve ekonomik bağlamında nasıl yerleştirildiğini keşfetmesinde, platform kapitalizminin hem evrensel hem de

yerelleştirilmiş kalıplarını ortaya koymasında yatmaktadır. Araştırma, teknolojinin algoritmik yönetim ve dijital aracılığın ince ama yaygın mekanizmaları aracılığıyla kültürel üretimi nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiği konusundaki anlayışımıza katkıda bulunmaktadır. Dijital platformlar müziğe daha geniş erişim sağlamakla birlikte, platform kapitalizmi aracılığıyla yeni denetim ve bağımlılık biçimleri de getirmektedirler. Bir şarkının dinlenmesini sağlamanın sözde basit eylemi artık her etkileşimi izleyen, analiz eden ve paraya dönüştüren veri merkezleri, içerik dağıtım ağları ve algoritmik sistemlerin karmaşık ağlarını içermektedir. Araştırma önemli bir paradoksu ortaya koymaktadır: müzik dağıtımını demokratikleştirdiği görünen özellikler aslında yeni kapı bekçiliği biçimleri ve engeller yaratmaktadır. ANT yaklaşımı, failliğin insan ve insan-olmayan aktörler arasında dağıtıldığı, sanatsal ifadeyi hem mümkün kılan hem de kısıtlayan yeni sosyo-teknik yapılanmalar yaratan daha nüanslı bir gerçekliği ortaya koymaktadır. Sanatçılar artık yalnızca müzik yapımının yaratıcı yönlerini değil, aynı zamanda teknik ve veriye dayalı yönlerini de göz önünde bulundurmak zorundadır. Müzik endüstrisinin bu yeniden yapılandırılması, ortaya çıkan güç dengesizlikleriyle başa çıkmak için yeni kuramsal yaklaşımlar ve politik müdahaleler gerektirmektedir. Çağdaş müzik ekosistemini oluşturan sosyo-teknik ağları incelemeye devam ederek, platform kapitalizmi çağında dinleyiciler, müzisyenler, müzik üretimi ve tüketimi için daha eşitlikçi koşullar yaratmanın yollarını keşfedebiliriz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: platform kapitalizmi, algoritmik yönetim, müzik endüstrisi, dijital akış, aktör-ağ teorisi



1. INTRODUCTION

Platform capitalism is a system that allows small groups to control market access by monitoring user activities and processing the resulting data, thereby concentrating power and capital (Srnicek, 2016). With the rise of platform capitalism in recent years, the music industry, like many other industries, has changed and transformed significantly. This economic model, characterized by algorithms fed by masses of data, has transformed all aspects of music, including production, distribution and consumption. We can see this quite clearly in the music industries, which have been taken over by streaming and social media platforms. These algorithmic platforms disrupted old business models and now play a huge role in reshaping consumption patterns through their algorithmic recommendation systems (Schedl et al., 2018).

Spotify has quite a significant role in this transformation, specifically in the music ecosystem. However, the transformation began with Napster, a peer-to-peer (P2P) document-sharing platform that shook the music industry by allowing anyone to download and listen to any song without copyright. It quickly disappeared in 2001 due to the legal challenges pressed by the Recording Industry Association of America. The Pirate Bay, founded in 2013 in Sweden, also didn't surrender as quickly as Napster. The three major label companies, Universal, Warner, and Sony, which have more than 75% of the total copyright (Billboard 2024), were struggling with royalty incomes from 2003, to the date which Spotify founded in April 2006. Following its foundation in such a crisis era, Spotify has become a powerful mediator that shapes the entire music ecosystem through its technological infrastructure and business practices since the beginning.

This thesis explores the impact of Spotify, which reconfigured power dynamics within the music industry, and analyzes its implications for artists and listeners. Spotify has democratized access to music, but it also introduced new forms of control and dependency through algorithmic governance and data-driven decision-making. Today, Spotify has the biggest performativity, as it is the most used platform (Statista, 2024), in this intricate network of human and non-human actors, including artists, listeners, algorithms, protocols, and technological infrastructure. This network operates within

platform capitalism, an economic model where digital platforms act as intermediaries that extract value from user interactions and data.

This thesis embraces a Science, and Technology Studies (STS) perspective, mainly drawing on Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 1996), to analyze how Spotify's algorithms mediate relationships between stakeholders as it increasingly becomes the primary means of music distribution and consumption. Exploring the impacts of the platform dynamics on artists and listeners requires a multi-faceted examination of Spotify, as it is one of the critical actors in the music industry of the platform capitalism era.

1.1 Aims and Scope

This thesis aims to explore how Spotify's recommendation algorithms and “taste profiles” (created from user-generated data) influence music creation and consumption patterns. It also aims to explain the power dynamics between Spotify, artists, and listeners, as well as bargaining power of artists and their creative autonomy. The thesis examines Spotify's algorithmic performativity through interviews held in Istanbul. It also aims to explore a localized perspective on global platform dynamics through the experiences of music professionals. Through semi-structured interviews with artists, industry professionals, and platform representatives, this study investigates users' firsthand experiences within the platform economy. Employing ANT as its theoretical framework, the research maps the complex relationships between Spotify and its users while exploring the interconnected network of the contemporary music ecosystem. Certain aspects fall outside the scope of this study to maintain methodological focus. Historical industry analysis and detailed examination of competing platforms are not included. Similarly, technical aspects of music production, and AI created music are not an inquiry of this thesis.

1.2 Methodology

This research embraced a mixed-method approach to examine platform capitalism and the digital music economy since “a mixed methods design is useful when either the quantitative or qualitative approach by itself is inadequate to best understand a research problem or the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research can provide the

best understanding” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 25). Spotify was selected as the primary analysis object. This decision was based on the fact that it is the biggest and most used music company globally as in market share (28.7%) by Q2 2024, as well as in Turkey in terms of usage share (54%) by 2023 (Statista, 2024). The methodological framework integrated primary and secondary data collection for exploratory and explanatory purposes.

In the qualitative phase, the primary data collection included semi-structured interviews, which “incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research” (Galletta, 2013, p. 45).. Semi-structured interviews with music industry professionals are central to this research design as they were utilized to thoroughly examine the micro-level impacts of the platform economy and user experiences.

After obtaining Istanbul Technical University’s ethics committee approval on May 17, 2025, interviews were held between March 18 - April 30, 2025, with 12 participants via approximately 45 minutes of Zoom video meetings. The interviews included independent and signed musicians, sound engineers, managers, live musicians, a music agency worker, a boutique label worker, a music journalist, a music podcaster, a music institution coordinator, a copyrighter, a digital marketing agency founder, a music lawyer and a music community manager. The interviews focused on understanding participants' direct experiences via 22 open-ended questions regarding the impacts of Spotify and platform capitalism in the streaming era. The interviews became valuable for systematic data collection and offered insights into experience with platform algorithms and recommendation systems, revenue generation and economic sustainability, artistic autonomy and creative decision-making, platform governance and policy impacts, adaptation strategies and challenges, and lastly, relationship with audience and fan engagement.

Discourse analysis of the interviews revealed main discussions and debates around Spotify's role in the music industry. It was also used to explore public statements, industry publications, and media coverage to understand how different stakeholders conceptualized and responded to platform capitalism in the music industry. A thematic approach was also followed in the data analysis by identifying recurring themes across

various data sources using ANT. This approach using ANT was quite useful for exploring how different actors and systems interacted with each other in a complex network, following which connections and nodes.

The exploratory dimension of the research was the local manifestation of global streaming dynamics through Istanbul's music professionals' experiences. Istanbul is the most populous and cosmopolitan city, with 15.7 million people. It has been seen as the heart of the music industry in Turkey since the Unkapanı period. Unkapanı Record Dealers' Bazaar was the most important center of the music industry in the past. Also, the most significant music production and digital media companies are still in Istanbul. In the quantitative phase, secondary data collection was based on analysis of personal Spotify account data, including taste profiles and streaming history metrics. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to visualize and interpret these data sets, revealing how platforms classify and commodify user preferences.

In terms of self-reflexivity, a process in which researchers critically situate themselves and how their research endeavors are shaped and performed around the contradictions, realities, and experiences that constitute their own lives, my situatedness as both a researcher and a musician, who experienced different aspects of the streaming ecosystem was one of the crucial methodologies in this thesis (Berger, 2015). My self-reflexivity as a researcher provided the necessary outlook on platform-user relations, which nudged me to write this thesis. Including interviews, analysis of “taste profiles,” and debates on Spotify demonstrated the substantial necessity for exploring how platform capitalism affects and determines cultural consumption experiences in the music ecosystem.

The methodology also acknowledged several limitations and incorporated strategies to address them. Sampling selection bias was addressed through clearly defined criteria and inclusion of diverse perspectives. The participants were selected based on criterias such as direct experience with Spotify, representation across different genres and market segments, and different career stages and roles. Concerns about participant willingness to share sensitive information were mitigated through anonymized data collection methods and explicit informed consent protocols. There are some limitations that come with the ANT framework as well. ANT's comprehensive network mapping can make it difficult to maintain focus when analyzing very large-scale platforms like Spotify, making it difficult to maintain an analytical view of all

actor relationships. In addition, ANT's potential treatment of all actors as equals may underemphasize the significant power asymmetries between large platform companies and individual musicians, and may not allow us to clearly see the structural inequalities at the core of platform capitalism. The theory's focus of current conditions in the network may also underemphasize the importance of the historical contexts that shape the dynamics of the industry. Furthermore, ANT's emphasis on non-human actants may hide the choices that lead the configuration of those actants, as well as experiences, and other actions of the human actors. The mixed-methods approach of this study is important in overcoming these limitations. While semi-structured interviews provided depth to human experiences that ANT could not adequately highlight, quantitative analysis of personal Spotify data helped manage the complexity of network mapping by focusing on specific, measurable interactions within the broader ecosystem. This methodological framework allowed a comprehensive analysis of how platform capitalism operates through Spotify. Mixed research design provided tools for understanding both structural dynamics and lived experiences within the platform-mediated music ecosystem.

1.3 Glossary of Key Terms

Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

ANT is a theoretical framework developed by Bruno Latour, Madeleine Akrich, Michel Callon, and John Law which examines how human and non-human actors (e.g., technologies, algorithms, institutions) interact within networks. It emphasizes the distributed agency of actors and the dynamic, relational nature of sociotechnical systems.

Algorithm

A finite set of well-defined instructions designed to solve a specific problem or execute a computation. It provides a step-by-step process that can be executed by a computer or any other systematic process. "Informally, an algorithm is any well-defined computational procedure that takes some value, or set of values, as input and produces some value, or set of values, as output. An algorithm is thus a sequence of computational steps that transform the input into the output. We should consider algorithms, like computer hardware, as a technology." (Plantin et al., 2016, p. 309).

Algorithmic Bias

Algorithms tend to produce skewed or unfair outcomes, often due to biased data or design. In the example of music platforms, this can result in certain genres or artists being favored over others.

Algorithmic Curation

Usage of algorithms to select and organize content for users. It shapes listeners' discovery of new music and artists.

Algorithmic Performativity

The idea that algorithms actively shape social and cultural practices, rather than merely reflecting them. For example, Spotify's algorithms influence music production and consumption.

Recommendation Algorithms

Algorithms used by platforms to suggest content to users based on their preferences and behavior. In music platforms, recommender systems curate playlists and influence listening habits.

Blackboxing

The process by which complex technical systems become opaque as they gain stability and widespread use. Introduced by Bruno Latour (1999), blackboxing occurs when users focus only on inputs and outputs while the internal workings of a technology become invisible. In streaming platforms, this manifests when recommendation algorithms and curatorial decisions appear as neutral features rather than value-laden technical arrangements. Blackboxing reinforces platform power by concealing how musical preferences are shaped and calculated, making the system's operations difficult to challenge while presenting algorithmic recommendations as objective and personalized rather than strategically curated.

Commodification

The process of transforming goods, services, or activities into marketable commodities. In platform capitalism, user data and creative content (e.g., music) are commodified for profit.

Data Extraction

The process by which platforms derive value from user behaviors by collecting, analyzing, and monetizing interaction data. This is central to the platform capitalism model in music streaming.

Datafication

The process of transforming activities and interactions into quantifiable data. User behavior on music platforms is datafied to optimize recommendations and advertising.

Data-driven Algorithm

An algorithm that relies on large datasets to inform its decision-making process. In music platforms, data-driven algorithms analyze user behavior to generate personalized recommendations.

Digitalization

The integration of digital technologies into various aspects of society, including the music industry. It has transformed how music is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Digital Streaming Platforms (DSPs)

Digital services that allow users to access music, podcasts, and other audio content without downloading files. Examples include Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music.

Editorial Playlists

Curated playlists in Spotify, often influenced by algorithms and human editors. Getting featured on these playlists is crucial for visibility and success of artists.

Filter Bubble

A state of intellectual isolation comes from personalization, recommendations, and algorithmic curation. The outcomes stem from a range of user data, such as geographic location and search history. Users encounter a set of information or content that reinforces their existing viewpoints or choices, ultimately confining them within their cultural or ideological “bubbles”. Consequently, algorithms limit exposure to diverse content by reinforcing users' existing preferences and lead to homogenized listening habits.

Infrastructure

The underlying systems that enable the functioning of technologies and services include streaming platforms, data centers, and distribution networks.

Loudness Wars 2.0

A term used to describe the trend of optimizing music production for streaming platforms, often at the expense of artistic quality. This includes shortening songs, placing hooks early, and maximizing loudness to avoid being skipped.

Lean-back Listening

A passive form of music consumption where listeners engage with music as background sound rather than through active, attentive listening. This practice has been encouraged by streaming platforms through playlists like “Arkada Çalsın” (Background Music) and has shifted how audiences value and experience music.

Mediation

A concept from Antoine Hennion (Hennion, 1993) that refers to the processes through which music is experienced and valued. In streaming platforms, mediation involves the interplay between algorithms, user behavior, and cultural practices.

Pay-Per-Stream System

A revenue model used by streaming platforms where artists are paid based on the number of times their songs are streamed. Critics argue that this system disproportionately benefits popular artists and major labels.

Peer-to-peer (P2P)

P2P networks allow users to connect directly with each other. This network structure is designed so that each participant can be both a provider and a receiver of data. This offers a different approach from traditional centralized server-based networks.

Platform

A platform is an online intermediary service that connects different users and enables them to interact. Examples include digital marketplaces, social media, and streaming platforms. These platforms generate revenue through various methods, such as

subscriptions, advertising, and data collection, and are somewhat stingy about sharing this revenue (Kasap & Yalcintas, 2021).

Platformization

The process by which digital platforms become central to economic, social, and cultural activities. In the music industry, platformization refers to the dominance of streaming services like Spotify.

Platform Dependency

The reliance of artists and other stakeholders on digital platforms for visibility, revenue, and audience engagement. This dependency often leads to power imbalances and reduced autonomy for independent artists.

Platform Capitalism

This economic model emerged in the digital age and is characterized by online platforms that connect producers of goods and services with consumers (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). These platforms offer services that simplify operations among different parties and act as intermediaries that extract value from these exchanges through fees, commissions, or data mining.

In platform capitalism, a platform's value increases in direct proportion to the number of users it attracts. As more people join a particular platform (e.g., Spotify), its reach expands exponentially, and it becomes more profitable. This is because it can mine more data, and with more reach, it can generate revenue from users who want to advertise and gain visibility. Platform capitalism has radically transformed traditional business models, creating new opportunities and challenges for companies and individuals across various industries.

Protocol

A set of rules or standards governing interactions within a network. In the context of music platforms, protocols include user agreements, algorithmic systems, and revenue-sharing models. “*Protocol* suggests that power relations are in the process of being transformed in a way that is resonant with the flexibility and constraints of information technology.” (Galloway, 2006)

Socio-technical Networks

Systems that integrate social and technical elements, such as the interactions between artists, listeners, algorithms, and streaming platforms. ANT is often used to analyze these networks.

Sound Studies

An interdisciplinary field that examines the cultural, social, and technological dimensions of sound and music. Sound studies often draw on frameworks from STS (Science, Technology, and Society) to analyze the role of technology in shaping musical practices.

Taste Profiles

Digital representations of a user's musical preferences, created by analyzing their listening habits. Platforms like Spotify use taste profiles to personalize recommendations and playlists.

2. THE JOURNEY OF DIGITAL MUSIC AND PLATFORMIZATION

Complex networks of technology companies and dozens of new intermediaries have significantly impacted the creation of global music industries that have evolved and changed in a short time. For example, Brandenburg and his team have developed a new lossy compression algorithm that is more efficient than any previously developed algorithm. They called their algorithm MPEG-1 Audio Layer III, or MP3 for short (Brandenburg, 1999). With the introduction of the Internet, the MP3 format became widespread, and in 1999, a software appeared that turned the music distribution industry upside down: Napster. This software allowed people to exchange their music online. It did this by using P2P technology, which allows you to transfer the music you are looking for from someone else's computer to your own computer in MP3 format over the internet. Napster was sued by Metallica in 2000, followed by lawsuits from 18 major record labels and then quickly disappeared.

After Napster, The Pirate Bay from Sweden was next in line. It emerged in 2003 as a new platform for P2P file sharing. While Napster focused solely on music, The Pirate Bay allowed downloads of all digital content, including movies, software, and books, in addition to music. Developed by Gottfrid Svartholm, Fredrik Neij, and Peter Sunde, the platform advocated for free content sharing and represented an anarchist approach to corporate control over content distribution. The Pirate Bay showed resilience against legal sanctions. Backup servers thwarted efforts to shut it down, while record labels whose songs were downloaded for free experienced significant revenue losses. At that time, Spotify was anticipated to be the savior of struggling record labels. In contrast to the conventional listening model that depends on MP3 files, Spotify's streaming platform eliminates the need to download and own music files. This change exemplifies cloud computing, where data and services are housed not on the user's device but in centralized data centers. Users can retrieve content from these servers as required. In light of the rapid advancements in technology over the past two centuries, there has been an increasing interest in the social sciences concerning the study of technology, particularly evident in the last thirty years of the 20th century and extending into the current era. The application of STS frameworks in music-related

case studies ultimately led to the emergence of the discipline known as “Sound Studies”.

2.1 Sound Studies in STS

In recent years, some scholars have created and produced studies on a sub-field that later came to be called Sound Studies in STS (Harkins, 2015; Magaudda, 2014; Mooney & Pinch, 2021; Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2004; Zimmermann, 2021). Antoine Hennion, who possesses degrees in civil engineering and musicology, is recognized as a pivotal early figure in ANT. Hennion's inquiries have been characterized by a unique emphasis on the infrastructures and processes that constitute music practice. Across the ocean, Trevor Pinch is noted for his partnership with Harry Collins in the sociology of science. He also partnered with Wiebe Bijker on the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). Wiebe also has a comparable background: he earned a physics degree from Imperial College and is connected to music, including constructing his modular synthesizer in the 1970s (Zimmermann, 2021).

In contrast to Hennion, Pinch's initial focus was not on music as a social investigation subject but on physics. Nonetheless, he focused on the technological aspect of music, particularly, a monograph about Moog synthesizer's history. The Moog synthesizer by Robert Moog was created in 1964. With this technological innovation, the concept of the analog synthesizer was developed. This device has an important role in music history as it changed and influenced musicians' production and performance practices directly. It became the first commercially widespread synthesizer.

While the roots of STS in anthropology have revitalized interest in fieldwork and empirical research, the focus of Sound Studies in STS has introduced a new perspective for examining technical objects of sound. In the studies of music, these developments have resulted in a concentrated focus on the physical manifestations of sound. As argued by Pinch and Bijsterveld, those in the field of sound studies recognized their research object as the relationship between musical technology and culture (Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2004). They started with the idea that the social dimension of sound and music cannot be addressed without paying specific attention to their technical and material dimensions, as well as to the practices and cultural meanings actors build around them (Magaudda, 2014).

‘User-technology nexus’ as argued by Harkins, is a shift towards the contexts of use and ‘the co-construction’ or ‘mutual shaping’ of technologies and their users. One of the objects was the Fairlight CMI, a digital synthesizer/sampling instrument that was used in ways unimagined by its designers (Harkins, 2015). When the Fairlight CMI was first introduced in 1979, its original purpose was to imitate the sounds of real instruments through digital synthesis. However, users were able to create sounds beyond the real instruments by using different synthesis methods. Examples of these sounds include sounds of nature such as lightning and rain, or notational manipulations of people's own voice recordings. This concept suggests that new technologies adapt and change based on user feedbacks.

Another example is the work of David Van Koevering. He was not only a performer of unconventional instruments but also a preacher and showman who played a pivotal role in founding the market and methods for selling the first commercial electronic music synthesizers in music stores. He ultimately ascended to the positions of marketing director and vice president at Moog Music. Both Davies and Van Koevering started their careers during an era when electronic music was primarily confined to studio environments, relying heavily on tape. Sounds were recorded on tape and modified by adjusting playback speed or direction, with compositions created by cutting the tape and reassembling the segments by adhesive splicing tape.

This process was labor-intensive and entirely took place away from the stage. They imagined a future where electronic music could be performed live on stage rather than being limited to studio settings only. To bring this vision to life, they needed to redefine the concept and role of a musical instrument. Davies demonstrated that anything could be considered a musical instrument and that artists could create their own tools, allowing them to express their musical ideas without being constrained by traditional instruments.

A significant aspect of Davies’s influence was evident in the growing DIY circuit-bending, making of instruments, and performance communities that characterize today’s electronic music landscape. Van Koevering embraced the newly developed Minimoog synthesizer, advocating that any keyboardist could utilize it, thereby transitioning the synthesizer from the specialized realm of electronic music studios into the mainstream of popular music. Increasingly, Van Koevering was recognized for laying the foundation for the retail synthesizer industry. His promotion of the

Minimoog paved the way for the array of portable keyboard synthesizers with integrated sounds that are now commonplace in today's synthesizer market (Mooney & Pinch, 2021).

Synthesizers, as visible technological devices, demonstrated the connection between music and technology and how technological developments have changed the production and performance of music. Algorithms and interfaces, on the other hand, are not entities that we see so clearly or touch and use consciously. You may think that we do not know much about the working mechanisms of synthesizers, even though we can touch and use them. However, I would like to point out that synthesizers cannot produce sound on their own, but algorithms make decisions and apply them, and interfaces can push us to make certain choices as I will elaborate in Chapter 3.

2.1.1 Infrastructure in Music Ecosystem

Today's digital music landscape created opportunities and limitations posed by the increasingly infrastructural character. Music listening tools have gradually evolved into interfaces that primarily connect individuals with broader networks, platforms, and infrastructures. Since the 1980s, the concept of infrastructure has emerged as a vital framework in STS to explore the confluence of technology, individuals, and collective practices. Star and Ruhleder (1996) see infrastructure not as a static substrate but as a relational concept that becomes visible upon breakdown. Building on this, Bowker and Star (1999) have demonstrated how infrastructures embody values and politics while simultaneously fading into the background of everyday experience. Infrastructures are deemed crucial because their design and implementation significantly affect the activities and practices enabled through these technologies.

Infrastructures have developed as distinct socio-technical entities that can shape the interactions between organized human practices and the technologies that support and enable these actions. They may be hard to realize and understand: "infrastructures are never transparent for everyone, and their workability as they scale up becomes increasingly complex" (Bowker & Star, 2008, p. 33). Considering the current form of the infrastructure and the processes through which it is developed and maintained, focusing on the dynamics that lead to the emergence of infrastructures and evolution of them is also important. This approach reflects what Karasti et al. (2010) term

“infrastructuring”, the ongoing, never-complete process of creating, maintaining, and modifying sociotechnical arrangements.

One of the major changes in terms of infrastructure is the shift from CD to MP3 format, which indicated not just the introduction of a new technical device but a more extensive process of infrastructuration. In this evolving process, music metadata plays a pivotal role, aiding the smooth circulation of music and shaping how music is considered (Sterne, 2015). This perspective has underscored the processual qualities of the technological setting that supports digital music distribution while also illustrating how listening methods are innately connected to collections of technologies, procedures, and cultural beliefs regarding the nature of music as both object and commodity.

“Many today say that new media technologies are ushering in a new era of enhanced freedom and that technologies of control are waning. We say, on the contrary, that double the communication leads to double the control.” (Galloway & Thacker, 2007, p. 124). Spotify's evolution has made it beyond just a streaming service to an all-around service that dominates the industry. While it enables accessing millions of songs, it also comes with dependencies because of the complex web it creates. Artists are finding themselves in a complex algorithmic game. Visibility and success increasingly mean getting into “editorial” playlists and engagement metrics.

2.2 Platform Society and Platformization

Platform society refers to what van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal describe as “a society in which social and economic traffic is increasingly channeled by an (overwhelmingly corporate) global online ecosystem, driven by algorithms and fueled by data.” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4) They identify three key mechanisms of platforms that merit attention. The first is datafication, which involves the platforms' ability to convert every user interaction into data, allowing for the creation of predictive analytics and targeted advertising. The second mechanism is commodification, which pertains to how platforms transform content or activities into tradable data. Finally, selection or curation involves the platforms' capacity to replace traditional expert-based selection methods—such as those used by music journalists—with algorithms and big data.

With the rise of online platforms, user data has become a valuable commodity. The primary focus for most digital companies—both provider platforms and those seeking visibility on them—is online advertising. This has led to platform capitalism, where users are continually bombarded with targeted ads based on extensive analysis of their preferences and behavior. Online social networking platforms have little motivation to actively filter out fake news or ads since a highly engaged user base generates more revenue. These platforms have fostered an environment where users' attention and data are insatiably monetized by advertisers (mainly digital platforms). These companies prioritize profits over the quality of information, advertising, or content presented to users.

Comprehending the different categories of platforms and their interconnected functions is challenging. “The potential for vertical integration between infrastructural and sectoral platforms is endless, as is the creation of path dependency for users and consumer lock-in. Some platforms’ near-monopoly status in the infrastructural core coupled onto sectoral platforms’ dominant positions make these companies become “fluid”: they introduce a new type of organization, defying classic definitions that are tied to sectors.” (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 22). Importantly, the concentration of power generally happens across different sectors, as data flows can be maneuvered across sectors via infrastructural platforms that function independently of particular industries. A pertinent illustration is Google's search and advertising, which can be connected with its educational platforms.

We should not regard the hybrid or fluid aspects of platform ecosystems as a reason to ignore the important differences between public and private sectors, as well as between state and market functions. In fact, these distinctions are crucial for establishing societal structures. As a large part of the world adapts to an infrastructure ecosystem mainly created, owned, and managed by global private companies, we need to be especially attentive to the consequences for public values and the common good. The ecosystem itself, which is apparent through its design, algorithms, and user engagement, is anything but impartial. Rather, the ideological beliefs woven into its framework significantly shape what is deemed public value and whose interests are favored.

The platformization also means infrastructural changes. Paolo Magaudda explains the change: “This shift in music listening can be addressed as one from technology-as-

material-artifact to technology-as-infrastructural-interfaces: a change that has become particularly relevant in relation to today's smartphone-based music streaming listening." (Magaudda, 2021, p. 241). This technological transformation is part of a broader shift in the digital ecosystem. Indeed, "The emergence of digital technologies within a neoliberal political and economic environment has concurrently enabled a 'platformization' of infrastructures and an 'infrastructuralization' of platforms." This relationship highlights two main points about how digital content circulates. First, digital platforms are improving their systems while recognizing their limits to change their industries. Second, these companies apply their business approach to systems that support different parts of society and culture (Plantin et al., 2016, p. 309).

The evolution of digital platforms highlights a significant interconnection among technical, social, and economic factors. These platforms actively influence production and consumption patterns through interlinked feedback loops involving data, recommendations, and metrics. As sociotechnical systems, these platforms establish particular regimes of visibility and worth that creators must navigate to remain competitive in the digital market. Streaming platforms can also be seen as complex sociotechnical networks that emphasize the technical construction of cultural artifacts. Their scope goes beyond technical systems; they transform and redefine practices, values, and meanings. This transformation is further reinforced by a phenomenon called "platform dependency." (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

2.2.1 Platform Dependency

Platformization is reshaping conventional industry frameworks. Platform dependency cause economic participants increasingly rely on digital infrastructures managed by platform owners. This reliance appears through various mechanisms such as technical lock-in effects, data enclosure, and algorithmic governance. The emergence of platforms indicates a restructuring of the connection between users and providers which resulting in new forms of intermediation and dependence. These dependencies are not simply technological limitations. They represent significant power imbalances that influence economic outcomes and competitive dynamics.

Research shows that content creators in different industries face growing platform dependency (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Especially when platforms hold crucial positions as key intermediaries between producers and consumers. This dependency is

strengthened by proprietary application programming interfaces (APIs), exclusive data access policies, and algorithmic systems that dictate visibility and success within platform ecosystems. Platform dependency leads to “an asymmetric relationship where platform owners can unilaterally alter rules, functionalities, or access conditions, leaving dependent actors with limited options.” (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This power disparity is especially pronounced for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that lack the bargaining power or technical resources to reduce dependency risks.

Platform dependency is also evident through network effects that grow stronger over time, resulting in situations where dependent actors encounter significant switching costs. As van Dijck observes, “The interoperability challenges between platforms create considerable barriers that hinder smooth transitions between competing infrastructures.” (Van Dijk, 2019). These switching costs extend beyond technical integration issues to include data portability challenges, reputation systems, and accumulated knowledge specific to the platform. The multi-sided nature of platforms further complicates dependency concerns, as explained: “The simultaneous oversight of multiple user groups creates intricate interdependencies that render platform ecosystems tough to replicate or substitute.” (Gawer & Cusumano, 2015). As a result, the inherent characteristics of platform markets tend to reinforce dependency relationships rather than alleviate them.

Recent research highlights how platform dependency poses challenges to traditional competition policy frameworks by generating new forms of market power that conventional antitrust methods may not effectively address (European Commission. Directorate General for Competition., 2019). Tackling platform dependency is hard and multi-faceted, including data governance policies, interoperability mandates, and potentially structural solutions that maintain innovation incentives while preventing excessive power concentration. As platform business models continue to proliferate across various economic sectors, comprehending and managing platform dependency is a key issue for strategists, and platform-dependent entities aiming for sustainable positions within evolving digital ecosystems.

The evolution of digital music provides a compelling illustration of how platformization dynamics and platform dependencies manifest in cultural industries. The transformation of music from physical media to digital streams represents one of

the most comprehensive examples of platform-mediated industry reconfiguration. The digitalization of music altered value creation networks and revenue models, shifting power from traditional record labels to emerging digital platforms. This transition occurred in distinct phases. It started with the MP3 format, and followed by the circulation of MP3's through peer-to-peer networks, and continued as the platform-dominated streaming paradigm goes mainstream. The platformization of music distribution has created pronounced dependencies for artists, labels, and consumers alike. Major streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube have become essential gatekeepers controlling access to global music audiences. Music streaming platforms not only distribute content but actively shape listening practices through recommendation algorithms and curated playlists, creating new forms of cultural intermediation.

2.3 The Shifting Financial Landscape of Music

This platformization and digitization have also transformed the modes of selling music and compensating artists within the industry. The subscription system of the music platforms offers cheap music (approximately 10 Dollars monthly in US, 60 Turkish Liras in Turkey) to users worldwide. These revenues (average 0.003 to 0.005 dollars per stream) mostly go to the big artists with many streams, and the advertisement power comes from their big agencies. To acquire streams, average artists have to pay for advertisements on social media platforms and need to constantly create content to be seen in algorithms, further embedding artists within this new system. Despite these transformations, questions remain regarding how these changes affect global and local contexts. Here is a related comment from one of the interview participants:

“I think streaming platforms saved the music industry, but there's a problem with pricing policies; they're not about supporting artists. The current revenue distribution is just putting money into a pool. Previously, there was a model where you directly supported the artist. There's a huge injustice between artists and music genres in terms of equality and justice. Even the income that very famous artists earn from streaming is ridiculously low. In the 90s and 2000s, production companies covered all expenses. They covered those expenses and gave the artist some money as well. I think there was a problem with the entitlement model back then too.

Now even none of that exists. Spotify actually saved music labels, not necessarily artists.” (Participant 2: Musician, General Coordinator of a Music Institution)

Prior to this transformation, record labels invested some of their profits in artists, using them to support recording facilities, marketing, and distribution. However, with music platforms giving users access to millions of songs for a very small monthly fee, the pay-per-stream model is often used to support highly streamed and advertised artists with large catalogs and record labels. I quote famous musician James Blake: “Do you want good music or do you want what you paid for? If we want quality music, somebody will have to pay for it. Streaming services don’t pay properly, labels want a bigger cut than ever and just sit and wait for you to go viral, TikTok doesn’t pay properly, and touring is getting prohibitively expensive for most artists.” (Dredge, 2024). James Blake's concerns on touring and live events show themselves in Turkey's local dynamics as well:

“The situation is not very promising. In the past, there was a concert culture. The economic situation also has an effect, of course. Our country's agenda is constantly chaotic, something is always happening. People are even afraid of being in public spaces in our country. Beyond that, there's the issue of 'Spotify artists,' digital artists. These people can't sell event tickets to their listeners. Because the listener knows the song but doesn't remember the artist for example. According to your algorithm, you'll hold concerts in whichever city has your highest listenership. But often, even when you trust the algorithm and go to those places, you can end up disappointed. It's somewhat relative. Venues look at stream counts, but that's not the only variable.” (Participant 3: Producer, Arranger, Composer, Musician)

2.3.1 Freemium Model

The freemium model is a representation of a paradigmatic shift in how the music is monetized. Before this model consumers paid once for permanent ownership. The freemium approach offers basic services at no monetary cost while reserving enhanced features such as unlimited skipping and no-ad listening for premium users, creating a

hierarchical listening experience. This business model exemplifies what van Dijck et al. (2018) identify as the platformization of cultural industrie. In this paradigm, access rather than ownership becomes dominant. The ad-supported free tier serves multiple functions within platform capitalism. It is an entry point to capture user data for “free”, expands the potential advertising audience, and creates a conversion possibility to premium subscriptions. This structure reconfigures the power dynamics between artists, listeners, and platform itself. As noted by Prey (2020), the freemium model has normalized the devaluation of musical labor, as artists receive substantially lower compensation from streams on free tiers compared to premium tiers. This economic structure privileges platform accumulation over artist sustainability, embodying what Srnicek (2017) describes as extractive platform capitalism in which value is generated by cultural producers is disproportionately captured by platform intermediaries. The freemium model represents a restructuring of power relations within the music ecosystem.

With this freemium system, the major record labels also attained their preferred business model, which encompassed significant advances, assured minimum payments per stream, and an ownership stake in the company. The details of streaming agreements are often shrouded in secrecy. However, in 2015, Spotify's initial contract with Sony in the United States was revealed in The Verge (The Verge, 2015). This document revealed that Sony was given a \$25 million in advance for the first two years. Also there was no clarification on whether this had to be shared with artists. Furthermore, Sony was allocated \$9 million in free advertising space, which they could either utilize or trade for cash, again artists are not mentioned. Sony also negotiated a series of intricate arrangements regarding assured per-stream minimums for the free tier and per-user minimums for the subscription tier. It is reasonable to presume that the agreements of other major labels were similarly designed (Pelly, 2025).

2.3.2 Discovery Mode & Marquee

Discovery Mode and Marquee represent sophisticated mechanisms of algorithmic governance. These promotional tools offered by Spotify allow artists and labels to increase their visibility within the platform's architecture in exchange for either accepting reduced royalty rates (30% goes back to Spotify as commissions) on resulting streams in “Discovery Mode” or directly paying for enhanced visibility in the

home page of Spotify in “Marquee.” This exemplifies what Gillespie (2018) terms “algorithmic power”. In this system, visibility becomes a commodity that can be purchased rather than earned through listener preference. By implementing these, Spotify has created an economy where access to audiences is mediated through financially altered algorithmic systems privileging those with financial resources.

These promotional mechanisms function as visibility architectures that systematically advantage already established industry actors such as big artists and big labels. When artists or labels utilize Discovery Mode, they essentially consent to a form of reverse payola where they sacrifice future earnings for temporary algorithmic prominence. This arrangement exemplifies a financial uncertainty increasingly borne by artists rather than labels or platforms. Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue that implementing these systems creates a “platform dependency,” where artists have to engage platform-dictated terms of engagement to get visibility and, thus, a livelihood. Discovery Mode and Marquee represent technological manifestations of power asymmetries in platform-mediated cultural industries, where visibility becomes a manufactured scarcity that platforms can monetize while maintaining the appearance of algorithmic neutrality (as seen in Figure 2.1, and Figure 2.2).

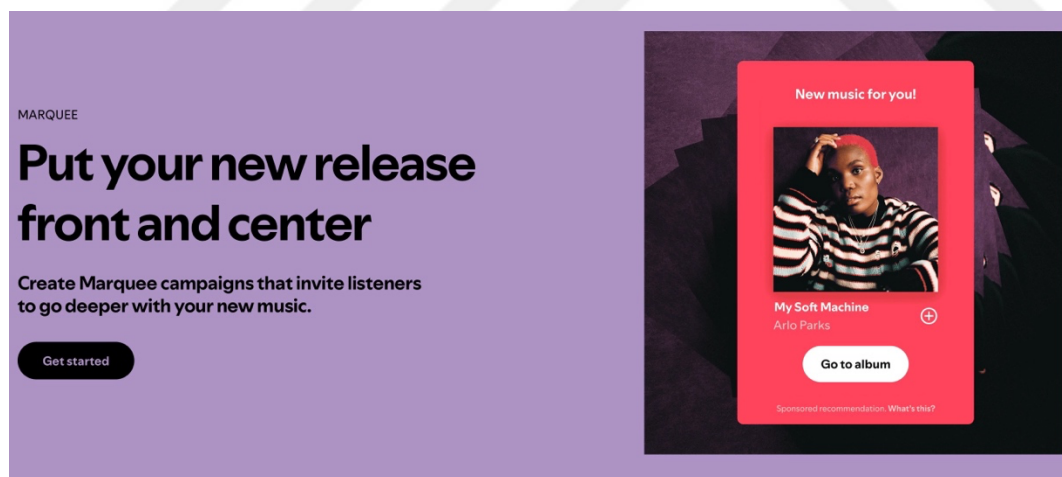


Figure 2.1 : An example of a Marquee Campaign from the Spotify webpage.

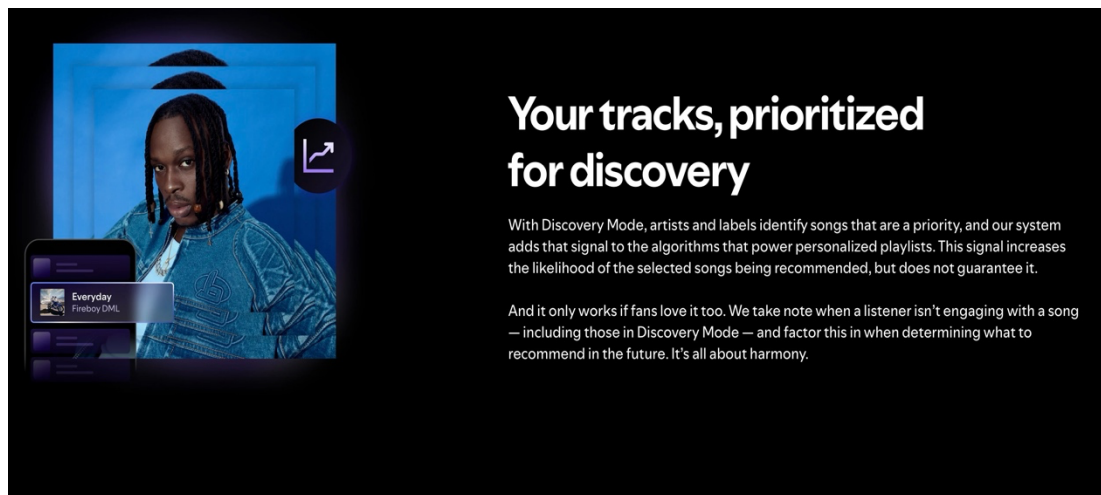


Figure 2.2 : An explanation of Discovery Mode from the Spotify webpage.

2.3.3 Payola 2.0

The emergence of algorithmic promotion systems represents a digital reconfiguration of historical industry practices, constituting the conceptualization of “Payola 2.0.” Unlike traditional payola, radio stations received direct compensation for airplay, and contemporary streaming platforms have developed sophisticated mechanisms of preferential treatment that operate through opaque algorithmic systems. This evolution reflects Gillespie's (2014) identification of the “politics of platforms” in technical systems, which embody particular values and power relations while presenting themselves as neutral intermediaries. These new forms of promotion exemplify how algorithmic systems make consequential decisions about cultural visibility that reinforce existing hierarchies of power and capital. “Payola 2.0”'s promotional mechanisms are systematically embedded within platform operations and presented as optional services. This transformation represents how the influence becomes layered into the very technological infrastructure of music distribution. As Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) argue, the consequence is a reinforcement of oligopolistic market structures. Major labels with vast financial resources have the ability to systematically increase their visibility in technical structures such as recommendation algorithms, playlists, and search results. Independent artists also find themselves investing more of their already limited resources into self-promotion and advertising, which becomes a necessity in an algorithmically mediated economy. Payola 2.0 thus represents a restructuring of how visibility is distributed, reflecting broader trends where quantification and algorithmic logic increasingly determine cultural value.

2.3.4 Emerging Alternative Model: Streaming 2.0 & Super-fans

“Streaming 2.0” represent a paradigm shift toward more artist-centric approach that emphasize direct creator-audience relationships. Unlike that aggregate massive catalogs under uniform payment policies, platforms such as Bandcamp utilize alternative economic models that enable musicians to establish sustainable revenue streams with smaller but more dedicated fanbases. These platforms challenge the dominant industry logic by implementing fan-centric payment models where revenue flows directly to the artists supported by individual users, rather than pooling all subscription fees and distributing them based on total streams. By modifying core features such as ownership rather than access, direct artist-fan transactions rather than intermediated relationships, and flexible pricing rather than fixed subscription fees these platforms redefine the value proposition of music distribution.

This approach addresses one of the fundamental critiques of current streaming economics that niche artists with dedicated but smaller audiences receive disproportionately low compensation despite generating significant value for their listeners. By alternative models such as “Streaming 2.0”, alternative platforms can reconfigure the relationships between human and non-human actors in the music ecosystem, creating new meanings for how music should be valued and exchanged. As the contradictions within the dominant streaming model become more apparent, these alternative approaches may provide necessary blueprints for more sustainable music distribution systems.

The concept of “super-fans” has emerged as a strategic response to platform capitalism's financial limitations in the “Streaming 2.0” positioning. Super-fans are highly engaged listeners who provide disproportionate economic and promotional support that represent an alternative value model prioritizes depth of engagement over breadth of consumption. Unlike the mass audience approach of dominant streaming platforms, which treats all listeners as equivalent data points differentiated only by aggregate streaming statistics, the super-fan model recognizes qualitative differences in listener engagement and investment. This approach acknowledges that a smaller number of dedicated supporters can provide more substantial and reliable income than thousands of casual streamers.

The super-fan strategy directly counters the economic structure of platform capitalism by establishing alternative value networks that exist alongside but partially independent from streaming platforms. Musicians increasingly focus on converting algorithm-driven casual listeners into committed supporters who purchase merchandise, attend concerts, participate in crowdfunding initiatives, and subscribe to artist-specific membership programs. Artists attempt to redirect platform-mediated relationships toward alternative networks of exchange and support. This model reestablishes direct creator-audience connections that platform intermediation had previously disrupted, while still utilizing platforms as discovery mechanisms.





3. SPOTIFY AND THE ALGORITHMIC NATURE OF PLATFORM CAPITALISM

The term ‘platform’ may seem innocent, implying only an intermediary role. It’s a word choice intended to suggest that companies act as providers, not curators. However, these companies do more than just that intermediary role to generate profits and capital flows to their platforms. “This discursive positioning depends on terms and ideas that are specific enough to mean something and vague enough to work across multiple venues for multiple audiences. To call one’s online service a platform is not a meaningless claim or a simple one. Like other structural metaphors (think ‘network’, ‘broadcast’ or ‘channel’) the term depends on a semantic richness that, though it may go unnoticed by the casual listener or even the speaker, gives the term discursive resonance.” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 349).

Spotify’s gatekeeping techniques seem not dangerous to the listener but seem seductive and engaging. The platform’s “Discover Weekly” and other personalized playlists present tools for music exploration, yet they effectively funnel listeners into carefully orchestrated consumption patterns and further refine the platform’s control mechanisms. It is a brilliant sleight of hand, the very features that make users feel empowered are the same ones that lock in them. The supposedly straightforward act of streaming a song now involves complex networks of data centers, content delivery networks, and algorithmic systems that track, analyze, and monetize every interaction.

Artists must now be concerned with creating music and understanding streaming algorithms, playlist ecosystems, and engagement metrics. The “freedom” to distribute music independently has paradoxically created new forms of dependency on technical infrastructures and platform-specific knowledge. This doesn’t mean that traditional gatekeepers, such as record labels, have disappeared; they have evolved to operate through these new digital channels. As Galloway and Thacker presciently noted, the multiplication of communication channels has indeed led to more sophisticated and pervasive forms of control, albeit ones that often masquerade as enhanced freedom and opportunity (Galloway & Thacker, 2007) .

(Tofalvy & Koltai, 2021). Spotify's streaming technology eliminates the need for local storage of music files. The platform's journey started with P2P and changed direction in 2014 with the decision to move entirely to servers. Also, Spotify is not just taking on a distribution role. It exerts unprecedented control over the listening experience as a music player. By 2024, they have “100 million tracks, 6 million podcasts titles, and 350,000 audiobooks. As the world’s most popular audio streaming subscription service with more than 640 million users, including 252 million subscribers in more than 180 markets.” (Spotify, 2025).

The effects of streaming services on the music industry are still not completely understood. As Eriksson put it, “While this new distribution model appears to provide consumers with more freedom and access to music, Spotify's leading market position raises worries about the concentration of power within the music industry, the ambiguous organization of music content, and ethical concerns regarding the commercial exploitation of listeners' consumption habits.” (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 108).

To gain a profound sense of this thesis and its key arguments, fundamental factors that constitute platform capitalism's essence must be thoroughly explored in the streaming era. As a platform in which music consumption and cultural production are tightly assembled, Spotify can never be detached from its social implications. Spotify is mainly placed as a node of technologically mediated curation and consumption, and it has an “entangled” (Callon, 1998) governance function with algorithmic curation ingrained within it. These rationales and ideas enclosed within a “blackbox” (Latour, 1999) must be examined in the context of the current platform-mediated music ecosystem. By doing so, we can better grasp how “datafication” (van Dijck, 2014) and algorithmic performativity reinforce the workings of platform capitalism within Spotify.

3.1 Recommendation Algorithms

Algorithms may seem simple and predictable in theory, but they are complex and variable in practice. Many stakeholders with different objectives contribute to creating, maintaining, and updating algorithms. No single engineer understands all the parts of this complex system. Therefore, when the system becomes extremely complex, it becomes difficult even for experts to predict the exact output, and they, too, can

become confused. Algorithm recommendations are driven by scores and data collected from users. These queries point to an underlying idea, which is understanding an algorithm. This means understanding its decision mechanism and knowing the parameters that govern why it makes that specific decision. This reminds us again how important it is to call for openness and transparency about the functioning of any algorithm (Seaver, 2019).

Spotify's recommendation system is such a paradox to the music consumer. Its predictive algorithms can also stifle musical exploration by narrowing us to specific options because of calculated recommendations. For instance, the platform's famous Discover Weekly algorithm operates as a sophisticated pattern-matching system that creates what might be called “taste profiles”, digital fingerprints of our musical preferences that become increasingly detailed with each interaction. However, this precision in matching our tastes might be what limits genuine musical discovery and serendipity. One of the interview participants expresses this as:

“Spotify's algorithm previously worked very well. But now, Spotify can no longer properly operate its tools that would help us discover something new. About a year ago, a new feature was introduced where it gives you recommendations within your playlist. There's a feature called 'Smart Mix.' I turn on 'Shuffle' and 'Smart Mix.' 'Shuffle' is already in terrible condition. It's not a real shuffle. It always plays the same 15 songs that I listen to most in my playlist of 500 tracks. Occasionally it throws in a few different songs but then returns to that flow. The algorithm has gone haywire.” (Participant 9: Musician and Sound Engineer)

This algorithmic mediation of discovery has influenced the temporal rhythms of listening to music. It has successfully established automated loops of music exploration. These temporal infrastructures do not just react to our repetition but bring it into play, producing the regularity that such a platform relies on for its perpetual harvesting and processing of information. This means that artists and producers are designing their songs more and more in ways that promote them with the rule of Spotify algorithms. This comes out in different forms, from trimming the length of songs to putting the hooks at the front so people don't skip the tracks (which causes the algorithm to not recommend their track). The result is significant shift in musical

creation, where artistic decisions are increasingly influenced by algorithmic preferences rather than purely artistic considerations.

As Debruyne put it: “But, in fact, the algorithms create these samenesses and regularities. They encode heterogeneous things into consistent digital data. It is no doubt true that we tend to make regular choices that correspond with our own taste, but these systems transform contingent regularities into mathematical rules, so that the recommender systems work from a complete disconnection of music experience, understood as the meaning produced in contingent and heterogeneous situations of listening.” (Debruyne, 2021, p. 260) Platform capitalism has transformed the music industry in several ways in recent years. Streaming services have become the primary source of revenue for artists and labels, replacing physical album sales. Streaming revenues make up 89% of total revenue in the music industry (Forbes, 2024). Algorithmic curation systems have changed how listeners engage with new music discoveries, while user-generated playlists have taken over the role of mixtapes. Live performances have become increasingly important to artists' revenues because streaming royalties do not adequately compensate artists for a decent living.

In the platform economy, digitizing and monetizing user activities creates dangerous spirals for listeners and artists. In the past, music recommendations primarily came from personal connections (suggestions from friends), the insights of experts (magazines, journalists, blogs), or secondary sharing features of the software. In the era of algorithms, however, this aspect of experiencing music is predominantly driven by seemingly automated processes that platforms execute based on their unclear handling of users' data and listening habits (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018). One of the interview participants expresses concerns on the topic:

“In the past, people would carefully create playlists for their partners, putting in a lot of effort. Now, as soon as you upload two songs, a ton of suggestions appear saying 'add this, add that.' I personally don't listen to playlists because when I check the 'Turkish Rock' playlist, I see irrelevant artists which are not from specified genre. The meaning of genres has been lost and emptied. Music has this psychological ability to bring people together. The essential property of music to bring people together and create an identity that defines you is being destroyed. When genres disappear, stereotypes emerge.” (Participant 8)

Algorithms are crucial actants in Spotify's infrastructure. These algorithmic systems are reaching far beyond merely facilitating connections, but they actively transform how music is discovered, consumed, and valued. Spotify's recommendation algorithms create new “hybrid agency” (Michael, 2000), where musical preferences become entangled with machine learning. Thus, this increasingly shapes taste-making or “taste profiles” and music discovery.

3.2 Taste Profiles

Spotify's recommendation system uses a complex machine learning algorithm that processes user data. This creates “filter bubbles”. For example, if a listener listens to Taylor Swift, the algorithm will likely recommend other pop princesses. This person may never discover that they like 90s grunge or electronic atmospheric sounds in the style of Jon Hopkins. This algorithmic curation goes beyond simple genre matching, creating what music industry researchers call “taste profiles”, patterns that can predict and shape user preferences. These recommendation mechanisms, designed to keep users in the app “easily and effortlessly” by taking the “discovery” process out of their control, encourage a standardized music culture and undermine diversity. I quote, “Ideas about taste do not need to be correct (or even explicit) to be built into algorithmic systems, and once there, they can constitute performative infrastructures that bring the world into alignment with the theories they embody” (Seaver, 2022).

In order to show what kind of data constitutes the taste profile based on the data I requested from Spotify, I created the following graphs from the “inferences.json” file in the data (as seen in Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2).

Spotify User Categorization Overview

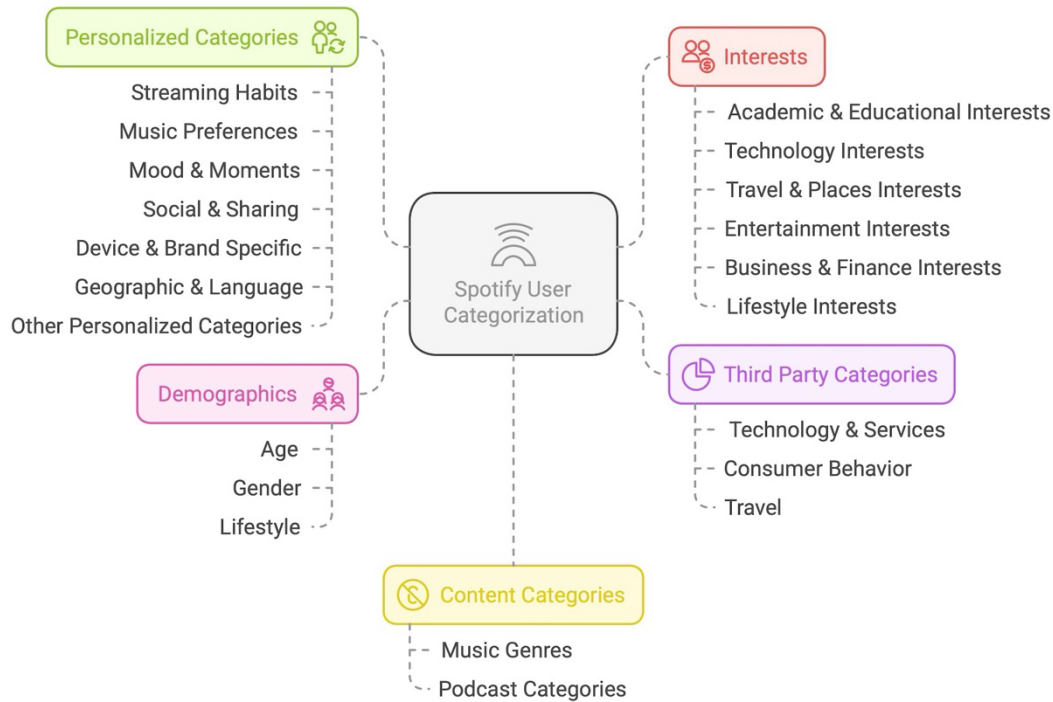


Figure 3.1 : A model of categories that configure a taste profile.

Comprehensive Interests Categorization

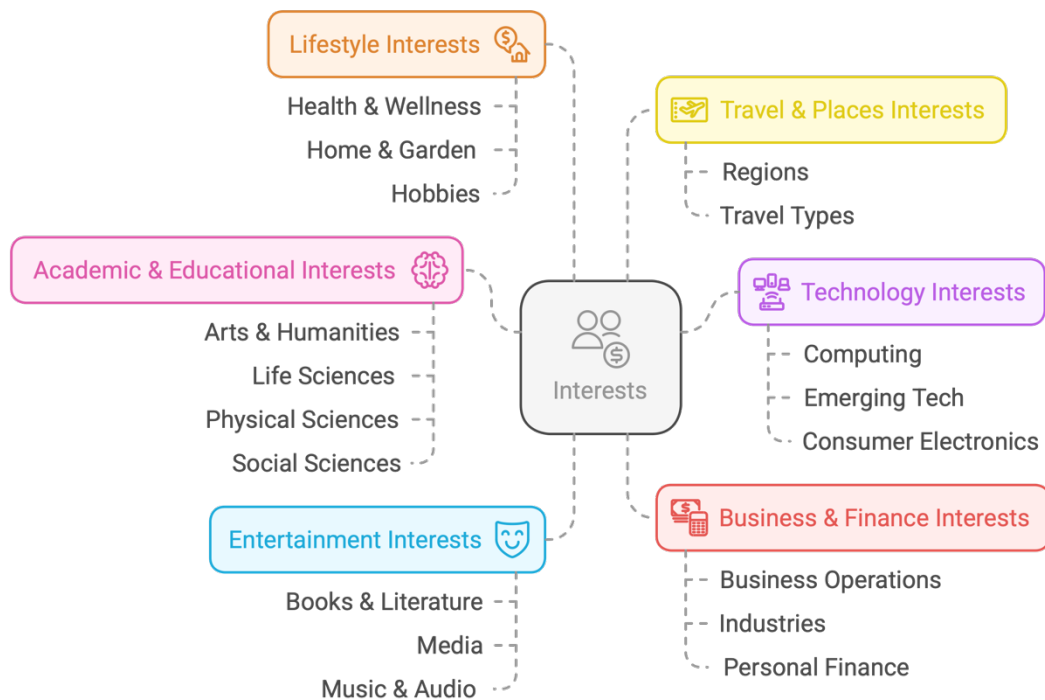


Figure 3.2 : A model of user categorization based on a taste profile.

The taxonomies reveal Spotify's data extraction imperative, which van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) might characterize as a “datafication” infrastructure designed to render user behavior into quantifiable, marketable intelligence. The classification schema demonstrates how platforms operationalize wherein user experiences are transformed into behavioral outputs for prediction products. The platform's decision to segment users across multiple identity dimensions reflects Gillespie (2010) as it identifies its role in shaping cultural categories and public discourse. The differentiation between “Personalized Categories” and “Third Party Categories” indicates data interoperability across corporate entities, suggesting what Srnicek (2017) identifies as the “network effects” and data advantage that characterize platform monopolization strategies.

The demographic categorization particularly invites interrogation regarding how platforms reproduce social stratification through algorithmic sorting. The taste profile architecture exemplifies, in Cheney-Lippold's (2017) terms, “algorithmic identity,” the constitution of selfhood through data categories that serve commercial purposes. The listener's tastes become abstracted into categorical data points separated from their embodied, contextual meaning and show themselves as the digital enclosure of cultural consumption. These visualizations provide empirical evidence of how music streaming platforms transform cultural engagement into extraction opportunities, demonstrating the materiality of what Couldry and Mejias (2019) define as “data colonialism”, which means the appropriation of human experience as raw material for market processes.

3.2.1 Streaming Data

The digital footprint we leave behind when engaging with streaming platforms extends far beyond our conscious awareness. An examination of my personal Spotify extended streaming history reveals the granular level at which listener data is collected, processed, and categorized. Each interaction with the platform generates a comprehensive data point that informs not only personalized recommendations but also builds intricate taste profiles that reflect our listening habits (as seen in Figure 3.3).

```

"ts": "2024-10-05T15:18:48Z",
"platform": "android",
"ms_played": 204040,
"conn_country": "TR",
"ip_addr": "xxx.xxx.x.xxx",
"master_metadata_track_name": "Telallás",
"master_metadata_album_artist_name": "Nicolas Jaar",
"master_metadata_album_album_name": "Telas",
"spotify_track_uri": "spotify:track:0KWntABFNHRVssK0ZdqkfD",
"episode_name": null,
"episode_show_name": null,
"spotify_episode_uri": null,
"reason_start": "clickrow",
"reason_end": "logout",
"shuffle": false,
"skipped": false,
"offline": false,
"offline_timestamp": 1728140582,
"incognito_mode": false

```

Figure 3.3 : The streaming data flow on Spotify.

As evidenced by the sample data entry from September 30, 2024, Spotify tracks an extensive array of parameters for each streaming session. Beyond the obvious metadata about the track itself (“Telallás” by Nicolas Jaar from the album “Telas”), the platform records precise timestamps, playback duration (599,353 milliseconds, nearly 10 minutes), and geographic information (connection from Turkey with the specific IP address). The platform also monitors how we interact with content, whether a track was played to completion (“reason_start”: “trackdone”), how the session ended (“reason_end”: “endplay”), and whether I chose to skip the track before it finished (noted as “skipped”: true). Furthermore, the data includes behavioral patterns such as shuffle preferences (“shuffle”: false), whether content was accessed offline (“offline”: false with corresponding timestamps), and if the listening occurred in “incognito mode” (which it did not in this case). The platform also distinguishes between music tracks and podcast episodes, maintaining separate URL identifiers.

This level of collected data raises concerns on the commodification of music and creating a personal taste. These extensive taste profiles represent a form of platform capitalism where our aesthetic preferences and consumption patterns used for behavioral prediction. The granularity of this data extends to how, when, where, and for exactly how long up to milliseconds. Spotify can effectively map emotional states and daily routines through music consumption patterns. A track skipped after several minutes may indicate waning interest, a song played repeatedly might signal emotional significance. These algorithmic interpretations of personal taste create aspects of our preferences we may not have consciously articulated.

These data demonstrated the double-edged nature of algorithmic curation. The potential of personalized recommendations narrow our choices by reinforcing existing preferences through collected vast amounts of data. The extensive data collection that enables this personalization also represents an unprecedented level of corporate insight into intimate aspects of personal identity. Our moods, routines, cultural affiliations, and emotional responses, all quantified into marketable data points. The asymmetrical relationship, where platforms know exponentially more about us than we know about their algorithmic operations, demands greater scrutiny of the hidden costs of “free” or low cost cultural consumption.

3.2.2 Music Classification and Personalization

Spotify uses deep learning technologies to enhance personalization. Their hybrid approach combines collaborative filtering, content-based filtering, and advanced neural networks. One of them is collaborative filtering, which is based on similar user's behaviors, examining interactions such as likes, listens, and skips to predict user preferences in the same “taste” group. Content-based filtering utilizes song metadata, including genre, artist, tempo, and lyrics, to recommend music similar to the user’s previous selections. Spotify uses various architectures of deep learning models. Autoencoders¹ learn compressed² representations of songs to predict user preferences by capturing intricate patterns in behavior and song characteristics. Reinforcement learning techniques refine recommendations based on user feedback (Tomasi et al., 2023).

On the other hand, Recurrent Neural Networks³, particularly Long Short-Term Memory Networks⁴ and Gated Recurrent Units⁵, model sequential patterns in listening behavior to predict what users might want to hear next, which uses in-playlist recommendations. Convolutional Neural Networks⁶ analyze audio with spectrograms,

¹ A type of neural network used to learn codings of unlabeled data efficiently.

² An audio process for reducing the volume of loud sounds while increasing the volume of quite sounds.

³ Class of a neural network for processing sequential data. They are used in situations where the order is important such as speech, text, time.

⁴ A specialized version of a Recurrent Neural Network.

⁵ Another specialized version of a Recurrent Neural Network.

⁶ Regularized type of neural network learns from filter optimization.

and consider lyrics to learn inherent patterns. Transformer-based models⁷ efficiently process user behavior and music features to make more personalized and context-aware recommendations. Natural Language Processing⁸ techniques are used for lyrics analysis in content-based recommendations that try to predict emotional states or musical tastes (Shitole et al., 2024).

Spotify also employs several specific deep learning techniques, including collaborative deep learning models with matrix factorization combined with neural network-based latent space embedding, variational autoencoders for robust user-song interaction capturing, graph neural networks to model relationships between users and musical entities, attention mechanisms to focus on important user behavior patterns, and contextual bandits to balance exploration of new music with exploitation of user preferences. Spotify's home screen uses an AI system called BaRT (Bandits for Recommendations as Treatments) that organizes the display and collections of suggested songs and fresh content (Shitole et al., 2024).

The system breaks down songs into seven raw audio analysis metrics: danceability, loudness, energy, tempo, acousticness, chord progressions, and lyrics. Danceability is based on rhythm, beat, and tempo. Loudness indicates the volume and dynamic range. Energy represents the activity level of a track which higher values correspond to loud, fast, and dynamic tracks. Acousticness indicating the dominance of non-electronic instrumentation. The chord progression is about the harmonic structure of a song. Lastly, the lyrics analyze the story and the song's message. Can these complex algorithmic systems really define a "taste"? Nick Seaver (2022) asked Dan, an experimental musician and data scientist, "what constitutes 'taste'?". It is an even more complex answer than these algorithmic systems:

"Why do people like the music that they like? I mean—I think this sort of platonic ideal in mine and a lot of people's minds is that there's some sort of—you know, I don't know. I mean, this is such a tricky thing—I wanted to talk about some innate sensibility that matches the sensibility of the musicians essentially. You know, there's sort of—It's some sort of almost mystical thing that they're tapping into that expresses something inexpressible, and that strikes a chord with you, but—I mean,

⁷ Context learning neural network from sequential data such as words.

⁸ Computational technology for the synthesis and analysis of speech and language.

of course there's this social dimension too, and there's this, you know—There's a million examples of—It's not so pure in a way or, you know—I mean—I guess the other extreme is, like, because it's cool, you know? There's all this—I feel like the reality is some sort of mix of “Because I really enjoy these sounds and the way I feel when I experience these sounds” and “I also get some sort of pleasure about thinking about who this band is and what they represent and where that places me in this whole scene,” and, you know, how that sort of—It's part of creating my image of myself.” (Seaver, 2022).

Taking a step back from the complexities of the situation to reflect on the concept of ubiquity can be quite difficult, particularly when we concentrate on the numerous connections in specific instances. The commonness of classifications and standards is unexpectedly difficult to identify, primarily because we have been conditioned to ignore them. “This categorical saturation furthermore forms a complex web. Although it is possible to pull out a single classification scheme or standard for reference purposes, in reality none of them stand alone.” (Bowker & Star, 2008). These classifications creates an enormous network of interoperability. However, “taste” is overwhelmingly complex than this interoperable concepts.

3.2.2.1 Diversity of consumption

A research by Spotify highlights an important finding: listening to music through algorithm-generated recommendations reduces the diversity of music (Anderson et al., 2020). If individuals depend exclusively on algorithmic recommendations, they may receive increasingly similar suggestions over time. The initial bias influencing the recommendations generated by Spotify's algorithm is the popularity bias. When a user first creates an account, at which point the system lacks enough context to deliver personalized recommendations. To kickstart the personalization process, the app defaults to showcasing a selection of trendy music. As the user continues to engage, Spotify fine-tunes its suggestions, gradually shifting from a broad assortment of hits to a more tailored collection of content that personalized for the user. Because algorithms are influenced by user behavior, this programming establishes a feedback loop that ties users to the app, which can only be interrupted if users consciously explore music outside of Spotify's suggestions.

For any music streaming platform that provides on-demand services, user listening typically falls into two categories: organic, user-driven, listening and programmed,

algorithm-driven, listening. On Spotify, users can search the songs they specifically wanted to listen, assemble collections for later listening, or listen user-made playlist. These activities are referred to as organic listening, where plays are driven by user interactions. Users can also engage with algorithmic playlists, such as “Discover Weekly”, curated playlists, or stations created based on a selected song. Although the user starts the stream, the song that will play next is determined without any input from the listener. This method of streaming is known as programmed listening.

One of their aims is to determine how “spread out” a user's musical tastes are within the music landscape, taking into account the variations in song similarity. If a user mainly listens to tracks that are very alike, Spotify classifies them as a “specialist”. If a user prefer a diverse range of songs, they are referred to as a “generalist.” To measure musical diversity, they apply the generalist-specialist score (GS-score). To capture this difference, the GS-score calculates the average similarity between a single song and the average of the user's songs. Specialists usually exhibit a high average similarity, whereas generalists are likely to demonstrate a lower average similarity (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 2158).

User-driven listening habits typically showcase greater diversity compared to those influenced by algorithms. Recommendations often lead to a “focused” approach to music consumption, resulting in closely grouped music selections. However, organic listening reflects a wider variety. Premium users demonstrate more varied organic listening behaviors than free users. This difference can be largely attributed to the restrictions in free tier, such as limited skipping options. One of the finding is Spotify's study is that across different levels of activity, generalist users show a higher likelihood of remaining on Spotify. If a user identified as a generalists rather than a specialists, they are more likely to switch to premium. The recommendation algorithms play a significant role in increasing user engagement and switching to premium tier. However, they reduce the diversity in music consumption:

“I've found that Spotify's recommendation system limits my experience in a way. When I make a playlist and listen to it for a week, my whole life seems to revolve around it. I can't find anything else. It feels somewhat restricting. Everything is in there, but because it's responding to my movements, it limits and narrows things. Yes, I might have listened to those songs and that music for a month, but a month later I might listen to

something completely different. I find it difficult to discover new things; I need to spend a lot of time inside. It doesn't provide me any convenience.”
(Participant 6: Music Publisher, Content Consultant)

3.3 Optimization

The platform’s emphasis on user engagement metrics leads to what critics call the “Spotify sound” (Pelly, 2025, p. 191), songs designed to perform well in its algorithmic ecosystem. “How will this sound on Spotify?” is now one of the most critical questions for producers. One of the forced technical standardization has been named “loudness wars 2.0”. This phenomenon illustrates a significant change in optimization. In the original loudness wars, producers competed to make their tracks sound louder on physical media and radio. Version 2.0 shows itself in technical requirements beyond just volume, compression, and algorithmic preferences. The reason why Spotify implemented loudness normalization is to create “consistent” listening experiences.

This also established new technical parameters that producers must consider and optimize. The algorithmic ecosystem demands specific audio characteristics beyond mere volume levels. Songs optimized for streaming platforms tend to come hooks within the first 30 seconds; producers now consider implementing strategic sonic elements that trigger algorithm recognition and production techniques that sound good on mobile devices and earbuds, which are the primary listening tools for most streaming consumers, and construct tracks with algorithm-friendly durations to avoid skip penalties.

The question “How will this sound on Spotify?” encompasses not just audio quality concerns but considerations of how algorithms will categorize, recommend, and ultimately “value” the work. The economic logic underlying this optimization process reveals platform capitalism’s core dynamic: creative labor must conform to technical specifications determined by proprietary algorithms designed primarily to maximize engagement metrics rather than artistic expression. Musicians and producers now must think beyond their creative processes and subordinate to algorithmic imperatives if they wish to remain visible within the platform economy. This optimization exerts a powerful form of control, where platforms shape creative output not through direct censorship but through the economic necessity of optimization. The result is a

homogenization of sonic characteristics across seemingly diverse genres as creators independently arrive at similar solutions to the shared problem of algorithmic visibility. One of the interview participants touches on the topic as follows:

“Production used to be more art-based. Our role models, our mentors, created more musical, artistic productions. Currently, the industry has evolved into a more consumable model. Now productions are aimed at people and social media content. Especially TikTok has a major influence on music in Turkey. Partly due to the desire for popularity, more consumable, more mainstream things are produced, and when one catches on, everyone follows. Social media trends lead to streams for music.”
(Participant 3: Producer, Arranger, Composer, Musician)

3.4 Artist Visibility

This transformation is not limited to revenue models. Platform dynamics have completely transformed the music production and distribution ecosystem. Big streaming platforms such as Spotify have the superpower of determining which artists get visibility. Spotify collects music consumption patterns, such as listening habits, skip rates, and playlist additions, by mining data from users. The platformization of the music industry and the contentization of music has also changed the way artists approach creativity. Many musicians now design their songs to create the possibility of algorithmic success. While music platforms see themselves as a democracy where anyone can distribute their work, the reality is more complex. Algorithmic systems work to the benefit of already popular artists, making it increasingly difficult for independent musicians to break out without significant marketing budgets or visibility on editorial playlists. I quote one of the interview participants who plays in an alternative band:

“Alternative artists are more affected by this situation. They put in a lot of effort to make something happen. Recently I worked with a musician whose song was released, and he monitored the song's data from the Spotify for Artists application. It made a very rapid rise to a certain point, then the graph suddenly flattened. It probably entered a playlist and lost its engagement as soon as it left that playlist. Or, for example, when a song is

featured in a series, engagement increases and then suddenly stops. Artists put a lot of effort into pushing engagement.” (Participant 10: Musician)

3.4.1 The Role of Social Media Platforms

The social media mindset is also an important part of contemporary popular music marketing. As van Dijck and Poell state: ”In line with the feature of programmability, popularity is conditioned by both algorithmic and socio-economic components. Each platform has distinct mechanisms for boosting the popularity of people, things, or ideas, measured mostly in quantified terms.” (Dijck & Poell, 2013). This intertwined, chained quantification means that independent artists who cannot get their share from pay-per-stream are trying to enter the algorithm and move further away from sincere creation.

Musicians are now anticipated to take on roles as dancers, models, and lifestyle influencers; they are encouraged to reveal their most profound challenges. An intense focus on literal interpretation in lyrics has emerged, with songwriters aiming to portray themselves as relatable figures on TikTok, underdogs competing for streams. This method is strictly managed, yet often appears haphazard and superficial. The short-form video trend as a means for music discovery has elevated the idea of streambait to unprecedented levels. It's no longer enough to engage listeners within the initial thirty seconds; now, you need to capture their interest within the first three to five seconds. The chorus or a catchy element must immediately seize the attention of app users.

The landscape of songwriting has increasingly shifted towards the use of snippets. Artists were sharing short pieces of unfinished work, effectively A/B testing their hooks to gauge audience reaction and determine which songs to develop further. There is a thing called “TikTok burnout” where artists express their exhaustion with the platform has become a trend. Major label artists critiqued their labels' relentless demand for content. Labels have engaged in campaigns to “seed” songs into the algorithm, and employing strategic influencer placements and even having interns create multiple accounts solely to promote specific sound clips. In the end, TikTok emerged primarily as a platform for music promotion rather than for its monetization. Artists typically receive little compensation, often earning less than they do from streaming platforms.

As the way people listen to music continued to evolve into a more passive activity, this undervaluation carried on. TikTok's approach remained centered on directing users to services like Spotify or Apple Music; entire marketing strategies frequently hinged on “teasing” short clips of forthcoming singles to support “pre-save” efforts, allowing fans to automatically include a song in their libraries once it was released. Over time, the ideas of performing well on Spotify and excelling on TikTok started to become interconnected. Doesn't matter if it's Spotify or TikTok, the idea of discovery within these corporate digital domains ultimately was not a true discovery. Rather, it revolved around managing risks and the necessity to keep consumer engagement, and not losing them in first few seconds. Both settings were shaped by similar, yet different, inquiries: How long did you spend on this content? How long did it took your attention before you moved on? The measures of either fulfillment or discontent became strikingly passive as engagement metrics shifted towards a more detached style of interaction.

The rise of TikTok has effected the artistic decisions and promotional strategies as well as the approaches of Spotify. With the influence of TikTok, Spotify began to shift from editorial curation towards personalization. By the year 2023, Spotify created a personalized discovery feed for mobile users that emulates TikTok's interface, coinciding with TikTok's introduction of its streaming service, TikTok Music, in some regions (Pelly, 2025). As content creators, do artists become a mediator of platform capitalism? One of the interview participants expresses feelings on the role of social media as follows:

“This is a directly influencing factor. Unfortunately, artists need to become content creators. This is actually a separate profession. I mean, how can a person actively produce music, organize concerts, and find time for content creation? I'm not very sure about this, honestly. But we have to recommend and implement this because it works better when done. There are so many options, so many messages in this period. There's a system and audience that takes music away from being an artistic pleasure and turns it into a message. The artist has to constantly remind themselves and be visible. We're talking about some of the world's biggest companies: Meta, TikTok, YouTube, Spotify... Various capitalist companies. All these platforms should be thought of as music markets. If a product in the TikTok market isn't in Spotify, people will go to the TikTok market because they liked

that product. Therefore, Spotify needs to take this into its own market and integrate it because they're in competition. The 'I want to have it too' attitude.” (Participant 4: Label Coordinator)

At one point, it seemed that both platforms were on a collision course, each trying to serve similar functions; however, TikTok has since phased out its streaming service. Still, despite these developments, several elements remain unchanged. Songwriters pay close attention to the numbers. It can be quite addictive. If it weren't for Spotify and streaming data, they'd be tracking radio charts. If radio charts weren't available, they'd turn to iTunes sales figures. And if that data were also unavailable, they'd look at other metrics. In the end, they trying to gauge where their work connects with their audiences.

3.4.2 Meta Integration

Spotify has a serious integration and collaboration with Meta on data collection. I quote from an article published in Spotify Newsroom: “One of our first projects was to look into the viral loop to understand what the missing data was. Ultimately, we didn't have the full picture of what was driving our growth from a social perspective. We added tools to better understand sharing behaviors—for instance, volume of sharing, engagement and acquisition from shares, interesting industry trends, and so on. With this, we were able to demonstrate the impact and continue to invest with our partners. We launched the first version of Instagram Stories with static content, and build upon that, we did with assets like Canvas, Wrapped data-stories sharing, and others. I personally would love to see more features that support UGC (user generated content) video and personalized stats—or even being able to unlock filters and stickers based on your listening history. So there's a lot of ideas that we have about how to take it to the next level. ” (Spotify, 2022). This leads excessive behavioral tracking of users (as seen in Figure 3.4)



Figure 3.4 : This Spotify advertisement highlights the platform’s ability to track and analyze user behavior.

This partnership reveals how platforms commodify user behavior by implementing tools that track sharing patterns, engagement metrics, and acquisition channels. The systematic collection of these behavioral data points enables both companies to monetize social connections that users create organically, demonstrating how platform capitalism converts everyday activities into quantifiable value streams. Cross-platform data integration between Spotify and Meta creates powerful information ecosystems that entrench market dominance. The resulting data synthesis generates insights neither company could achieve independently, enhancing targeted advertising capabilities. What Spotify frames as product innovation more accurately represents an expansion of surveillance capabilities framed as user experience improvements.

3.5 Ghost Artists

Many users did not come to Spotify with particular artists or albums in mind. Rather, they looked for a solution, something that would offer a soundtrack for their everyday activities. They wanted a passive listening experience. They needed a single press of a button which provide them with suitable music. Whether it was a playlist for studying, calming background music, or an appropriate set of tunes for dinner, users turned to Spotify for its convenience. In the lean-back atmosphere of listening that streaming had made popular, many listeners often remained unaware of the specific songs or artists playing in the background.

What led to this situation? That question might linger in the minds of both musicians and listeners, but Spotify had other priorities: To them, it is not necessary to paying full royalties if users were only partially connecting with the music. In response, music programming executives introduced an innovative plan: they created a strategy to lower royalty costs by settling the mood playlists with inexpensive filler music, stock tracks sourced from studios that matched specific moods, licensed by Spotify identified as special, reduced-rate agreements. These tracks were frequently created by anonymous musicians, giving them temporary nicknames. If users mainly engaged with the platform through curated playlists, they don't even notice if high-quality tracks were removed. When listeners develop consistent habits around playlists curated by the platform, artists become interchangeable and disposable (as seen in Figure 3.5).

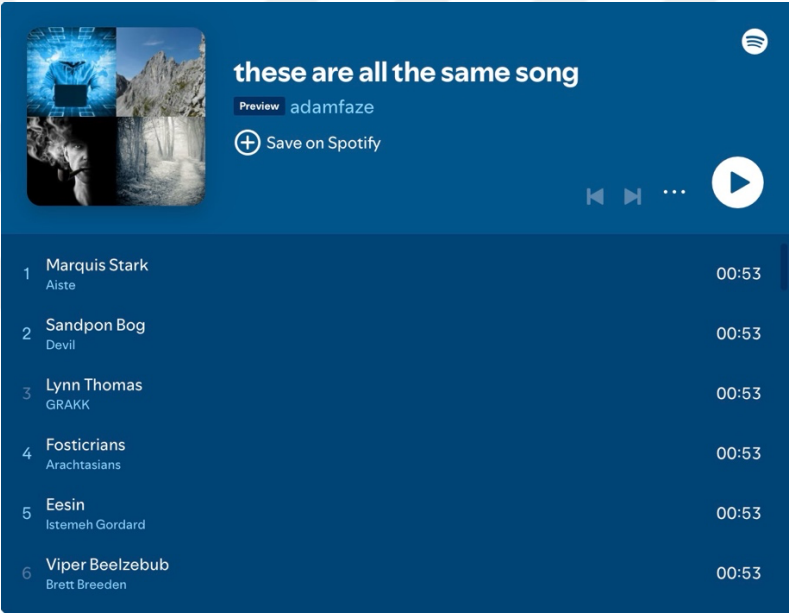


Figure 3.5 : A user-created playlist following the discovery of publishing the same song under different aliases.

Journalists started reporting on this peculiar trend, referring to the ghost music creators as “fake artists.” However, the situation was more complex. It is a situation that has complicated network of power and financial stakes. This initiative was known as Perfect Fit Content, or PFC. For the artists whose songs were replaced by these ghost performers, the consequences could be significant, both in terms of popularity and stream revenues. As this situation progressed, some of Spotify’s committed in-house playlist curators also felt something is bad. They observed with regret how the playlists they had carefully developed were altered into simple, cost-effective content sources.

The issue was initially brought to light by Music Business Worldwide, in 2017 (Music Business Worldwide, 2017). It was claimed that Spotify had been sourcing generic instrumentals directly to cater to certain genres and themes, such as jazz and relaxing piano music. Producers would produce these tracks in mass and release them under temporary nicknames. The preliminary investigation indicated that Spotify licensed these tracks from production companies at a reduced royalty rate. Which enabling them to showcase the music prominently on their widely followed editorial chill playlists. The company firmly denied the existence of “fake artists,” while not addressing the broader, underlying arrangement. Spotify claimed they had recognized a demand for content and were merely reaching to suppliers to deliver what listeners desired. However, the dilemma remains. Were listeners genuinely creating this demand, or had Spotify, in reality, fabricated it?

The questions surpassed the answers until a 2022 investigation by the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter (DN) significantly substantiated the claims (Dagens Nyheter, 2022). By validating streaming data from various sources alongside documents from the Swedish Collection Society, the newspaper disclosed that roughly twenty songwriters accounted for more than five hundred different artist identities. Together, these songwriters flooded Spotify with thousands of tracks, which received millions of streams.

3.6 Data-metrics

In 2013, Spotify launched a marketing program for musicians called “Spotify for Artists”. This program started as a website, then turned into an app in 2016. The platform encouraged musicians to take a data based approach to their art. The app provided instant alerts on streaming statistics and additions of their songs to playlists, notifying artists when their metrics changed. In addition, Spotify for Artists' editorial section included interviews and tutorials with popular artists who shared advice on career development. A key early effort was a video series called “The Game Plan” (2018), designed as a guide for artists to improve their engagement with Spotify.

One of the videos, “How to Read Your Data,” (2018) emphasized Spotify's need for musicians to engage in data analysis. In this episode, an enthusiastic Spotify employee explains how detailed performance analytics can help artists determine which tracks resonate best with listeners and spot unexpected placements in playlists. For example,

a pop artist might find that their track was on a trap playlist, causing them to reevaluate their artistic direction towards trap. Just such an example appears in one of the videos. After reviewing their data, an acoustic duo called Slenderbodies discovers that they are predominantly classified as an electronic band rather than indie-pop. This findings lead them to reduce the number of people in the band, incorporate electronic elements to their live performances, and potentially adding DJ sets to their repertoire (Pelly, 2025).

The video's tone is playful and educational, but the underlying message is the importance of using data to create music. In this respect, Spotify is not only emphasizing the importance of data but also trying to plant an optimization mindset to the artists. This strategy encourages artists to conform to popular categorizations, potentially sacrificing their own artistic vision for greater visibility on the streaming platform. As a result, Spotify sends a clear message about its ideal creator-consumer: an artist who actively engages with the platform's promotional tools while producing commercially viable content and consistently applies data-driven methods to maximize streaming success. This data-centricity further strengthens Spotify's position as a gatekeeper, as artists have begun to make creative and marketing decisions based on these metrics. This has created a new industry that promotes and optimizes playlists, further cementing Spotify's influence on the music ecosystem.

3.7 Actions of Resistance

3.7.1 Spotify's Appeal Against Copyright Royalty Board (CRB)

In 2019, big group of songwriters including Nile Rodgers, Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds, Greg Kurstin, Frank Dukes, Benj Pasel and Justin Paul, Mike Elizondo, Murda Beatz, Ross Golan and Teddy Geiger, and dozens more sent a letter to Spotify founder and CEO Daniel Ek:

“An Open Letter to Spotify

Dear Spotify:

We're hurt and disappointed. You created a songwriter relations team and ingratiated Spotify into our community. We know that you are not the only DSP appealing the Copyright Royalty Board (CRB) rate determination. You are, however, the only provider that made us feel we were working to build a modern music industry together.

Now, we can see the real reason for your songwriter outreach. You have used us and tried to divide us but we stand together.

Our fight is for all songwriters: those struggling to build their career, those in the middle class and those few who have reached your Secret Genius level. But none of us are “secret!” WE all create the ONE thing you sell... songs.

Do the right thing and drop your appeal of the Copyright Royalty Board rate determination.

Sincerely,

Not So Secret Geniuses”

This open letter was written in response to Spotify's appeal against the US Copyright Royalty Board's (CRB) decision to increase the royalty paid to artists from 10.5% to 15.1%. This decision was a step towards fairer royalty payments for artists. Artists claimed that Spotify had set up a “secret” team to develop relationships with and persuade artists, and accused Spotify of backstabbing. Following the incident, Spotify continued to appeal the CRB.

3.7.2 Spotify (Un)wrapped

Creative workshops can function as sites of resistance against algorithmic datafication as presented in the “Spotify (Un)wrapped” workshop series (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024). The authors' feminist approach to engaging with Spotify's yearly Wrapped campaign demonstrates that collective critical reflection can challenge the platform's claims of “knowing us” through data. Authors positioned participants as co-analysts rather than subjects of data extraction and inverted the power dynamics between platform and users. Participants collaboratively deconstructed the assumptions embedded, revealing how the platform attempts to categorize and shape identity through collected data. This analytical process empowers users to recognize how their complex, multifaceted relationships with music are flattened into marketable categories that serve commercial interests.

The creative exercises within these workshops exemplify how resistance can take material form through artistic expression. Participants created collages on their “Spotify data selfies,” and reclaimed agency over their “taste profile”. These collages often criticised Spotify's simplified representations. The physical act of crafting these

responses allowed participants to engage with their data on their own terms, embodying what the authors describe as “elevating emotion and embodiment”. This creative resistance challenged the premise that platforms can meaningfully capture identity through data points, instead emphasized the personal, subjective, and temporal dimensions of music listening that algorithms fail to capture (as seen in Figure 3.6).

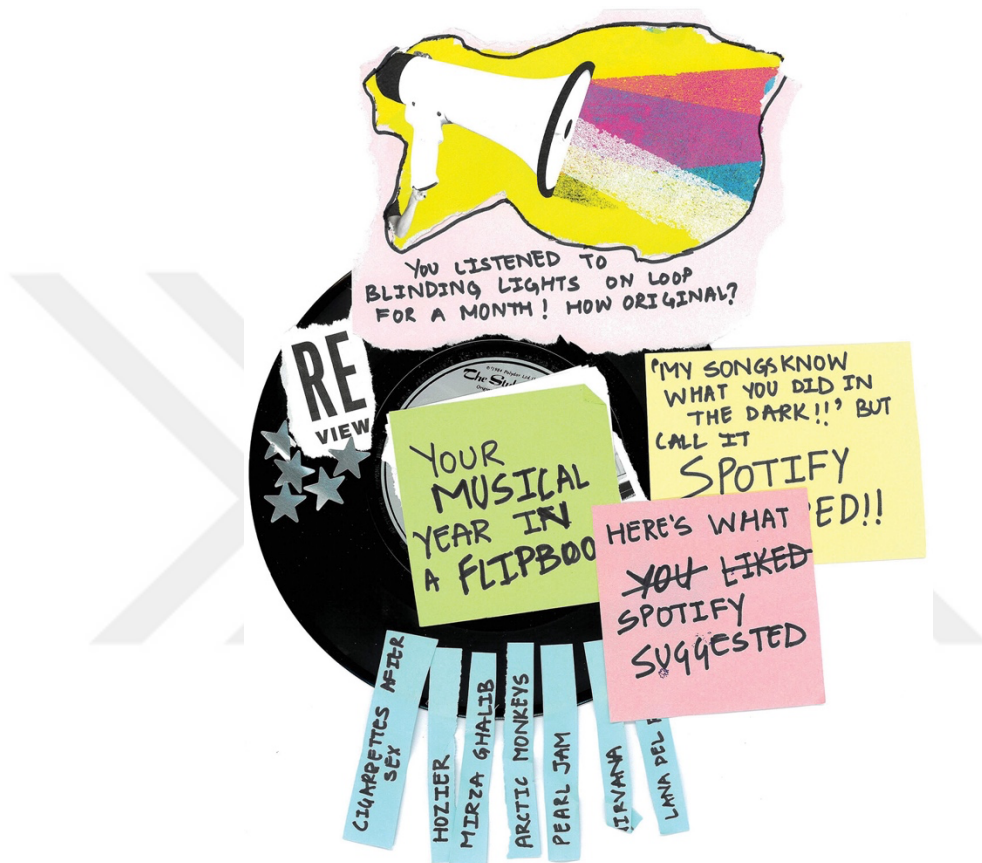


Figure 3.6 : Example of a collage from one of the “Spotify (Un)wrapped” workshops that teases the Spotify wrapped (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024).

The workshop's “analytical journey” demonstrated how resistance can be methodical and educational rather than merely reactive. Participants learned to recognize patterns in how platforms extract value from user data, positioned themselves as authorities on user identity, and naturalize surveillance practices through engaging interfaces. This awareness countered what the authors describe as Spotify's efforts to “reorganize the consumption of music around behaviors, feelings, and moods” in ways that serve the platform's commercial interests. The workshops' emphasis on collective sense-making fosters what researchers call “collective intimacy” where users can share observations

about algorithmic culture, thereby creating solidarity in resistance that counters the individualizing effects of personalization features.

3.7.3 Union of Musicians and Allied Workers and Protests

The Union of Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW) is a labor organization of musicians formed during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to the economic hardships faced by artists due to the shutdown of live performances. The increasing reliance on music streaming platforms led UMAW to create efforts to advocate for fair compensation. UMAW organized protests at Spotify's offices in 31 cities, including Madrid, New York, and London, in March 2021. This protests highlights the discontent with Spotify's business model (Defector, 2021).

3.7.4 Artist Withdrawals

3.7.4.1 Thom Yorke and Nigel Godrich

In July 2013, Thom Yorke, the lead singer of Radiohead, and producer Nigel Godrich withdrew their band Atoms for Peace, along with Yorke's solo music, from Spotify. In a tweet, Yorke emphasized, “Make no mistake new artists you discover on #Spotify will not receive fair compensation. Meanwhile, shareholders will soon be reaping significant profits. It's that simple.” Godrich remarked, “[Streaming] cannot function as a means of supporting new artists' work. Spotify and similar platforms must either recognize this reality and adapt their model for new releases, or all emerging music producers should take a bold stand and vote with their feet.” Yorke's solo albums and the project Atoms for Peace were made available again in December 2017 (BBC, 2013).

3.7.4.2 Taylor Swift

On November 3, 2014, Taylor Swift removed her entire discography from Spotify. She had previously postponed the streaming of her 2012 album, “Red”. Swift expressed her discontent by stating, “I’m not willing to contribute my life's work to an experiment that I do not believe fairly compensates the songwriters, producers, artists, and creators of this music. I also disagree with the notion that music has no value and should be free.” In June 2017, it was revealed that all of Swift's music would be made available on various streaming platforms, including Spotify (Rolling Stone, 2014).

3.7.4.3 Björk

The Icelandic artist Björk decided against releasing her album *Vulnicura* on Spotify at first, stating that: “This streaming thing just does not feel right. I don't know why, but it just seems insane. ... To work on something for two or three years and then just, 'Oh, here it is for free.' It's not about the money; it's about respect, you know? Respect for the craft and the amount of work you put into it.” (Rolling Stone, 2015).

3.7.4.4 Cindy Lee

Cindy Lee's album “Diamond Jubilee” is available only on the Geocities website, which is the website of the record label, and on YouTube. The Geocities website explains the album's unconventional distribution strategy, including a brief critique of Daniel Ek, the CEO of Spotify. Cindy Lee's album has garnered an unspecified number of downloads from the website and numerous unofficial plays on bootleg YouTube videos. In 2024, after the album's release, many of Cindy Lee's live performances were sold out. This indicates that the album had successfully made its mark without utilizing Spotify. This is also a strategic choice rather than a purely political stance (Bloomberg, 2024).

3.7.4.5 Spotify's 2025 Grammy Party

Amy Allen, Jessi Alexander, Edgar Barrera, and Jessie Jo Dillon skipped the Grammy party for Spotify's songwriter of the year because of how Spotify treats songwriters. “After some thought, I couldn't in good conscience support this initiative given their approach to bundling royalties,” said Dillon in a comment to the publication. “It is very nice to be individually honored, but it is better for me and my entire songwriter community to be paid fairly for our art. There are no songs without songwriters.” (Billboard, 2025).



4. TRANSFORMATION OF THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IN TURKEY

In this section, the transformation of the Turkish music industry under the influence of platform capitalism examined through the perspective of Science, Technology and Society studies and Actor-Network Theory. While the STS approach emphasized that technological systems are not only technical but also social and cultural structures, ANT conceptualized these systems as complex interactions of human and non-human actors. To understand how the global dynamics of platform capitalism are localized within the unique cultural and economic conditions of Turkey, it is essential to map the relationships, power dynamics, and networks formed by different actors.

4.1 Mapping Connections in the Music Ecosystem

Actor-network theory positions Spotify not as a passive intermediary but as an active mediator within a complex network of human and non-human. Following the conception of technical systems as assemblages, we can understand Spotify's platform as a dynamic network where algorithms, users, artists, playlists, and infrastructure continuously interact and reshape one another. These interactions create what terms “socio-technical arrangements” (Callon, 2004), hybrid arrangements where agency is distributed across human and technological “actors” and “actants” (Latour, 2005). Thus, Spotify's performativity with its users and the music industry can be examined extensively with the ANT.

In time, Spotify strengthened its place as the “gatekeeper” in the industry and the central apparatus for mediating the production and consumption of music. This made Spotify a strong “actor” that controls the performativity of other actors and “actants” in the streaming ecosystem. This actor's associations and functions with other actors and actants in the shared network define its actual role and oversized presence in the music sphere (Latour, 1996). As this thesis examines Spotify's role in platform capitalism, a singular view of the technical platform is insufficient for a critical study exploring the political economy of music streaming.

The analysis will draw on the sources that position the platform as a mediator between music listeners and creators, emphasizing the algorithmic arrangements governing the streaming experience to locate Spotify as a cultural phenomenon. Hennion stresses that mediators actively shape the experience through various intermediaries (Hennion, 1993). Spotify's "Discover Weekly" and "Release Radar" are playlists that curated algorithmically and unique to the user. These features demonstrate how algorithms mediate user experiences via personalized playlists based on users' listening habits, creating "feedback loops" that influence listener behavior and artist strategies to reinforce specific genres. This process highlights the performative nature of algorithms.

Actor-Network Theory seeks to explore the combined complex network of streaming, algorithmic systems, and user behaviors. They have unique and independent characteristics leading to intra-actions that cannot be achieved alone. Thus, it is essential to consider the interplay of social, material, and relational elements to explore platform capitalism in this backdrop. This understanding cannot be separated from the broader streaming and algorithmic governance context. The goal of the STS outlook on this thesis is to examine how Spotify has been shaped by material, sociological, and political influences in the present-day stature of Spotify. These influences do not operate under a singular, one-time condition of shaping; instead, they are continuously shaped and reconfigured as they interact. Consequently, these already molded actors become crucial controlling elements.

Given the interconnected nature of the current music ecosystem, mechanisms of platform capitalism in the current music ecosystem are not presented as isolated entities. ANT offers a perspective on interconnectedness, enabling platforms to engage in intra-actions when used to investigate the entangled network of streaming. ANT's analysis highlights the intra-actional dynamics that creates this new hybrid arrangement, illustrating how the platform's influence on music consumption results.

Bruno Latour introduces the concept of "hybrid"s (Latour, 1993) and subsequently examines the emergence of a platform hybrid arising from the convergence of "human" and "algorithmic" actors and actants, in this instance, the human user and recommendation algorithms. Therefore, this thesis will contend that Spotify is not a neutral mediator of cultural content. Its meaning and associations on the opposite are transformed, paving the way for new intra-actions within the platform environment,

actions that could not occur without the interplay between users and algorithms in the streaming ecosystem.

ANT's concept of “translation” is a process in which actors' identities, possibilities for interaction, and margins of maneuver are negotiated and delimited. Through translation, certain actors become “obligatory passage points” (Callon, 1984). These certain actors gain power and influence within the network. Translation produces new entities, relationships, and forms of power. It involves the creation of alignments between heterogeneous elements, human and non-human, which results in the formation of relatively stable networks (Callon, 1984).

This quote illustrates how a playlist and the algorithm becomes an obligatory passage point:

“One of my songs had entered the 'Turkish Acoustic' list. It had 500,000 followers, actually let me check how many it was, (looks to the playlist on his phone) it was 539,000. I was very happy, thinking I would get a lot of streaming. But from that list, I was getting two streams a day. Because the list is now algorithmic, Spotify didn't show my song to anyone, apparently. And I'm happy that my song has entered a big list. Sometimes no streams would come, sometimes 1, sometimes 3, my nerves would jump when I saw this. It's incredible, at least don't make that algorithmic, right? I mean, you call it editorial, at least remove that phrase.” (Participant 11: Alternative Musician)

Another participant gives insights about how these obligatory passage points are not neutral and function through economic interests:

“If these playlists were really fair and their usage was really a tool for bringing music to people, this would be a great service. But as long as there's money in this business, something like this will never happen. But naturally, people now get upset like “I released a track, it couldn't get into New Music Friday” and feel psychological pressure. It's the thing that most undermines people's production. If you're releasing ten tracks, by the eleventh, you want your music to be on a playlist. When it's not, you start wondering why because you put in the effort. The production, its musicality, mix-mastering, and editing are all stressful. You sit and spend

time, and time is something that can't be retrieved, can't be bought with money.” (Participant 3: Producer, Arranger, Composer, Musician)

Through processes of “punctualization” (Law, 1992), complex networks of algorithmic decisions, user behaviors, and corporate interests become blackboxed into seemingly simple features like personalized playlists or recommendation systems. ANT also reveals how Spotify's platform creates new dependencies and network effects that reshape industry relationships. Artists, listeners, and algorithms become enrolled in what Latour (1996) describes as “chains of translation”, series of transformations that modify both the actors involved and the nature of their relationships. These chains create new forms of value extraction and cultural production that are inherently tied to the platform's socio-technical infrastructure. This participant illustrates how corporate interests manifest itself in these chains of translations:

“There's a friend of ours who works in an A&R role in Turkey. This friend, when we look, has worked with Universal Music in the past. Now you look at another friend at Universal, and he worked at Spotify in the past. Looking at another friend at Spotify, he worked at Sony Music before. I can say that they even “rotate” their staff among themselves. When that happens, the relationship between them becomes completely different. They communicate with each other and inevitably get ahead of other labels.” (Participant 7: Musician, Copyrighter, Digital Marketing Agency Founder)

4.1.1 Reconfiguring Musical Creation

Industry professionals reported significant changes in song structure, duration, and production techniques driven by algorithmic concerns rather than artistic considerations. Interviewees mentioned song lengths that have decreased dramatically, with many tracks now falling between 1:40 and 2:30 minutes, as shorter songs generate more plays within the same listening period. The elimination or reduction of instrumental intros was also frequently mentioned, with artists feeling pressured to capture listener attention within the first few seconds to prevent skipping. Several participants described how musical complexity is sacrificed in favor of algorithmic optimization. These changes illustrate “translation”, the process by which actors'

identities and possibilities for interaction are reconfigured through their enrollment in networks.

“Songs have become a lot shorter. This approach has also influenced the creation of hooks at the very beginning of songs. If you want to capture listeners right away, you can't afford to have a long intro anymore. Since streams only count after 30 seconds of listening, you have to keep the listener engaged for at least that long.” (Participant 11: Alternative Musician)

This transformation also represent an OPP, where certain actors (in this case, Spotify's algorithms and counting mechanisms) gain power and influence within the network. Artists must now route their creative processes through these passage points to remain visible in the platform ecosystem. A sound engineer and musician elaborated on how thoroughly music creation has changed to accommodate platform requirements:

“It changed a lot actually. From beginning to end it changed, I'd say. In fact, 'what part didn't change?' might be a better question. It changed significantly. From lyric writing to song structure to song duration. The only thing it probably didn't affect was the key of the song (laughs). It directly affected the rhythmic structure. Regardless of genre, we now try to use more angular and hype rhythms. Harmonic decisions are simpler, avoiding complicated progressions. Really, only the key wasn't affected, I think.” (Participant 1: Musician and Sound Engineer)

This quote illustrates how non-human actants (algorithms, platform interfaces, data metrics) exert agency by reshaping the creative decisions of human actors (musicians, producers). It exemplifies “hybrid agency”, where human and technological elements become entangled in ways that distribute action across the network. The pressure to optimize music for algorithmic success has led many artists to adopt production techniques that prioritize platform metrics over artistic expression:

“Previously I strongly advocated for good music and high-quality production. More complex, colorful chords and an artistic production approach mattered a lot to me. But as I observed audience behavior, my perspective changed. Now I think the simpler, the better. I'm not as focused on complexity and artistic vision anymore, to be honest. After all, we don't

make music just for ourselves. We make it for people to listen to, targeting a specific audience. You need to find common ground with similar artists in your genre that your audience listens to. We're making something for society now. So in a way, we need to follow this path to maintain our livelihood and earn money. When you try to do something different, you don't gain traction. There are many examples of this.” (Participant 3: Producer, Arranger, Composer, Musician)

This sentiment was echoed by other participants who described the shift toward more commercially viable production approaches to succeed within platform ecosystems. These testimonies illustrate “punctualization,” where complex networks of algorithmic decisions, user behaviors, and corporate interests become blackboxed into seemingly simple features like streaming counts and playlist placements that artists must optimize toward.

4.1.2 Distribution Networks and Power Dynamics

The interviews revealed significant changes in music distribution and marketing in the streaming era. Almost all participants agreed on the shift from album releases to single-based strategies. Participants mentioned how this strategy pressures them and affects the quality of artistic output to maintain continuous visibility within algorithmic systems:

“The release strategy has also definitely changed. The trend of recent times is to proceed single by single. Due to countries' worsening economic situations and increased living costs, people can allocate less money to their music, which is why they can't afford to make albums anymore. Because I still think albums are valued on platforms. Looking at popularity and listening rates, the attention given by platforms to relatively lesser-known people who release albums is something they wouldn't get if they released singles. But of course, proceeding single by single makes a difference in terms of visibility. We try something like every two months, but it also feels absurd. After uploading a song to the distributor, when I'm working on the recordings for the second song, like when we're talking about recording vocals, I feel like a chicken. I need to lay another egg as soon as possible, and I never experience any sense of satisfaction. I've done

something, finished it, uploaded it, and it will be released in three weeks, but you can't experience that satisfaction and sense of sufficiency. It's a sad situation, but I guess we need to adapt.” (Participant 1: Musician and Sound Engineer)

Multiple participants noted how release schedules now revolve around platform-specific timing (particularly for editorial playlist consideration), with Friday releases becoming standardized to align with Spotify's “New Music Friday” playlist updates. This standardization demonstrates how platform logic imposes temporal rhythms on artistic production. The interviewees also mentioned the intermediary role of the distribution companies. The presence or absence of local company offices significantly impacts artists' access to editorial playlists. Several participants described how certain distributors with direct relationships to Spotify's Turkish editorial team can provide privileged access to playlists, which creates new gatekeeping mechanisms that independent artists must navigate.

The changing power dynamics between artists and labels was another significant theme in the interviews:

“It used to be that you couldn't release your track without a producer or distributor. But now you can put your tracks on all platforms by paying very small service fees through platforms like CD-Baby. This liberated artists. When this first came out 8-10 years ago, it was bad for artists because they had no advertising tools. Production and distribution companies had such tools. But as roles changed, when producers and distributors couldn't properly use today's advertising and content delivery tools, individuals who could master these skills rose on their own. I'm sure many of us use Facebook and Instagram more effectively than Warner Music or Universal Turkey. The way promotion and marketing works has changed dramatically. Have you ever seen a music listener among your friends who says, 'I follow Universal Music's accounts'? They always follow the artist. Now that artists can remove that production company from the middle and reach their audience directly, it's become something people appreciate.” (Participant 9: Musician and Sound Engineer)

This quote illustrates what ANT theorists call the “destabilization of networks” (Callon, 1984), where established arrangements are challenged by the introduction of new actors (distribution platforms) that enable different relationships between existing actors (artists and audiences). However, despite these new possibilities for independence, several interviewees noted that genuine visibility still requires connections to established power structures:

“Major labels are also partners with Spotify. This causes gatekeeping practices. For example, Kanye had a situation long ago. Kanye was on the covers of many unrelated genres. As another example, Apple computers come pre-loaded with U2 songs in Apple Music. That's an interesting marketing campaign.” (Participant 8: Lawyer, Community Manager, Musician)

These observations illustrate how platform capitalism creates what Van Dijk (2019) describes as “platform dependency,” where apparent independence is counterbalanced by new forms of dependency on algorithmic systems controlled by powerful corporate actors.

4.1.3 Algorithmic Governance and Hybrid Agency

The algorithmic systems that govern streaming platforms create new forms of power that shape both artistic creation and listener behavior in increasingly intimate ways. In Turkey's music ecosystem, these algorithmic mechanisms manifest as complex negotiations between human and non-human actors, resulting hybrid agency. Spotify's algorithmic governance create particular regimes that Turkish music professionals must navigate, often leading to ambivalent relationships with these technological systems. A musician and general coordinator of a known music institution expressed frustration with Spotify's algorithmic curation:

“It works terribly. Terribly. But I've trained it by beating it into submission. I actively follow things I like. From January to March, it never offered me appropriate recommendations. It recommended things that made me think, 'How could you possibly suggest this to me?!' It exposed me to a Turkish rapper I'd never listened to. How could this infiltrate my algorithm? The only rapper I listened to was Ezhel, and even he comes much later in my preferences among artists and genres. Irrelevant things appear. Either the

AI isn't that smart, or the algorithm might be paying for highly-streamed content, directing listeners there. After fighting with it—blocking things, removing suggestions, following what I like—it finally started suggesting nice things. But its recommendations are still mostly artists I already like. It's a technology that doesn't do what I tell it to. I also don't remember it ever helping me discover a new genre or artist. I try to follow music magazines too. I often listen to and discover artists I read about there.”
(Participant 2: Musician, General Coordinator of a Music Institution)

This experience illustrates what Gillespie (2014) describes as the “politics of algorithms,” where seemingly neutral technical systems embody particular values and create power dynamics that shape cultural consumption. The interviewee's description of “training” the algorithm highlights the bidirectional agency that characterizes human-algorithm interactions, what ANT would describe as a form of negotiation in a translation (Callon, 1984).

Another interviewee described how algorithmic systems and commercialized imitations limit discovery rather than expanding it:

“I used to be very against the 'Arkada Çalsın' (Background music) playlist. Then I thought, 'Maybe this is actually nice?' When a friend comes over, I turn it on during conversation, and it really does play in the background. I don't understand what's playing, but it supports me in the background. I think only algorithms are working in the editors' minds now. I don't understand these issues much, like how they choose what to include. We had a meeting with Spotify officials recently. We had mentioned there were no playlists for Black Sea region songs, and they said they were working on it. That playlist eventually came out, but it was filled with imitations of Black Sea songs. Adorno came to mind. I wish he could have seen these times [laughs]. We're truly living at the peak of it now. Culture is being marketed at maximum efficiency today. Imitations gain more popularity. Black Sea music now incorporates guitar, changing the meaning of genres. Capitalism changes the form of certain things, as we can see.” (Participant 7: Musician, Copyright Expert, Digital Marketing Agency Founder)

This observation illustrates how algorithmic systems and platform capitalism transform cultural production in ways that prioritize commercial optimization over cultural authenticity. The reference to Adorno connects these contemporary dynamics to longer-standing critiques of cultural commodification, while highlighting how platform capitalism introduces new mechanisms of standardization through algorithmic mediation. The interviews also revealed how Spotify's algorithms create “obligatory passage points” that artists must navigate to achieve visibility:

“There are all kinds of things that affect my creative decisions. For example, I've heard that when you use certain words in song titles, there's a 20-30% chance of being algorithmically boosted. When I hear these things, instead of naming my song 'water,' I name it 'water is so beautiful come here' (laughs). There are various strange data points like this. For instance, songs ending with a question mark or exclamation point get more streams. These things affect everything from your song title to sound design, from song structure to the video you'll shoot. Because everyone wants to be heard at some point. This has definitely influenced even my guitar parts when composing. Think about it. For example, I have a song in my last album. I wouldn't have wanted to start it directly with the chorus, I would have preferred an instrumental intro. But because I needed to 'capture people immediately into the song, not lose anyone, go straight to the chorus,' I reluctantly started with the chorus. By the way, thinking about it now, I've tried not to make too many compromises. That's probably why it didn't get many streams (laughs).” (Participant 11: Alternative Musician)

This quote illustrates the performative nature of algorithms (Seaver, 2022), where they don't simply measure success but actively produce the conditions for what constitutes successful music. The interviewee's internalization of algorithmic optimization (“I wouldn't have wanted to start directly with the chorus”) demonstrates how platform logics become incorporated into artistic decision-making through what ANT would describe as a process of “enrollment” (Callon, 1984). The term “enrollment” refers to the actors' acceptance of playing the designated role within the complex socio-technical network. This participant highlights one aspect of the process:

“A friend of mine recently said, “when I wake up in the morning, if the vocal melody of the song I wrote yesterday doesn't stay in my mind, I delete the song.” You say it should be “catchy,” but does every song have to be “catchy”? I mean, shouldn't one also have an emotional depth, a melodic distinctiveness, but no.” (Participant 11: Alternative Musician)

This quote from another participant gives insights into young generations' enrollment in the industry:

“Most of the young generation actually enters this business without knowing exactly what they want. They try to bend and conform to the “needs” of the industry before they can define their own desires and mature their own music. That's why you can't hear characteristic music that has settled in anyone. Everyone wants to do something close to what's in the “Top 10.” Maybe they enter the industry in a very idealistic way, but then you look and they've started saying, “well, I'm doing it this way, but which playlists will this enter? How many listens will it get? Should I make it a bit more like so-and-so's?” When they start this, they bring out certain “sounds” again.” (Participant 9: Musician, Sound Engineer, Manager)

Here is another participant talking about another kind of enrollment:

“Artists try to adapt to the playlist. A very popular name, a close friend of mine, from the mainstream, thinks that at least one of the songs on the album should be made according to playlists and designed accordingly. But I don't think this is a problem, you're going to the market after all, and that market has its rules.” (Participant 2: Musician, General Coordinator of a Music Institution)

4.1.4 New Intermediaries and Evolving Actor Networks

The interviews demonstrated the emergence and rise of new intermediaries in Turkey's music ecosystem such as digital marketing agencies, playlist promotion services, and streaming optimization consultants to help artists navigate platform requirements and improve algorithmic visibility. Many participants expressed skepticism about the effectiveness and work ethics of these new intermediaries. Participants expressed concerns about fraudulent practices such as artificial stream generation on paid advertising mechanisms such as playlist placements, which are subject to legal actions

and sanctions. Many participants expressed that A&Rs adapted their role from talent development to data analysis increasingly driven their decisions by streaming metrics rather than artistic potential. Similarly, the role of producers and arrangers has evolved to include optimization for platform performance alongside traditional creative functions. These demonstrates platform capitalism creates new intermediaries and transforms existing ones, privileging data-driven decision-making over traditional industry expertise and reorienting professional roles around platform requirements.

ANT directs attention to how networks evolve through the introduction of new actors that reconfigure existing relationships. The interviews highlighted the emergence of new intermediaries in Turkey's music ecosystem, such as playlist curators, digital marketing agencies, and streaming promotion services.

A manager and music agency employee described the problematic nature of these new intermediaries:

“Some of these are complete scams. That's why you should never work with any digital media agency or playlist curator without being very certain. You pay playlist curators with many followers to pitch your songs. Among them, there may be those who conduct fake listening and fraudulent click operations. I experienced problems with a similar organization with one of my artists. Not a playlist curator, but an application. The artist used this application without asking me. You buy clicks for your song on a counter-based system. We suspected bots were being used when the clicks depleted very quickly. You can't determine how these clicks are made with what system, and you can't hold anyone accountable. You can't get such data from Spotify. So you're forced to trust what this application tells you. Even worse, let me tell you what happened to us. In the 'Similar Artists' section, we had names like Sezen Aksu and Nilüfer (known Turkish singers), but after using this application, it completely changed. It filled with random names like Elif, Ayşe, people with absolutely no listeners. The entire Spotify algorithm was thrown into chaos. We struggled with this issue, sending numerous emails to the distributor and others. When your song gets more plays, the service is more likely to notice you. That's why artists want to turn to these kinds of things. Artists often don't have the time or budget to conduct effective organic PR.

We couldn't get an answer from Spotify either, beyond 'the algorithm determines these things.' Spotify is a black box on these issues, you know.”

(Participant 12: Manager, Music Agency Employee, Mentor)

This account illustrates how new intermediaries attempt to capitalize on what Gillespie (2014) describes: “A sociological inquiry into algorithms should aspire to reveal the complex workings of this knowledge machine, both the process by which it chooses information for users and the social process by which it is made into a legitimate system. But there may be something, in the end, impenetrable about algorithms. They are designed to work without human intervention, they are deliberately obfuscated, and they work with information on a scale that is hard to comprehend (at least without other algorithmic tools). And perhaps more than that, we want relief from the duty of being skeptical about information we cannot ever assure for certain. These mechanisms by which we settle (if not resolve) this problem, then, are solutions we cannot merely rely on, but must believe in” (Gillespie, 2014, p. 27). The opacity of these systems, “blackboxing” (Latour, 1999), creates conditions where fraudulent practices can flourish and where even legitimate intermediaries cannot guarantee results.

The changing role of traditional intermediaries such as A&R (Artists and Repertoire) representatives and music arrangers was also highlighted:

“Certain business models have simply disappeared. Currently, you go to a production company with the production almost completed, having already handled the mix-mastering and other expenses. A&Rs are now in a very strange position. The acronym stands for Artists and Repertoire. When you approach them as an artist, they should see you as a potential and offer you something, but now they just listen to your demos and say 'I like it' or 'I don't like it.' And interestingly, these people often don't have music education. The role of arrangers has also become strange. Normally, a production company should direct you to an arranger. The arranger gets a share from publishing. Now arrangers act like producers, and record companies act like distribution companies. Production and record companies only make advance payments without participating in any creative process. In this situation, what you need to do as an independent producer becomes unclear. Independent producers also take advances from

major companies. Think about (names an indie publisher), they constantly send artists to Universal. What kind of independence is that? The world's largest independent companies are uniting globally under one umbrella, being bought by majors. This is a direct unfair competition practice. This happens more intensively in places like Turkey. Concepts lose their meaning, and only the big fish win.” (Participant 8: Music Lawyer, Community Manager, Musician)

This testimony illustrates how platform capitalism has reconfigured what ANT theorists call the “scripts” (Akrich, 1992) that guide the roles and interactions of industry actors. Actors such as A&Rs and music arrangers find their roles redefined within network oriented around streaming metrics and algorithmic visibility rather than industry expertise and artistic vision (as seen in Figure 4.1).

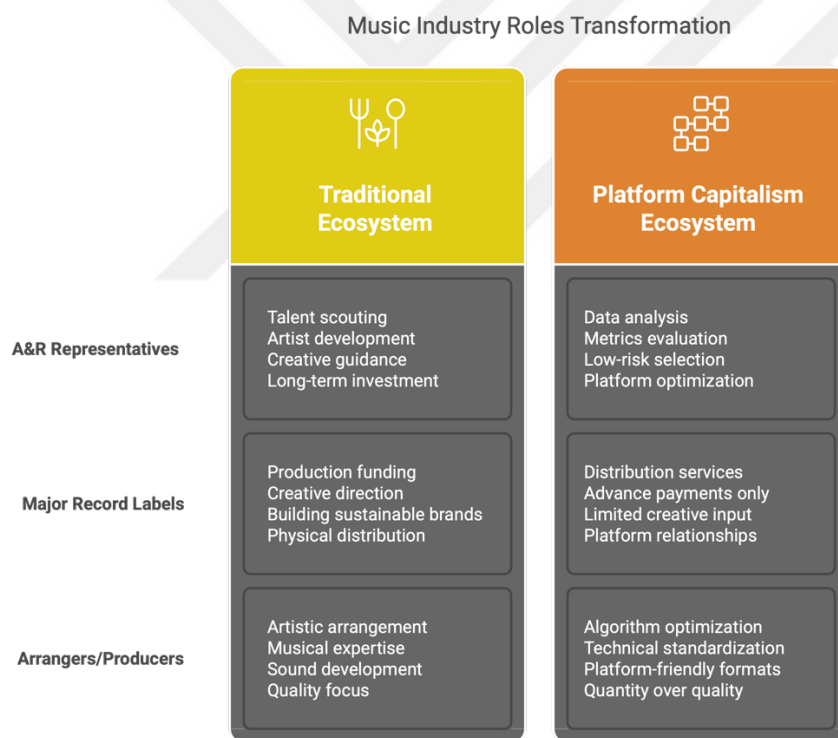


Figure 4.1 : Changing “scripts” of music industry actors.

4.1.5 Transforming Listener Behaviors and Cultural Consumption

The interviews revealed important concerns and implications about the ways in which music listening practices in Turkey have been transformed by platforms. Several

participants noted an even more increasing shift toward what is called “lean-back listening,” where music serves as just another sound in the environment rather than an art form to be listened to and attended to.

As DeNora (2000) demonstrated in her seminal work *"Music in Everyday Life,"* the shift toward what she termed "musical accompaniment" and "background music" consumption was already evident at the turn of the millennium. DeNora's ethnographic analysis revealed how music was increasingly being used as "scaffolding" for daily activities from aerobics classes to retail environments rather than as a primary focus of attention. This transformation reflects what she identified as music's role in "making, maintaining and changing social worlds and social activities" (DeNora, 2000, p. 7), where musical consumption becomes instrumentalized within broader patterns of daily life organization. The commodification of music under capitalist relations had already begun to reconfigure listening practices toward utilitarian ends, treating music as an ambient resource rather than an artistic work demanding focused attention.

Contemporary streaming platforms and their algorithmic systems thus represent an acceleration and digitization of these pre-existing tendencies rather than their origination, building upon the structural foundations laid by earlier forms of capitalist cultural production. Participants expressed concern that the “Arkada Çalsın” (Background Music) playlist was one of the most listened to lists in Turkey. Many professionals expressed concern about listeners’ diminishing interest in carefully crafted concept albums, and that the platform’s interfaces and recommendation systems were not suitable for the album format. Many participants described this as the “contextualization of music,” where songs are transformed into interchangeable content units rather than artistic expressions.

The “filter bubble” effect created by algorithmic recommendation systems was also a recurring motif in the interviews. Many participants reported that Spotify’s recommendations rarely offer genuinely new music recommendations, but instead reinforce existing listening patterns. Many have complained about how they try so hard to “keep its algorithm clean” and yet it’s still hard to get satisfying results. These excerpts highlight how platform capitalism is creating new forms of interaction that prioritize convenience and constant engagement over careful listening and artistic

discovery. A musician described how streaming platforms have altered the relationship between listeners and music:

“Before, when you bought an album, you would sit down and actively listen to it. There wasn't such easy access. Yes, of course, being able to find everything so easily in one place like Spotify is good, but now it's evolved into something like social media. It's become content production rather than music. YouTubers became singers, fans record and upload chants from soccer matches, and these enter viral lists. I don't think Spotify is a place about music anymore; it's something else that happens to include music. Currently, it's a platform used by artists and non-artists alike to generate income through various means. These must affect the algorithm as well.” (Participant 10: Musician)

This observation points to the “mutual constitution” of technological systems and social practices (Latour, 1996). Spotify does not simply mediate existing listening practices; also fundamentally transform what it means to listen to music, creating new categories of cultural consumption and new actor relationships.

Several interviewees noted how streaming has shifted music consumption toward background listening rather than active engagement:

“I think the most important change is that the concept of 'mood' has entered our lives. Previously, this 'mood' manipulation was done through radio. Morning energetic music, afternoon calmer music, and so on. Now you can manipulate yourself. You think, 'I need energetic music right now,' and enter that playlist. Sometimes I even see playlists for moods I've never experienced in my life. Like 'calm but hopeful', what's that? This mood issue is becoming increasingly micro. There's even a mood designation through memes now without naming the mood, like a playlist with a photo of İlkan from the Gibi series smoking a cigarette on the cover, with no other explanation. (Participant 7: Musician, Copyright Expert, Digital Marketing Agency Founder)

This shift toward mood-based and background listening illustrates how streaming platforms reconfigure the very purpose of music in everyday life. As ANT would suggest, these changes aren't simply technological but involve the mutual

reconfiguration of cultural practices, business models, and subjective experiences of music. A participant described how these changes have affected the cultural impact of music:

“The challenges created by this situation are causing countless musicians to stop producing. We're in a nostalgia cloud. We have a new narrative problem in general. I think this is related to a creativity crisis. Open the most popular music on digital platforms now and look, you've probably never heard it in your life. Nor our families. Previously, the best-selling cassettes were on everyone's lips; there's a cultural influence difference there. They're all just echo chambers now. Before, this industry really touched people's veins, souls, daily lives. Now it doesn't have that effect. I look at Spotify like a Migros (supermarket chain). Migros shouldn't sell spoiled products. But the fact that spoiled products arrive there points to another chain of breakdown.” (Participant 2: Musician, General Coordinator of a Music Institution)

This cultural shift illustrates what a reconfiguration of the assemblage (Latour, 2005), where not only individual actors but entire systems of cultural meaning and social connection are transformed through their enrollment in platform networks.

4.2 Platform Capitalism and Local Industry Dynamics

4.2.1 Infrastructure and Access

The material conditions through which streaming platforms operate in Turkey create distinctive patterns of inclusion and exclusion that shape the local music ecosystem. While global platforms promise universal access and democratized distribution, their implementation within specific national contexts depends on local infrastructural arrangements, economic conditions, and business relationships. Hence, Turkey's music ecosystem has been shaped by the specific infrastructural conditions through which streaming platforms operate. While Spotify promise global access, local arrangements create particular patterns of inclusion and exclusion:

“Distribution companies with local offices have direct connections with platform officials. They have direct communications. I once worked at a distribution company. When your music is used without permission, when

fake accounts are created for you, or when your Spotify for Artists account is stolen, it's harder for you to communicate with platforms. A distributor can establish direct contact in these situations. They also deal directly with playlist editors. Trying to do this yourself as a DIY artist doesn't mean much. Orchard is Sony's, and Believe and Tunecore are Universal's subsidiaries. Downtown, a large independent distributor, was recently acquired by Universal. So financially, as I said, these companies are Spotify's partners, and when you distribute through them, you can get onto playlists much more easily. I think Spotify has a mentality of 'Since we're going to pay someone anyway, let's pay our partners.' There are discussions behind Spotify constantly losing money. Spotify has only recently started showing a profit on paper. Major companies already take a huge share of revenue through copyright, phonogram, etc., and they also fund Spotify.”
(Participant 8: Music Lawyer, Community Manager, Musician)

This account illustrates how global platform infrastructures become embedded in local business arrangements and power structures. The privileged position of distributors with local offices in Turkey creates another “obligatory passage point” (Callon, 1984) through which artists must pass to achieve visibility on global platforms. Here is another example in the same topic from a different participant:

“There are three major distribution platforms that independent musicians prefer in Turkey: DistroKid, Ditto, and Tunecore. But I've never discovered any DistroKid user from New Music Friday or any other playlist. I once became fixated on this and examined the statistics for a year. From DistroKid, maybe 3-4 artists make it onto playlists, and two of them previously released music through a major label. The equivalent of a major firm here would be Orchard, Believe, Videomite, and similar companies. I had a friend who made it onto a playlist. I called her at night saying, 'I finally saw someone from DistroKid make it onto a playlist after a long time.' She said, 'I forgot to tell you, I switched to OneRPM.' That was actually the first distributor to have a Turkish branch. Because DistroKid doesn't have a Turkish branch, you can't get onto playlists. For example, the Fresh Finds Turkey playlist should consist of independent

artists, but instead, it usually features an equal distribution of Orchard, Believe, and Ingrooves.” (Participant 5: Music Journalist)

Economic conditions in Turkey also shape the specific impacts of platform capitalism on artists and listeners:

“Spotify pays very little now. Subscription fees in Turkey are also very low. I don't think anyone would pay 300 liras monthly to use Spotify. The younger demographic uses Spotify more, and Turkey's economic situation is obvious. It's partly politics. Artists aren't satisfied globally either, but in Turkey, there's an extreme situation in this regard.” (Participant 3: Producer, Arranger, Composer, Musician)

This observation illustrates how global platform models acquire specific economic implications in different national contexts. Lower subscription fees due to the Turkey's economical imbalances create challenges for local artists, even as they participate in supposedly global ecosystem.

4.2.2 Genre Politics and Cultural Representation

Spotify's algorithmic recommendation system embodies certain cultural policies that shape which musical traditions gain visibility and how they are represented. Turkey has a wide range of genres, but the platform's curation practices limit the visibility of this cultural identity, linguistic expression, and genre authenticity. Spotify's classification and playlist systems reflect particular understandings of Turkish music that often privilege certain expressions while marginalizing others.

The interviews revealed how platform curation practices intersect with specific cultural and genre dynamics in Turkey:

“What I see as a deficiency in artists is the lack of proper promotion for their music. That promotion requires certain boundaries. I think it restricts many different music types, different languages, different expression styles. It creates standardization. Despite Kurdish music being among Turkey's trends, we don't see a 'Kurdish Rock' playlist. This is also related to the platform's segmentation. It creates a deficiency in terms of expression. When you start creating content according to the platform's

language, you begin to abandon your musical language and world.”

(Participant 2: Musician, General Coordinator of a Music Institution)

This observation highlights how platform curation practices embody particular cultural politics, with certain musical traditions and linguistic expressions receiving less visibility than others. These curatorial decisions are not neutral technical choices but as political choices that inscribe particular values and power relations into platform infrastructure. Another musician described similar experiences with genre misrepresentation:

“We had a meeting with Spotify officials recently. We had mentioned there were no playlists for Black Sea region songs, and they said they were working on it. That playlist eventually came out, but it was filled with imitations of Black Sea songs rather than authentic ones.” (Participant 7:

Musician, Copyright Expert, Digital Marketing Agency Founder)

This example shows how platforms' attempts at genre inclusivity can result in problematic translations, where cultural forms are incorporated into platform ecosystems in ways that distort their original meanings and contexts.

4.2.3 Local Resistance and Adaptation Strategies

The interviews revealed various strategies through which Turkish music professionals navigate, resist, or adapt to platform capitalism. These strategies illustrate what ANT theorists would call “anti-programs” (Latour, 1992), efforts to work against or around the prescribed uses of technological systems. One music agency employee described strategic approaches to platform visibility:

“How do you get visibility without major support? Having the right distributor is crucial. Ezhel, for example, independently sent his album into the universe through DistroKid and is now one of Turkey's most-streamed musicians. But that's a one-in-a-million occurrence. Your record label, logistics, distribution are all consolidated in the digital distributor now. Can they manage the catalog properly? Is there a team behind them? How much are they investing in technology, interface, license agreements? How efficiently do they deliver information? Can they solve problems? Do they have meetings with service providers? You need to research these details thoroughly. Beyond that, timeline is crucial. So many contents are

uploaded to services. Let's say 30% use the pitching tool. Editors select from thousands of songs, and you're struggling to be chosen. Everyone has learned to upload their releases a month in advance and provide information. You need to understand what's expected and requested in those processes and provide information accordingly. The issue isn't just about the service. You need a team to analyze what kind of content your audience wants from your social media channels and develop these aspects as well. The strategy isn't just 'let the service give me a chance and put me on a list,' but 'let the service notice me.' So you need to manage all these together. The visual aspect is much more important now. Currently, the places where musicians can meet people and get their attention are mainly Instagram and TikTok.” (Participant 12: Manager, Music Agency Employee, Mentor)

This detailed account demonstrates how industry professionals develop sophisticated strategies that work with platform logics while attempting to maximize artist autonomy and visibility. These strategies represent “programs of action” (Latour, 1992) that incorporate platform requirements while pursuing independent goals. Some artists choose more radical forms of resistance by opting out of platform optimization entirely:

“I used to try to keep up with algorithm changes. What's trending, how can I emulate it, what should I do, I thought about these things. But now I've decided not to do any of this and to stay out of this system.” (Participant 10: Musician)

This approach represents a disassociation from the network, in which actors choose to withdraw from certain network relationships rather than accepting the terms of enrollment they offer. Here is another quote from different participant:

“When it comes to balancing artistic vision and platform optimization, I think generation plays a role. As younger generations emerge, they have more ideas about 'How can I get my music heard more?' These ideas come from studying what platforms prefer, examining which songs get on more playlists, and this naturally affects their creative process. But as I mentioned, there's also a segment that doesn't care about this at all and

continues just as they did in the 90s.” (Participant 12: Manager, Music Agency Employee, Mentor)



5. CONCLUSION

Platform capitalism, as exerted by Spotify, has transformed the music ecosystem in ways that are not only technological but also impact creative practices, cultural meanings, and business models. Therefore, Spotify is an active mediator that reshapes the very nature of music production and consumption, and the algorithmic governance mechanisms of the platform create new forms of dependency even as they enable certain forms of independence from traditional industry structures. Datafication stands at the center of Spotify's business model as they categorize and commodify user preferences into extensive taxonomies that transform cultural engagement into extraction opportunities.

These collected datasets named as “taste profiles” reveal the granular level at which listener data is collected, capturing everything from demographic information to precise listening behaviors down to millisecond timestamps, where human experience becomes raw material for platform capitalism, and musical preferences turning into predictive products which drives both algorithmic recommendations and advertising revenue. Furthermore, the platform's algorithmic systems don't simply reflect user preferences but actively shape them. The platform further monetizes visibility through features like “Discovery Mode” and “Marquee,” which function as sophisticated mechanisms of algorithmic governance where artists and labels must either accept reduced royalty rates or directly pay for enhanced visibility, creating what industry professionals have termed “Payola 2.0.”

The traditional gatekeeping structures of the Turkish music industry haven't disappeared but rather transformed. New forms of gatekeeping emerge through algorithmic curation, playlist placement, and the privileged access granted to distributors with local offices. This finding challenges simplistic narratives of democratization often associated with streaming platforms, highlighting instead how previous power imbalances are often reproduced in new technological contexts. The emergence of “ghost artists” who are anonymous musicians creating generic tracks for mood playlists at reduced royalty rates further illustrates how platforms strategically reduce costs through content that appears authentic but actually serves platform

economic interests. Meanwhile, the shift toward “lean-back listening” has transformed music into background accompaniment rather than an object of focused attention, creating the “Arkada Çalsın” (Background Music) effect that privileges atmospheric, unobtrusive sounds over more demanding artistic expressions.

The Turkey music scene demonstrated how algorithmic governance exerts agency within a cultural-specific context. Turkish industry professionals adapt their creative processes to meet algorithmic requirements, even internalizing platform logic as their own artistic vision. The shortened song durations, hooks placed within the first seconds for avoid skipping, and optimization for playlist inclusion reveal how deeply platform requirements have penetrated artistic decision-making. Cultural factors further complicate how platform dynamics unfold in Turkey. The pressure to conform to mainstream genres leads to homogenization and erosion of cultural specificity. Platform metrics create new forms of visibility that don't necessarily translate into meaningful audience connections or sustainable careers. The analysis also reveals how platform capitalism has created new forms of precarity and uncertainty for music professionals in Turkey, imposes particular temporalities and production rhythms, such as constant pressure to produce new content, undermining artistic satisfaction and creative sustainability.

The shift toward data-driven decision-making, engagement optimization, and content packaging documented in this thesis reflects larger trends affecting numerous creative industries subject to algorithmic governance. What emerges is a form of hybrid agency where human and algorithmic decision-making become entangled in complex ways. Artist must navigate in these tensions daily to increase their visibility, making algorithmically influenced strategic decisions about song structure, release timing, and social media presence. The interconnection between platforms (TikTok, Instagram, and Spotify) places additional pressure on artists to become content creators rather than focusing solely on their musical expression. Many artists experience burnout as they juggle multiple tasks, simultaneously producing music, organizing concerts, and maintaining a constant presence on social media, an effort that is necessary for gainin visibility on platform economy.

Platform capitalism has fundamentally altered the material conditions and power relations within Turkey's music industry. Through algorithmic governance, datafication, and the resulting platform dependency, streaming platforms have

restructured how music is created, evaluated, and experienced. The paradox that recurs throughout this thesis is that digital platforms have expanded access to music and provided independence from traditional gatekeepers, but have also introduced new forms of control, gatekeeping, commodification, and precariousness. The study of personal taste profiles and streaming data has shown how platforms transform intimate aspects of musical preference into marketable data points, creating an asymmetrical relationship where platforms know exponentially more about listeners than listeners know about algorithmic operations.

To ensure fairness and support for artists, it is of utmost importance to explore alternative revenue models and business practices that prioritize the interests of artists over those of large corporations. By asking questions that can help create helpful discussions about these issues we must create a more equitable future for music professionals. When artistic decisions become optimized for platform metrics and cultural expressions are transformed into interchangeable content units, fundamental questions arise about the future of music as a cultural expression rather than a mere entertainment commodity. Through the experiences of music professionals in Istanbul, this thesis contributes to a critical gaze of platform capitalism as a socio-technical system with profound implications for cultural production in Turkey and beyond.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Ethical Approval from ITU

APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

APPENDIX C: Interview Transcripts



APPENDIX A: Ethical Approval from ITU

İSTANBUL TEKNİK ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL VE BEŞERİ BİLİMLER İNSAN ARAŞTIRMALARI ETİK KURULU
DEĞERLENDİRME SONUCU

PROJE NUMARASI: 2025-02-629

TARİH: 3.03.2025

1.	Projenin Adı ve Yürütücüsü: PLATFORM KAPİTALİZMİ VE MÜZİK ENDÜSTRİSİNİN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: SPOTIFY ÖRNEĞİ Danışman: Doç. Dr. Ebru Belgin Yetişkin Doğrusöz, İTÜ- Fen- Edebiyat Fakültesi, Sosyoloji Bölümü Yürütücü: Mert Sarıkaya, İTÜ- Bilim, Teknoloji ve Toplum Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi
2.	Projenin Amacı (azami 100 kelime) : Bilim, Teknoloji ve Toplum (STS) çalışmaları, teknolojik altyapıların ve platform protokollerinin kültürel endüstrilerdeki güç dinamiklerini ve sosyal ilişkileri nasıl şekillendirdiğini inceler. Platform kapitalizmi ve “aracılık (mediation)” teorisine ilişkin literatürü inceleyen bu çalışma, müzik akışı (streaming) platformlarından biri olan Spotify’ın algoritmik yönetişimini sorunsallaştırır ve müzik endüstrisinin mevcut teknolojik altyapısının sanatsal özerklik ve kültürel metalaştırmaya dair sorunsalları inceler. Platform protokollerinin analizi ve müzik endüstrisi paydaşlarıyla yapılan görüşmeler yoluyla bu araştırma, algoritmik sistemler ve sanatsal uygulamalar arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi daha iyi anlamaya yardımcı olmayı ve müzik prodüksiyon ve dağıtım süreçlerinde daha adil ve şeffaf teknolojik çerçevelere olan ihtiyacın anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.
3.	Projenin Yöntemi (azami 100 kelime) : Araştırmada nitel araştırma tekniklerinden doküman analizi ve birebir görüşmeden faydalanılacaktır. Çalışmada mercek altına alınan dokümanlar analiz edilecek ve kişilerle yarı yapılandırılmış mülakat teknikleri kullanılacaktır. Dokümanlar platform-plak şirketi-distribütörlerinin sanatçılarla olan sözleşmeleri ve platformların kullanıcılarla olan şart ve koşullarını içerir. Sorular çalışmanın amacına yönelik kavramsal arka planla ilişkilidir. (Bkz. Ek1). Görüşme katılımcıları mülakat örnekleme, İstanbul’da müzik profesyoneli olan kişilerden oluşmaktadır. Amaçsal örnekleme yöntemiyle 11-15 arası kişi seçilecektir.

- ☒ Proje değerlendirilmiş ve etik açıdan uygun BULUNMUŞTUR.
- ☐ Proje değerlendirilmiş ve etik açıdan uygun BULUNMAMIŞTIR.
- ☐ Proje değerlendirilmiş ve etik kurul belgesine GEREK DUYULMAMIŞTIR.

Projenin Adı ve Yürütücüsü:

TARİH:

PLATFORM KAPİTALİZMİ VE MÜZİK ENDÜSTRİSİNİN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: SPOTIFY ÖRNEĞİ

Yürütücü: İTÜ- Bilim, Teknoloji ve Toplum Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Mert Sarıkaya

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APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. In what ways has your music creation process changed to meet the requirements of streaming platforms?
2. Can you describe how you've had to adapt your release strategies to fit Spotify's ecosystem?
3. What kinds of compromises or changes do you make to ensure your music performs well on streaming platforms?
4. How has the rise of digital distribution platforms changed your relationship with record labels?
5. How much control do you feel you have over your music before it enters the streaming ecosystem?
6. Can you describe situations where platform rules or algorithms have significantly influenced your creative or business decisions?
7. How do you balance artistic vision with platform optimization?
8. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the intermediary role played by distribution companies?
9. What do you think about how Spotify's algorithms promote or distribute music? What do you do to cope with or benefit from these algorithmic systems?
10. What strategies have you developed to increase your visibility on streaming platforms?
11. How do you adapt to platform updates and changing algorithms?
12. How has your relationship with other actors in the music industry (record & distribution companies, managers, other artists) changed in the streaming era?
13. Can you describe the interaction chain from composing a song to reaching listeners on Spotify? What tools/intermediaries are involved in this process?
14. How do you reach your audience through digital platforms?

15. How do you work with emerging intermediaries (playlist curators, digital marketing agencies, etc.)?
16. How do social media platforms affect your music distribution strategies?
17. How have the new revenue models brought by digital distribution changed the way you do business?
18. What strategies do you develop regarding platform commissions and distribution fees?
19. Has the economics of music distribution affected your creative decisions?
20. How have changes in listener habits influenced your production and distribution strategies?
21. How does playlist culture shape your music production process?
22. What do you think about the impact of algorithms on music discovery?
23. How has the relationship between artists and listeners changed and evolved in the digital age?
24. What new skills have you had to develop to survive in the digital music ecosystem?
25. How has your daily workflow changed with the introduction of digital distribution platforms?
26. What kinds of new professional relationships have emerged in the era of digital distribution?
27. How has your relationship with copyright institutions changed in the age of digital platform

APPENDIX C: Interview Transcripts

Participant 1 (Musician, Sound Engineer)

March 20, 2025, 14:00-15:00

Researcher: How have your music creation processes changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 1: It changed quite a lot actually. Can we say it changed from beginning to end? It changed a lot. I mean, I think a better question would be “was there any part that didn't change?” It changed a lot. From writing lyrics to the form of the song to the duration of the song. The only thing it probably didn't affect was the key of the song (laughs). It directly affected the rhythmic structure. Now, regardless of genre, we try to use more angular and more hype rhythms. Harmonic decisions are made more simply, without going into complicated progressions. I think it really only didn't affect the key.

Researcher: Could you talk about how you determine your release strategies within the streaming ecosystem?

Participant 1: Yes, of course. Streaming has affected the way we release music. The recent trend is releasing singles one after another. Recently, as countries' economies have worsened and living costs have increased significantly, people can allocate less money to music, which is why many can't afford the cost of making albums. I still think albums are highly valued on platforms. Looking at popularity and listening rates, when relatively less-known artists release albums, the attention they receive from platforms is, in my opinion, greater than if they released singles. But of course, proceeding with single after single creates a difference in terms of visibility. We try something like once every two months, but that also feels ridiculous. After uploading a song to the distributor, when I'm working on recordings for the second song, for example, when conversations like “let's record vocals for the next song” happen, I feel like a chicken, like I need to lay another egg as soon as possible and I don't experience any sense of satisfaction. I did something, it's finished, I uploaded it, and it will be

released in three weeks, but you can't experience a feeling of satisfaction and sufficiency about it. It's a sad situation, but I guess we need to adapt.

Researcher: What kind of compromises or changes do you make to ensure your music performs well on streaming platforms?

Participant 1: I can say we make compromises in the visual world. For example, there is some data suggesting that having the main artist appear on the cover will be a plus. Choosing more striking titles is also critical. We already discussed compromising on the music.

Researcher: How much control do you think you have over your music until it enters the streaming ecosystem?

Participant 1: I think about five percent or so. There's a pitching feature on Spotify. Apart from that, there are PRs done with money. If we assume you have a budget of 100,000 TL that you can allocate to PR for a song, we can actually increase that rate. Like getting it into 3-5 playlists when it comes out, et cetera.

Researcher: What do you think about how Spotify's algorithms introduce or distribute music? How do you cope with these algorithmic systems, what do you do to benefit from them?

Participant 1: I don't do anything. People I know don't do much about this either, or can't. But of course, those algorithms are completely chaotic. Most recently, they had a playlist like "*Soft Jazz*" where they had put their own AI-produced music into the playlists. I think it's a huge absurdity, but on the other hand, there's also a very large mainstream audience that benefits from this absurdity. When you look at the playlists, you see songs from a total of 8-9 people playing over and over and over again. So I think musicians have no say in this matter except for bringing their music closer to trends. If you include elements that will bring it closer to that trend, you might have a better chance, I think. But there's no effort on my end.

Researcher: How have your relationships with other music industry actors changed in the streaming era?

Participant 1: Of course, we've become less dependent at the end of the day. But when I think about both sides of the issue, the changing dimension of our relationship with record companies and everyone being able to upload songs has advantages, while on

the other hand, I couldn't place myself in a definite position between this freedom and the drawback of having too much production. Yes, the dependence on record companies has decreased, which is very good. Bedroom production and everyone being able to make what they want with low budgets is okay, but at the same time, the quality has dropped a lot because of this. What is a production company? You go there, you make that music with professional people using the budget you get, and that work has an importance. Without this, I think there has been a significant loss of quality in music. But of course, I'm not saying that many musicians should be exploited by many companies for decades just for the sake of quality. Both extremes are problematic. I think songs released from production companies still find much better places on streaming platforms compared to independent musicians. This is a very visible difference. The same musician who couldn't get into many playlists when releasing independently can get into them when releasing through Sony. In fact, Warner had a big incident. You know, Spotify has these radar artists. I think it was Radar. Those radar artists were all selected from Warner. I wish production companies were more fair in their contracts. If they were a bit more humane, so that when someone wants to release music from that company, they could get a good budget and work with the guitarist they want, have it mixed by the engineer they want.

Researcher: How do you work with the emerging new intermediaries?

Participant 1: I know a few people who add songs to playlists for a fee. Apart from that, there's a sector that claims to do digital PR, trying to institutionalize itself in that ambiguous area, but there's nothing institutional about its work, you can never do a data analysis, there's no measurability. It's a sector that has emerged, in my opinion. It even operates with quite large budgets. They claim to have functions such as both getting a song into playlists and making it viral on TikTok. As an experience, I've been a bit involved in this sector. At the end of the day, I think it depends entirely on what audience your music appeals to. It's somewhat related to how much work can be done on you. If you make a very consumable and mainstream work, that push can really bring you great returns, but if you're in a more niche and alternative place, it seems like wasted effort.

Researcher: What do you think about the economics of streaming platforms?

Participant 1: As a platform user, I was on TIDAL. It was both of higher quality and paid artists more fairly. Then, as the TL lost value in Turkey, everyone started opening accounts from here, using TIDAL for about 5 cents, and TIDAL found the solution in ending service in Turkey. Then I opened TIDAL from Canada, but thinking “am I stupid to pay this much every month,” I switched to Apple. I insistently don't use Spotify as a user. Some artists had also removed their albums from Spotify. Then they all re-uploaded, I didn't understand. I guess they realized they couldn't fight much. Well, as a musician, I think there's probably nothing you can do about this. Everything in the world is developing, but this issue has remained very primitive, and we've unfortunately coincided with a very transitional period. I think it won't be like this in 10 years.

Researcher: How do changes in listener habits affect your production and distribution strategies?

Participant 1: I think this situation affects everything so much. For example, background music, this is something that came with streaming. Background music has been very influential in the widespread use of this “*hyper-compressed*” sound that has been incorporated into music production. The song should not rise too much and at the same time should not fall too low and cause silence. With that high compression, I think a lot of things are affected sociologically as well. As a sound engineer, I can't do without compression, for example. I can't proceed without hearing what I'm hearing in a state close to its final form. Even my ear has evolved to this. I want to hear it “*limited*” and “*compressed*” to understand what the music is. I think even the topics people talk about with each other or the way they talk has been affected. We've gotten used to listening to video and audio recordings at high speeds, and we can't tolerate slow speech anymore, something like that. Actually, because of this, your music shouldn't attract too much attention. Not getting too harsh, not getting too sad, medium tempo, ambiguous feelings, something that will continue for hours in a flow. You know, that music doesn't want any complicated stuff either. It doesn't need to attract attention, and I find this very strange.

Researcher: How do you think playlist culture has affected the industry?

Participant 1: As a production process, it brought a big comparison into the game. This is a topic that really annoys me. As a listener, I actually like playlists, in terms of

discovering new music. But as someone in production, I very clearly observe that it brings a comparison situation. This could be a “*Brightness*” comparison, it could be a “*Loudness*” comparison. The question of “how will my song sound compared to the next song in the playlist” has become a measure of success among mastering engineers. For example, they can make the song as loud as possible and make the song after it feel low. This makes a mastering engineer successful and popular. It's very annoying. We were hoping this would decrease. I had also examined a lot of articles and graphics when writing my thesis about this. There was an atmosphere that all platforms introducing loudness normalization, first changing to track-based then album-based, would have a positive effect, but it went completely the opposite way. A friend of mine examined Grammy award-winning songs on YouTube in terms of loudness. All songs hit “*negative six*.” All have “*peak distortions*.” There's a movement in the completely opposite direction, and this is very bad. So negative 14 is actually the Spotify stuff. I also discussed a topic related to loudness with another friend recently. He asked why his song sounded lower despite being mastered louder, they were just learning about and researching the issue. They didn't know that normalization was done to a whole album. There was a very loud song in the album, and this raised the average a lot. The algorithm then cut all the tracks inside even more to balance the loudness of the album. Even more absurdly, when listening in *shuffle* mode, you hear that song with an individual effect. When listening in shuffle, you can hear the same song at -12, and within the album at -14. This even makes people think about these things. Why should I consider the loudness of my song as a competition element? I should actually be pursuing how musical and high-quality this song is. Right now, we're not pursuing anything like that at all. We're at a point where we listen to another mainstream song and think “so it doesn't get crushed under it if it plays after.” If you don't do it this way, the next project probably won't come to you, you'll lose work.

Researcher: What new skills did you need to develop to keep up with the digital music ecosystem?

Participant 1: I think we've developed a skill oriented towards making things smaller. Rather than longer expressions, it's about “how can I create the same feeling in very short periods.” We think of lyrics that way too, always wanting them to be more minimal. For example, you want to suffocate someone with the song, you want to disturb them. Then the song might need to be without a chorus, for instance. But this

is found strange. Recently, while recording with a mainstream artist, they said “I wish we could skip the verses and have it all be chorus,” and I was very surprised. I guess we have to adapt, there's nothing to do about it anymore, I've reached such a point. On the positive side, I think our production skills have developed the most. Due to the issues we mentioned earlier, pushing the boundaries has become everyone's topic. You constantly need to discover new things to be able to push more.

Participant 2 (Musician, General Coordinator of a Music Institution)

April 15, 2025, 14:30-15:30

Researcher: In your opinion, how have music creation processes changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 2: I see that songs have become shorter. There's also the issue of songs starting with the chorus. The deficiency I see in artists is the lack of proper music promotion. That promotion requires a boundary. I think it restricts many different music genres, different languages, different forms of expression. It creates standardization. Despite Kurdish music being among Turkey's trends, we don't see a “Kurdish Rock” playlist. This is also related to the platform's segmentation. This situation creates a deficiency in terms of expression. When you start creating content according to the platform's language, you begin to give up a bit on your musical language and your world.

Researcher: So what do you think about release strategies?

Participant 2: Between 1999-2014, the recorded music industry lost much money. Spotify's model has revitalized this industry. For example, you're going to release an album. Normally, you shouldn't be able to release an album tomorrow. There's a plan, a program, market research for this. I think it has a positive effect in terms of organizing the artist. Spotify is also a market, and you need to act according to its rules.

Researcher: What kind of compromises do artists have to make in the streaming ecosystem?

Participant 2: I'll say this because it's been discussed a lot in a UNESCO project research now. In 2024, I looked at YouTube, Spotify, and the most listened to and trending music genres here. Among these genres, we can see this very clearly. Arabesque pop, rap, and trap music are the most listened to. Now you can bring

yourself to a more mainstream point by making your music similar to these. In the 2000s, we looked at the MÜYAP MUSIC AWARDS in comparison. There's pop, folk music, and fantasy. It's like the 2025 version of the system itself. There's the rap difference, of course. The biggest difference is that in the 2000s, 10 thousand listeners could directly support you. Now, of course, you can't earn this from 10 thousand streamings. I think Spotify, or streaming, saved the industry, but there's a problem with pricing policies, it's not about supporting the artist. Right now, income distribution is just about transferring to an income pool. Previously, there was a model where you directly supported the artist. There is a great injustice between artists and music genres in terms of justice and equality. Even very famous artists' income from streaming remains at a ridiculous level. In the 90s and 2000s, production companies covered all expenses. They covered those expenses and gave the artist a little money in between. I think there was like a problem in the entitlement model there too. Now none of these exist. Spotify actually saved labels.

Researcher: How has the proliferation of platforms changed relationships with record companies?

Participant 2: It's different in the world and in Turkey. In the world, we are governed by the big three. Warner, Universal, and Sony. In Turkey, the most listened to are usually boutique or independent labels. Ada Music can't create trends anymore, for example. The top 10 looks horrible to me. Rappers distribute from their own labels. They're not very reliable either, there are allegations of money laundering, etc., I'm not sure of course. Record companies generally make money not from digital platforms but from copyright revenues, through licensing. So actually, the old labels are now making money from their catalogs that come from the past and don't invest much in what's current. The money-making channels have changed a lot for record companies.

Researcher: How do you think the balance between artistic vision and platform optimization is achieved? Do you think platform rules and algorithms affect the creative or business decisions of artists or other music industry actors?

Participant 2: First of all, I think artists need to make a realistic assessment. They need to realistically evaluate questions like where I will be listened to the most, how can I gain listeners. The artist is now obliged to create a listener channel themselves. Because you can't sell CDs anymore, if you're making alternative music, you need to

find a new way. So actually, it's about creating an audience. If you're making more mainstream works, of course, this is an advantage. If you say I want to make money from music, you need to evaluate the current standards and conditions of the industry and proceed accordingly. Alternative music will never be as widespread as pop, we need to accept this. So, can I make money from a single alternative music project? No, it doesn't look realistic. Then you'll need to play with five groups, and alongside that, acquire other skills like sound engineering and do them too. The method is changing. There aren't as many stage opportunities as before, you need to act in a more planned and thoughtful way. Standards in performance have also risen. As it becomes industrialized, it's not just about music anymore. You need to stay strong in the business world and have fortitude. We're in an integrated network. In this integrated network, you should find or create a channel where you can find your own voice. But there, one really needs to know and understand oneself and one's music first, or be able to see and evaluate the true potential of different projects they do. Not everyone can go viral on TikTok.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on Spotify algorithms?

Participant 2: It works terribly. Terribly. But I've trained it by beating it. I directly follow things I like. From January to March, it never offered me suitable suggestions. It confronted me with things that made me say, "How can you suggest this to me?!" For example, there's a rapper from Turkey that I never listen to, how can this infiltrate my algorithm? The only rapper I listened to was Ezhel, and even he comes much later among people and genres. Irrelevant things come up. So either artificial intelligence isn't that smart, or the algorithm might be progressing with the logic that it already pays money to what's highly listened to, so it directs the listener there. Through fighting, by blocking this, not removing that, following my favorites, etc., by forcing and forcing, it started to be able to suggest nice things. But its suggestions are also artists I already like, by the way. So there's a technology in front of me that doesn't do what I say. I also don't remember it ever enabling me to discover a new genre or a new artist, by the way. I try to follow music magazines too. I often listen to and discover artists I look at there.

Researcher: How have the relationships between music industry actors changed during this period?

Participant 2: I think the recorded music ecosystem and the live music ecosystem talk to each other. You'll also want to listen to a musician you think makes good music live, you'll want to discover them. No one takes risks anymore, no one invests in risk. Right now, the number of artists being invested in is small, more experimentation could be done. There's nothing like what used to hit us in the heart anymore, like Tarkan's (a famous Turkish singer) "Hepsi Senin Mi?" There's no longer something that explodes making you say "What a song this was." We have to accept that. I mean, we no longer experience the situation of being on everyone's tongue, being listened to by everyone everywhere, transcending segments, bringing us together, like Ahmet Kaya, Sezen Aksu, Tarkan (known Turkish singers). We're in a cloud of nostalgia. We have a new narrative problem in general. I think this is also related to a creativity crisis. Now, open the most popular music of digital platforms, look, you've never listened to it in your life. Our families are the same. Previously, the best-selling cassettes were on everyone's tongue, there's such a cultural influence difference in between. They're all a sequence of echo chambers, there's such a difference. Previously, this industry really touched people's veins, soul, daily life, now it doesn't have such an effect. I look at Spotify like Migros [a supermarket chain]. Migros shouldn't sell defective products there. But the fact that defective products arrive there also points to another chain defect. After all, Migros is not just a place that sells defective products. Because it's a music market, and there are different markets with different functions. We see the change and effect of listening habits in all of them. Previously, the local grocer's mentality was very broad. Now there's a very complex network in front of supporting the artist. Streaming reduced piracy, but it also changed our ways of listening to music. There are two books on this subject that I really like, one of them was translated as "You Haven't Reached Your Favorite Music Yet," it stuck in my mind. Spotify is no longer the right place to find this.

Researcher: What do you think about the platform economy?

Participant 2: Of course, revenues are very low, this cannot be denied. The revenue model needs to change. You need to transfer your subscription fee to whoever you listen to. The standard pool system benefits big artists. I, for example, would like to contribute only to the artists I listen to.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on playlist culture?

Participant 2: Artists try to adapt to the playlist. A very popular name, a close friend of mine, from the mainstream, thinks that at least one of the songs on the album should be made according to playlists and designed accordingly. But I don't think this is a problem, you're going to the market after all, and that market has its rules. You need to play by the rules. If you say you're doing *Free Jazz*, then you should play by its rules too. Rules and practices vary according to genres.

Researcher: How has the relationship between artists and listeners changed? What new skills did artists need to acquire during this period?

Participant 2: Artists need to find a new way of creating an audience to connect. Previously, you could connect with the artist by getting a physical item, this has a clear effect. Now it has become harder to establish such a relationship. I think the important thing is to establish a physical connection with the listener. This could be a t-shirt, it could be anything. Depending on the genre of their music, the artist needs to find ways to communicate in different ways. This is actually what's called the super-fan issue. There used to be a lot of super-fans, we talked about this, the potential was very high. Segmentation has increased a lot right now, and this makes things difficult. I also see a problem in musicians' performances now. They're trying to allocate budgets for a five-song album listening party, launch, etc. I wish you had made ten songs first, right? There's a problem of realism with the artist right now. I don't know if DIY culture has driven musicians crazy or what. It seems very strange to me that there are people who have listening parties even for a single. Instead of dealing with this, rehearse with your group, work, make a better album with more songs. But people are constantly in a race to produce and gain visibility, I don't know. It's a more complex system. One of the biggest problems I see in Turkey is the quality and quantity of production.

Researcher: Thank you for your contribution.

Participant 3 (Producer, Arranger, Composer, Musician)

April 22, 2025, 18:00-19:00

Researcher: How have your music creation processes changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 3: Previously, production was done more on an art basis. Our role model teachers would create more musical, artistic productions. Currently, the industry has evolved into a more consumable model. Now productions have started to be oriented

towards people and social media content. Especially TikTok gives a lot of direction to music in Turkey. Partly out of the effort to become popular, more consumable things, more mainstream things are being produced, and when someone succeeds with something, everyone follows in their footsteps. Social media trends lead to music streams. Good or bad, people have started not to get hung up on criticisms anymore. They don't care whether they've made a musical work here or not. Productions are not of the same quality as before, either. When I started, we would make songs with 30-40 *tracks*, putting in much effort. Now the number of tracks has dropped to 10-15. The durations have also become much shorter. Previously, we used to make pieces of 4 minutes, 5 minutes, now it's down to 2 minutes. Because radios no longer turn to new songs over 2 minutes. Art is no longer made for art's sake, but entirely for society.

Researcher: Can you explain how you've adapted your release strategies according to Spotify's ecosystem?

Participant 3: Previously, whoever wanted could release a track or album as soon as it was finished. It wasn't constrained by any date, time. But now globally, release nights, which happen on Thursday nights leading into Friday, have been invented. The choices of editors in the music industry have started to be based on that, too. Considering the editors' review process, songs need to be sent at least 20 days in advance.

Researcher: How has the proliferation of digital distribution platforms changed your relationships with record companies?

Participant 3: The impact of other technologies is also very high there. We shouldn't just look at it as *DSPs*. *DSPs* have brought a standard in terms of physical sound quality, which is a good thing. I'm not talking about production quality. These companies also generally make choices based on the numbers on the platform. Previously, talent was valued. Is the voice good? How do they use it? How are the lyrics, music, and verses? Now, platform data is at the forefront. A&Rs are suggesting contracts with sub-labels rather than the leading companies. Because they don't want to claim ownership until the song takes off, they don't want to invest, and they don't take as many risks as before.

Researcher: Has there been a situation where platform rules or algorithms significantly affected your creative or business decisions?

Participant 3: We have to adapt to loudness wars. This situation exists in Turkey too. Everyone is competing to make their production sound louder by manipulating platform standards.

Researcher: How do you balance artistic vision and platform optimization?

Participant 3: I used to advocate for good music and good production. I cared a lot about a more complex, colorful chords and an artistic production approach. But as I observed the listener, my opinion changed. The simpler it is, the better seems to be where I am now. I don't look at it with as much complex and artistic vision as I used to, to be frank. In the end, we don't do this just for ourselves. We do it for people to listen to, and we appeal to a certain audience. You need to find a common ground with people who listen to the same kind of music as you at some point. Right now, we're doing something for society. Therefore, we need to follow such a path to somehow sustain our lives and make money. When you try to do something different, you can't really hold on. There are many examples. Nobody is in an art competition with anyone anymore. This chord was played, that was used, etc., people have given up on arguing these. We see the production videos of people who make good money from this business, with millions of views, they use 5-6 tracks in their productions. So I don't need to make something extremely artistic. You need to look from the listener's perspective, not your own.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on these changes in listener habits?

Participant 3: Productions on Spotify were of much higher quality before the TikTok era. I think listener habits have changed a lot with TikTok. People no longer care if the song is poorly sung, detuned, or sur-toned. Or some make money from this business in a different way, like dancing and so on. Right now, especially in Turkey, social media gives a lot of direction to music. It wasn't this much before.

Researcher: What do you think about the intermediary role of distribution companies?

Participant 3: If a producer takes on distribution and is a good company, their marketing and promotion really benefit you. By promoting in the media, they bring your music to people. This is very important. When you're independent, these things become a bit more difficult, I'm talking about entities like DistroKid. If you're not independent, the qualities of your company are also very important. Some claim

they've done advertising, but they haven't, and they don't give you information either, so you can't measure it. Clear answers aren't given when asked. For example, when you ask “how much did you spend on advertising?” they give answers like “we can't share that information.”

Researcher: What do you think about Spotify algorithms?

Participant 3: I don't think there's a real editor in Turkey. I don't think there's an editor who understands music in the rap scene or the pop scene in Turkey. It has completely turned into a rent-seeking point, and everyone is looking for money. This is very clear. There are very underrated friends, young talents. The reason they can't stand out is financial means. Therefore, they can't enter the algorithm. Spotify constantly recommends mainstream people to me. There are dozens of artists I've never heard of with millions of listeners. I'm hearing their names for the first time. These people only exist on Spotify. I've never encountered any event or concert of these people, for example. I'm very surprised by this. These people probably gain streams through playlists.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on the playlist culture that emerged with streaming?

Participant 3: Playlist culture is actually a good thing. I'm talking about it in terms of personal sharing. I like a list created by someone, I ask for it from my friend, for example, or someone asks me for it, this is a nice interaction. Spotify's editorial playlists, on the other hand, are a different matter. If these playlists were really fair and their usage was really a tool for bringing music to people, this would be a great service. But as long as there's money in this business, something like this will never happen. But naturally, people now get upset like “I released a track, it couldn't get into New Music Friday” and feel psychological pressure. It's the thing that most undermines people's production. If you're releasing ten tracks, by the eleventh, you want your music to be on a playlist. When it's not, you start wondering why because you put in the effort. The production, its musicality, mix-mastering, and editing are all stressful. You sit and spend time, and time is something that can't be retrieved, can't be bought with money. In Turkey and around the world, this is an entirely rent-seeking system. The productions of the most listened to artists in Turkey are of very poor quality. For

example, they use samples they've taken from sample banks directly without evolving or transforming them, it's a careless approach. But it works because it's mainstream.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on the streaming revenues Spotify pays to artists?

Participant 3: Spotify currently makes very low payments. Subscription fees in Turkey are also very low. I don't think anyone would pay 300 lira per month to use Spotify. The younger demographic uses Spotify more, and the state of the economy in Turkey is evident. These things are a bit political, too. Of course, artists aren't satisfied globally either, but there's an extreme situation in Turkey regarding this issue.

Researcher: How do you think the relationships between artists and listeners have changed during this period?

Participant 3: There used to be a concert culture. The economic situation has an impact, of course. Our country's agenda is constantly confused, something is always coming up. People are even afraid to be in crowded environments in our country. Besides this, there's the issue of "Spotify artists," digital artists. These people can't sell event tickets to their listeners. Because the listener knows the track but doesn't remember who sang it, for example. According to your algorithm, whichever city has your highest listeners, you do concerts accordingly. But often you can be disappointed in places you go trusting the algorithm. This is somewhat relative. Venues look at stream counts, but that's not the only variable.

Researcher: What new skills did you need to develop to exist in the digital music ecosystem?

Participant 3: You definitely need to listen to and analyze mainstream works. You also need to continuously integrate technological developments into your workflow. Besides that, social media usage is very important, you need to follow and observe trends and developments. You also need to be very social and build a network. No matter how good a musician you are, if you don't have a market to showcase your talent, you're either discovered very late or not discovered at all.

Participant 4 (Record Label General Coordinator, Manager)

April 22, 2025, 16:00-17:00

Researcher: How do you think music creation processes have changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 4: We can observe that most artists feel compelled to produce.

Researcher: How are release strategies adapted to Spotify's ecosystem?

Participant 4: In general, we're in an era of very fast production and consumption, content and communication. Of course, we change our strategies accordingly. Spotify is one of the tools through which we can publish our music. First, there's an effort to meet the platform's interface, technological requirements, and updates. The most obvious thing is that artists are abandoning album concepts and turning to singles, which is among the biggest release strategy changes. Artists also execute video and content strategies for this ecosystem. Spotify has also changed a lot over time. New features definitely come every year. For example, it has video clips, canvases. It's not just a place where music is uploaded, but also a place where concerts are announced. Over time, we see it's transformed into a content platform. We're in a system where artists are not obliged to, but for them to reach their audience more, it would be better if they used the platform's these tools.

Researcher: Do you think artists make compromises to ensure their music performs well on these platforms?

Participant 4: The durations of songs have shortened. I'm not sure if this is platform-based or a more general sociological outcome. *DSPs* seem to me to be a consequence rather than a cause. In terms of composition, more easily listenable structures are now preferred more.

Researcher: How much control do artists have in the process until their music reaches this ecosystem?

Participant 4: This varies depending on which music structures and company structures the artist works with. Is it independent, does it have a distributor, does it have a record company? These become critical. They can't directly affect the algorithm; they don't have control over that, but the artist can make their choices outside the algorithm. I don't think it's like "I released it to the planet and it went." There's a system within the platform where data controls can be done more, and the artist can track these from the interface. I'm not very sure how reading these leads us to correct results from the perspective of artists and managers.

Researcher: Can you recall a situation where platform rules and algorithms significantly affected creative and business decisions?

Participant 4: The system was working in a similar way before platforms became so widespread and powerful. Only the tools have changed. When you went to Unkapanı and knocked on the doors of record shops and gave them your CD, you still couldn't reach listeners. There were those whose clips were played on *Kral Pop* (TV & Radio channel) and those that weren't. It seems to me that the dynamics were similar to the underground ones, etc. The system is the same, again in a neoliberal and very capitalist system, what has changed is new tools developed for fast and easy consumption.

Researcher: How do artists balance artistic vision and platform optimization?

Participant 4: Collaboration activities among artists have increased a lot in the Turkey scene. I see this as an algorithm strategy. Artists of similar genres do features to increase their listening potential.

Researcher: What do you think about the intermediary role of distribution companies?

Participant 4: There are many distribution companies in Turkey, and each one's working principles vary. Here, there needs to be a structure that can follow the music produced by the artist, the current conditions of Turkey, technological developments and innovations happening in the world; one that correctly guides the artist's manager and entire team. But if it works for a certain commission, uploads the song to the system, and then steps back, doesn't provide feedback, and isn't very involved in other work processes, it's not a necessary structure. Because the artist can do these things themselves.

Researcher: What do you think about Spotify algorithms?

Participant 4: I've been an active user of Spotify for 10 years. I've tried very hard to keep this algorithm clean. Of course, now I can't just listen as a listener anymore. Right now, I'm in a place where I listen to music I like, music I enjoy. It's also a platform that feeds me as a manager. I don't listen to editorial playlists much. Sometimes something I don't know and can't fully understand, or don't like, can come after something I really like. In that case, I start questioning, "Why is this algorithm making me listen to this right now?" It means these two artists, these two groups have a certain common listener pool, in which case I try to analyze the behavior of listeners and understand what they find in these two types of music. Of course, there are also times

when I can't see in the algorithm music from artists that I've heard at concerts or through other intermediaries in the industry, and that I enjoy.

Researcher: How do you think the relationships between music industry actors have changed during this period?

Participant 4: I've been actively involved in the industry for 5 years. I enjoy observing the institutionalization of record companies. Until a few years ago, there were no A&R departments in Turkey. It's also possible to describe institutionalization from a critical paradigm, of course. Because it became a systemic necessity. There's been a significant increase in digital marketing departments. Their direct relationships with artists again vary depending on the position of the artist and the structures. A&Rs also behave somewhat according to data. They can act according to what the numbers indicate. Numbers, listening, follower data, and interaction data have become important for all professional music formations.

Researcher: What do you think about the relationship between social media platforms and music distribution strategies?

Participant 4: This is a directly affecting phenomenon. Unfortunately, the artist needs to become a content creator. This is actually a separate profession. I mean, how can a person both actively produce music, organize concerts, and also make time for content creation? I'm not quite sure, honestly. But we are in a position to suggest and implement this, because it works better when done. There are so many options, so many communications in this period. There's a system and audience that takes music away from being an artistic pleasure and turns it into a communication. The artist has to constantly remind themselves and be visible. We're talking about some of the world's biggest companies: Meta, TikTok, YouTube, Spotify... Various capitalist companies. All these platforms need to be thought of as a music market. If a product that's in the TikTok market isn't on Spotify, people will go to the TikTok market. Because they liked that product. Therefore, Spotify needs to take this into its own market and integrate it because they're in competition. An attitude of "I want to have it too."

Researcher: What do you think about the new intermediaries that have emerged during the streaming period?

Participant 4: For example, I've never seen a digital music agency in Turkey that can work well in the music field. What's really important is not how many views something gets, but how sustainable it is and a roadmap towards this. Both producing music, and putting in the efforts I mentioned in the previous question, and being in the digital world following developments, making sense of them, and taking action accordingly are very difficult to carry out together. These are difficult things even for managers. It's not difficult for major record companies because they all have specialized departments. But I can't trust digital agencies very much as intermediaries. I'm also not very sure how useful non-editorial playlist curators are. The data of artists whose songs are included in a playlist with many followers for a certain fee needs to be examined by data analysts in terms of what changes have occurred and how long they've lasted. It's challenging to try to read how an acceleration and fluctuation happens behind a number without being captivated by a number.

Researcher: What do you think about the payments made to artists from platforms?

Participant 4: I think artists don't receive the payments they deserve. I find them low. We won't be able to convince consumers to switch to a platform that pays more. Consumer behavior is also important in coping with this situation. If subscription fees increase, the platform will lose users, that's another aspect of the situation.

Researcher: Have you observed changes in listener habits during this period?

Participant 4: The amount of communication has increased so much worldwide. Not just communication from the phone, but also from the street, politics, and society. It's not really possible for us to handle this much communication psychologically. Our attention spans have decreased, we're in stress and anxiety. The corresponding response in music is based on very quick consumption and moving past that communication as soon as possible. I observe this behavior in listeners. For example, they love a song, but a week later something else comes out that's similar to it. Everyone has gotten used to the "just drop it and take the new one" mentality. You look, it's being listened to by millions, you hear it everywhere during that period, in taxis, markets, beaches, everywhere. Then, without much time passing, it disappears from everywhere, no one opens it up and listens again.

Researcher: What do you think about the playlist culture that emerged with streaming?

Participant 4: I think we're making a mistake as an industry. *DSPs* are tools that respond to the calls of the world and consumers. They respond to the listener and the listening culture. The Turkish Rock playlist is criticized a lot in Turkey because it's said to not contain elements of the rock genre. Spotify shapes these lists in a completely commercial and capitalist way according to listener behavior. As a listener, I don't follow the lists. Especially “Arkada Çalsın (Background Music)” and it's like, (shuts dismissively). Worldwide, listeners want music to be more easily and effortlessly accessible, understandable. *DSPs* respond to this.

Researcher: How do you think the relationships between artists and listeners have changed during this period?

Participant 4: Well, we need to get into post-truths to answer this. The realities of the listener and consumer have changed a bit. The listener directly witnesses the artist's life very easily, can send a message. I don't know if it makes the listener careless, but there's a perception of “it's so easy” formed in the listener in general. Like there's a hologram in front of them, for example, they can throw a lighter at a concert.

Researcher: What kind of new professional relationships have emerged in the digital distribution era?

Participant 4: Synchronization and algorithm departments have seriously increased. Such a professional network has formed. We have a lot of labels now, for example. Distributors are increasing, but big fish usually buy them. In social media too, advertising agencies, media agencies have increased a lot. We don't see them much in Turkey, but there are content creators abroad. Very diverse new professional relationships have developed during this period.

Researcher: Thank you.

Participant 5 (Music Journalist)

March 19, 2025, 15:00-16:00

Researcher: How do you think music creation processes have changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 5: There used to be a 45 RPM trend. In the 1970s, you know, songs were released as 45 RPM records with the A side 5 minutes and the B side 5 minutes. I listen to and follow many songs. Artists have a concern about making the song a bit shorter

so it gets more plays, but the short songs of the past could tell all the ideas and concerns. But in these times, I can think that a 2-minute song hasn't even started yet when I'm approaching the end.

Researcher: How do artists have to adapt their release strategies according to Spotify's ecosystem?

Participant 5: Looking at the axis of Turkey, as I interview many independent artists, what I've seen is that there are 3 distribution platforms most preferred by independent customers in Turkey: Distrokid, Ditto, TuneCore. But I've never discovered a Distrokid user from New Music Friday or any other list. I fixated on this for a while. I looked at the statistics over a year. From Distrokid, maybe 3-4 artists get into the lists, and two of them had previously released songs from a major company. The equivalent of a major firm here is places like Orchard, Believe, Videomite. I had a friend, I won't name her now. She got into the list. I call the girl at night and say, "For the first time in a long time, I've seen someone who's with Distrokid get into a list." She said, "I forgot to tell you, I switched to OneRPM." That was actually the first distributor with a Turkey branch. Because Distrokid doesn't have a Turkey branch, you can't reach the lists. For example, the Fresh Finds Turkey list should consist of independents, but inside, Orchard, Believe, and Ingrooves are usually distributed equally.

Researcher: Have you ever observed situations where Spotify algorithms significantly affected creative and business decisions?

Participant 5: Now, let me say this, I give all sorts of advice to artists. But the one thing they will never hear, as long as I live, is "make your music like the ones there, shorten the duration, use electronic rhythms," etc. Such a thing shouldn't happen. Unfortunately, I hear and know that some arrangers make these offers to artists. We had an artist who wanted to record live strings. The arranger said there was no need, I did it electronically, and resisted this. But the spirit the artist wanted would come from live string recordings. The artist is rejected saying, "This doesn't work." By the way, what I'm defending here isn't good music bad music, it's good distribution bad distribution. For example, many of my independent clients don't want to wait 21 days. If there's a chance to get into a list, you're rejecting that list opportunity by not waiting. I recommend OneRPM as a distribution company, because they have branches in Turkey. When there's a branch, the necessary information can be provided to curators.

I can spend more time in Apple Music's playlists that compile new songs. I can discover more female artists. I think Spotify has a deficiency here. Unlike Apple Music, I haven't met a new female artist on Spotify for a long time.

Researcher: How do you think changes in listener habits affect production and distribution strategies?

Participant 5: As access to music has become easier, the value given to music has decreased. I'm still a person who likes to listen to products in some way from vinyl and CD. I mean, the change in listener habits is more pronounced in Turkey according to my observations. People abroad still listen to CDs. Right now in Turkey, all the cassette factories we know have removed all their parts, never to be attached again. The change in listener habits has greatly shortened the duration of songs and albums. I know old songs very well. Now I ask people who are interested, "which album, which song did you like last?" They say "None." People can't access quality music.

Researcher: What do you think about playlist culture?

Participant 5: There are strange playlist names from TV series, like in meme culture, for example, "Songs İlkan listens to when he learns he's 40 years old." These catch on, absurdity always works. The time and effort required to be successful now has increased a lot. Right now there's only one store, one showcase, and that's the Spotify showcase. You must know all the rules of this single store very well and act accordingly.

Researcher: Thank you.

Participant 6 (Music Podcaster, Content Consultant)

March 24, 2025, 14:00-15:00

Researcher: How do you think music creation processes have changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 6: First of all, the genre changed. I mean, the genre has changed as I see it. Everyone has started to lean more towards genres that platforms highlight rather than the area they want to freely produce in. That's why people want to try that first and gain visibility.

Researcher: Which genres do you think platforms are highlighting?

Participant 6: I would say pop, electronic, and rap.

Researcher: What else is being done to ensure music performs well on Spotify?

Participant 6: I know some paid collaborations are being made. There are some platforms that do this highlighting work. They offer things like “We can increase your listening on Spotify, “ like intermediary agencies.

Researcher: How do you think the proliferation of streaming platforms has changed artists' relationships with record companies?

Participant 6: It no longer necessitates dependency on a record company. This seems like a positive thing from the beginning. But releasing music is not just about adding it to a digital platform. There are a lot of variables involved. Concerts, merch production, meetings with fans, and so on. That's why the thing we call a record company should be an institution that can buy certain rights and also enable the artist to do these things without spending money, but now it's in a state where it can't meet these conditions and can't perform its role. But despite these lost roles, they maintain their profitability.

Researcher: So, previously, record companies also had a role in designing a music identity and funding it. But currently, it's just like “You do everything, if I like it, we'll sign the deal.” They've become passive, but they still continue to maintain the same profitability.

Participant 6: Yes, exactly like that.

Researcher: Can you think of a situation where streaming platform rules or algorithms significantly affected your creative or business decisions?

Participant 6: Yes, everyone is very affected by this. Spotify updates its lists on certain days of the week, and that new list is determined 3 weeks in advance. Release strategies are determined accordingly. If I talk about podcasts, the algorithm doesn't work very well on Spotify, like it doesn't work well in many things. There's also something there; releasing a podcast every week positively affects the algorithm's highlighting.

Researcher: What do you think about Spotify's algorithms' role in the introduction and distribution of music?

Participant 6: Well, it has a big role, and it only suggests very specific things. This is also a problematic point. I don't think the thing we call algorithms works well. I wonder if an agency or advertising comes into play. There's a mystery in Spotify in that regard. Algorithms aren't independent. Also, I often find the music it suggests to me irrelevant.

Researcher: How do you think the relationship between music industry actors has changed in the streaming era?

Participant 6: I think this has two aspects. Independents have started to support each other, collaborate, and do things to make each other visible. The second is the mainstream side. There has been a big increase in imitating each other, the mentality of “if this worked, let's do it too.” Previously, what we called measurability was the fan base. Now we're talking about a number system that we know isn't real. A song can be listened to millions of times within two days on platforms. Even someone who's never listened before listens just out of curiosity, like “I wonder why this was listened to so much.” There, other games and PR techniques come into play. Streaming farms, etc.

Researcher: How are the new intermediaries that emerged in the streaming era affecting the dynamics in the industry?

Participant 6: I think they're affecting it positively. For example, the existence of playlist curators is a positive thing. Knowing that a real person is making this list is more positive. Rather than algorithmic playlists, for example, a list I make as a publisher is more intriguing.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on Spotify's own editorial lists, such as New Music Friday and “Arkada Çalsın” (Background Music)?

Participant 6: I don't know how to say this politely. Yes, I can say it like this. Some people don't know what to listen to. For example, I'm not such a person. I always decide like, today I want to listen to classical music, today I want to listen to this. Some people don't have this. Those lists are very good for those people. They don't want to spend effort on it. But, for example, I don't think lists like This Week's New Releases, Third New Ones, are independent either. On that side, too, record companies, agencies, and similar institutions come into play.

Researcher: How do social media platforms affect music distribution strategies?

Participant 6: They affect it a lot. In both positive and negative ways. The positive aspect is the visibility that can be gained through reels, for example. The negative side is that people get irritated from hearing the same music over and over. There's something there that the musician can't control. That's the problematic thing. I mean, you might wake up one morning and more than a thousand people have used your song in a reels, and because of this, people might hate you, or they might love you. There's an uncontrollable point there, I think. Apart from that, due to Spotify's algorithm, it's not so easy to spread the word about a newly released song. But it's easier to do this on social media. Visibility can be obtained by advertising.

Researcher: Alright, let's imagine an artist who's just starting their music career. Let's say they have 500 followers on their social media account. Do you think they can easily gain visibility in this situation, too?

Participant 6: You can. But social media requires constant content production, you need to constantly give it something, you need to constantly feed it like Pac-Man. If that person shares 3-4 posts a week and constantly reminds themselves, they can grow their audience. Due to the Instagram algorithm, the number of followers doesn't matter, interaction is more important. They need to do something directed towards that now, musicians.

Researcher: So musicians can't choose not to use social media.

Participant 6: In that case, it's very difficult. Where and how will you show yourself? What else can you do? They'll make a weekly content plan for you. On social media, the product isn't your music, the product is you. The problem starts right here. We want the product to be what we produce, not us, but social media is unfortunately not like that.

Researcher: That means the quality of the music they make isn't really an important variable.

Participant 6: Yes. I mean, who the person is becomes important here. For example, there's only one musician I've discovered from Spotify. That's (names an artist). One day, after a song, she came up and I said, "Ah, this is very good." If I looked at her social media account, she would seem like someone whose music I wouldn't listen to. I liked her music, but I didn't like her social media account, for example.

Researcher: What do you think about Spotify's business model?

Participant 6: It's very problematic. That's why the "Playlist" series was an important series for me. Spotify suddenly entered our lives, but I switched much later; I gave up CDs late. Do people really want to listen to music without paying, or do they want it to be more accessible? Spotify thinks it's providing a very big service and doesn't even need to pay royalties. It has such an ego now because they think it offers big things like being very fast and having an extensive library. Well, if we start from our old listening habits, do we really need Spotify or not? We definitely need to listen to music from the internet, but I'm not sure if this is the only or best solution. Alternatives are possible. If we also love musicians, why should we continue a model where the musician doesn't earn anything? There's a problem of cultural and artistic labor not being visible, of it not being seen as a product. Previously, music appeared as a product because it was consumed on CDs and cassettes. There was a perception that record companies were making the most money from this, and people started to develop an antipathy towards them. Because musicians weren't earning well in that period either. People started saying, "Let's listen from a place that's free and not legal, let's not make them earn money." Then we came to the current model. But I'm sure Daniel Ek is also aware that the current situation is unsustainable.

Researcher: How do you think changes in listener habits during this period have changed the music ecosystem?

Participant 6: Everyone started leaning towards specific genres. Focal points changed, and diversity also decreased. Record companies are a bit like *Acun* (a Turkish TV producer). As with television, there's a practice of making similar formats of what works.

Researcher: The concept of what works is also related to numbers in this period. The numbers and data that appear before us.

Participant 6: Sometimes, there can be surprises. It can suddenly explode by coincidence after three or five years. Just being a phenomenon and being very popular is enough. Everything can change overnight.

Researcher: What new skills do you think artists need to develop to exist in the digital music ecosystem?

Participant 6: It's not enough for a musician to be just a musician. They need to be someone who understands algorithms and data, who can read them. They need to know

how to use social media and produce content. They need to learn video editing, take good photos, do graphic design, learning details about booking, etc.

Researcher: Thank you very much for your participation.

Participant 7 (Musician, Copyrighter, Digital Marketing Agency Founder)

March 25, 2025, 13:00-14:00

Researcher: Hello. First, I'd like to ask you about your general views and ideas about Spotify algorithms and the streaming ecosystem, independent of the questions.

Participant 7: Well, I think this topic has both positive and negative aspects. I think it has made the music industry a bit more savage. I feel that the direction is evolving even more that way. Especially, I think “rap” has an effect on bringing out the savage feelings inside people. I define the use of music in social media as somewhat of a message people send to each other. Because someone experiences a problem, an issue. Instead of expressing that problem with texts, they make a post, and maybe they're laughing in the post, but they put music behind it, and that music is actually a message to someone. This kind of message-laden music has been something done since “Demet Akalın (a famous Turkish singer), but now it's become even more extreme. I mean, we see it's reached the point of “they bark from behind” (lyrics reference). I think this has a direct effect on the music creation process. This effect has started to appeal more to people's savage emotions.

Researcher: Alright. Now I'm moving on to the questions. Do artists change their music creation processes to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 7: I think this is a question that can be evaluated based on genre. Labels or artists who care about streaming platforms are on one side, and a group that doesn't care at all and continues to do today what they were doing in the nineties is on the other side. Everyone asks this, but yes, the younger the generation, the more ideas they have about “How can I get my music listened to more?” These ideas come from examining what platforms want more of, studying which songs get into playlists more, and, of course, this affects their creation process. But as I said, if we think in terms of Unkapanı and “folk music” base, there are also many labels that don't care about this at all and continue their lives the same way. We all see that streaming platforms already work directly with just a few labels. There's a friend of ours who works in an A&R role in Turkey. This friend, when we look, has worked with Universal Music in the

past. Now you look at another friend at Universal, and he worked at Spotify in the past. Looking at another friend at Spotify, he worked at Sony Music before. I can say that they even “rotate” their staff among themselves, to put it crudely. When that happens, the relationship between them becomes completely different. They communicate with each other and inevitably get ahead of other labels. They may also use their advertising budgets much more wisely because of this. Now, some people far from these events allocate an advertising budget and spend it foolishly.

Researcher: Have you had a chance to observe how the proliferation of digital distribution platforms has changed artists' relationships with record companies?

Participant 7: Their proliferation was something that record companies initially liked. Because they were able to stand against piracy. Afterwards, at the point where we are now, especially in Turkey, I think they're unhappy with the money collected, as the business has now become monopolized. They think too little money is collected. I mean, it's basically the same price as a 2.5-liter cola to listen to all the music in the world. At this point, as far as I understand, there's no agreement between them about how much Spotify will distribute this music for. For this reason, the industry has started to be negatively affected.

Researcher: Is there a situation where platform rules or algorithms significantly affected your creative or business decisions?

Participant 7: There is. For example, a very close friend of mine said he wanted to make a traditional Turkish album. He asked me, “What do you think should be in it?” This friend usually utilizes anonymous works. I said, “Definitely make a birthday song.” Afterwards, he made a birthday song, and this song went viral on TikTok. Then he thanked me a lot. He saw a famous person celebrating with that song and was over the moon.

Researcher: So he actually didn't want to make such a song, but just to be more visible, he made this decision, and it worked.

Participant 7: Yes. Now he constantly asks me for new ideas and suggestions. I tell him to make anonymous works that have already gone viral on TikTok. After all, these people make music thinking, “What can I squeeze the juice out of?” and they get results. They play to what's popular. You know, I also made songs and shared them. They got about 4,000-5,000 listens, and that was it. Maybe today, if I did it differently,

if I put more effort into it, it would be different. I don't know. Anyway, I opened a new YouTube channel last month and prepared samba, New York jazz, and New Orleans jazz playlists with songs I created using artificial intelligence. My channel is doing well now.

Researcher: Interesting topic. This trend is referred to as lean-back listening in the literature. It's known that Spotify fills playlists like “Arkada Çalsın (Background Music)” etc. with cheaper versions of popular songs made by “ghost producers.”

Participant 7: Ah! I'm researching this topic lately, now I understand what's happening. I was also looking at lo-fi a bit recently. Lo-fi didn't work well on YouTube. I'm like, why doesn't it work? I mean, lo-fi is something that's produced a lot but also something that people listen to a lot, that's how it's been coded in my head. I take the files of lo-fi songs that have made it onto Spotify playlists and feed them to AI, saying “What do you think are the characteristics of this?” etc., trying to get prompts written. On the other hand, I thought, let me also check YouTube to see how many listens these artists have on Spotify playlists there. I looked and saw that a song with 25 million on Spotify has 25 views on YouTube. I said, how can this be, such a thing shouldn't be possible, I mean. You know, I don't know, at least 20,000 people would also listen to this on YouTube if they like it. I'm going to do it too. Since the system has left us out all this time, this time let's leave the system out.

Researcher: What do you think about how Spotify's algorithms introduce or distribute music?

Participant 7: It provides a benefit in being visible compared to the past. The system has changed too, of course, we couldn't even record at home before. It's a system that offers individuals opportunities, which is one of its strongest aspects. But on the other hand, there are so many songs with 0 listens that I don't think they can cope with it anymore. They generally proceed with people in A&R roles. They've also set up systems like “Marquee” through which they can earn money. Now, the way to distribute a song is through spending money. Artists have also now accepted that they won't be able to make money from streaming. I see it, even the biggest artists I work with hope “let my song get into a TV series, get into an advertisement,” because that's the only way they can make money. TV series music attracts a lot of audience. Artists

usually tell TV series, “Take it, use my songs for free.” The distributor takes a cut, the label takes a cut, the state takes a cut, you're left with very little money from streaming.

Researcher: What kind of advantages or disadvantages do you think the intermediary role of distribution companies provides?

Participant 7: There aren't many companies that have been able to transition from physical distribution to digital distribution. There's Universal Music and Sony Music that I know of. DMC also became Netd. Then DMC was sold entirely to Believe company today. They couldn't stay afloat, so they bought them. The authorized people on streaming platforms don't want to face labels. Editors are also secretive, for example. So I don't think they have much of a role at this point. Distributors are trying to develop marketing tools within themselves, including Distrokid, but they're very inadequate. Spotify's entire system would need to change for them to have a different role. Spotify has also grown unnecessarily large, so it can't intervene in this. This is heading towards a bad point for them. They're focused on how to make more money. Apple Music, on the contrary, approaches from a point of how to take the music listening experience to a higher level. For example, spatial audio and karaoke features. These are the kind of innovations that I think need to be made in today's world.

Researcher: How do you work with emerging intermediaries such as playlist curators and marketing agencies?

Participant 7: Okay, this is a super question because I do this job. I'm trying to be a production company based on social media. The reason I do this is the artists' desire to be more visible. The way for an artist to be listened to right now is through being recognized. Or, you know, somehow by chance, having their music used in a TV series, in an advertisement. There's no other way, unfortunately. For example, I work with an artist. I shoot videos of this guy in the Black Sea region. Afterwards, I make him tell the stories of his songs and so on. Right now, for example, his views and listening have increased a lot. Unfortunately, the subject is no longer independent of Instagram, you know, Twitter, and TikTok. Digital marketing agencies that have substance, I haven't seen many, but I'm trying to fill the substance. Artists need to work with these intermediaries. But when artists work with these intermediaries, they also have to deviate from their own line. So this is not something every artist can do. Artists who can be included in show business can do this. For example, an indie music group

came to me recently. I'm thinking about what I can do for them, but it's very limited. I mean, it's really difficult; the things I can do are very few. Some genres provide great material for social media, and it becomes much easier for them to work with digital marketing agencies. Otherwise, you get stuck.

Researcher: What do you think about the changes in listener habits in the streaming era?

Participant 7: The most important thing is that the concept of “mood” has entered our lives. Previously, this “mood” manipulation was done through radio. Like energetic music in the mornings, calmer in the afternoon. Right now, you can manipulate yourself. You say I need energetic music right now and you enter that playlist. I even sometimes see playlists of moods I've never experienced in my life. I say, “Oh, is there such a mood?” hahaha. For example, “calm but hopeful,” what is that? This mood issue is getting increasingly micro. Now there's even a mood term without being named through memes, for example, I had seen a playlist with a picture of İlkan from the TV series “Gibi” smoking a cigarette on the cover, and no other explanation was given underneath. At first, I was very against the “Arkada Çalsın (Background Music)” playlist. Then I said, “Well, I wonder if this is good?” When a friend comes to my house, I play it while chatting, and it really does play in the background, I don't understand what's playing, but it plays. It's like it supports me from behind. I don't really understand these issues, but how do the editors choose, what do they do. We had a meeting with Spotify officials recently. We had said there's no playlist oriented towards Black Sea songs, they said they were working on it. Then that playlist came out, but the inside is full of imitations of Black Sea songs only. Adorno came to my mind. I wish he had seen these times too hahaha. We're really living at the peak of this right now. Culture is being marketed at maximum efficiency today. Imitations receive more demand. Guitar is now entering into Black Sea music, the meaning of genres is changing. As we can see, capitalism changes the form of some things.

Researcher: Thank you for your contribution, see you later.

Participant 8 (Music Lawyer, Community Manager, Musician)

March 27, 2025, 16:00-17:00

Researcher: How do you think music creation processes have changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 8: Artists are making much shorter songs and releasing them as singles for consumption purposes. Apart from this, they try to design the chorus specifically for it to become a trend on TikTok or be used in memes during the composition process. Designs are also made to be able to get into specific playlists. In the New Music Friday example, there are situations like everyone releasing on Thursday night. It has seriously shaped production and distribution.

Researcher: What kind of compromises are made to ensure music performs well on streaming platforms?

Participant 8: There's an algorithmic imposition on uploading canvas and using the artist's own visual. They try to turn the artist into a packaged product with photos and styling. It needs to meet certain conditions to be saleable. I think it's absurd. Spotify uses these elements quite a lot. Visual and music relationship creates certain aura data.

Researcher: How do you think the proliferation of digital distribution platforms has affected relationships with record companies?

Participant 8: Music is much more accessible right now, this is a fact. But currently, record companies can't set a unit price, every stream has a fixed and almost the same income. This situation has been an obstacle for good music and budgeted productions. Because it's not needed, the money earned per stream is the same, and ultimately, these companies are profit-oriented companies. When record companies could hold price policy in their hands, more investments were made. Consequently, we see consumption, productions where less money and effort have been spent.

Researcher: Can you describe situations where platform rules or algorithms significantly affected creative or business decisions?

Participant 8: Many major companies are partners with Spotify. This leads to gatekeeping practices. For example, Kanye has an incident from way back. Kanye was on the cover of many relevant and irrelevant genres. For example, Mac computers come preloaded with U2 songs in Apple Music. This is an interesting marketing campaign.

Researcher: What kind of advantages or disadvantages does the intermediary role of distribution companies provide?

Participant 8: Those companies have direct connections with platform officials. They have direct meetings. I also worked at a distribution company for a while. When your music is used without permission, when fake accounts of yours are opened, or for example, when your Spotify for Artists account is stolen, it's harder for you to communicate with platforms. The distributor can establish direct contact in these situations. Apart from that, they directly deal with playlist editors. Your doing this as DIY doesn't mean much. Orchard is Sony's, Believe and Tunecore are also Universal's subsidiaries actually. Universal also recently bought Downtown, a large independent distributor company. Therefore, financially, these companies are also partners with Spotify as I said, when you distribute from a place where they are the distributor, you can also enter playlists much more easily. So commercially, I think Spotify has a mentality of "Since we're going to give money to someone anyway, let's give it to our partners." This is behind its constant loss show. Only recently has Spotify started to make a profit, apparently. Major companies already take a very large share of the income through copyright, phonogram, etc., and they also fund Spotify.

Researcher: How has the relationship between music industry actors changed in the streaming era?

Participant 8: Certain business models have directly disappeared. Right now, you go to the production company with almost the entire production finished, having done the mix-mastering and other expenses. A&Rs are also in a very strange position right now. The expansion is Artists and Repertoire. When you go as an artist, they should see you as a potential and offer you things, but now they've turned into people who just listen to your demos and say "I liked it, I didn't like it." And when you look, these people don't have music education either. The role of the arranger has also become interesting. Normally, the production company should direct you to an arranger. The arranger also gets a share from publishing. Right now, arrangers act like producers, and record companies act like distribution companies. Without getting involved in any creative process, production and record companies just make advance payments. What you need to do as an independent producer here, there's an uncertainty. Independent producers, when you look, are also taking advances from major companies. Let's consider that (names a big Indie publisher), they constantly send artists to Universal. What kind of independence is this? The world's largest independent companies are uniting under a global umbrella, being bought by majors. This is directly an unfair

competition practice. In places like Turkey, these situations are experienced even more intensely. Concepts are losing their meaning, only big fish are winning. I'm also a lawyer, I work with artists on contracts. I tell them, "look, if you sign this, there's nothing you can do afterwards, forget that song." Because such a process doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. They demand too many things from the artist. Perpetual royalties and such things create big problems for the artist.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on the changes in listener habits during this period?

Participant 8: Music has definitely become more accessible. Spotify's success lies in user experience. Previously, people would make playlists for their lovers with a lot of effort and care. Now, as soon as you upload two songs, a bunch of suggestions come underneath like "add this, add that." Personally, I don't open and listen to playlists because when I enter the "Turkish Rock" playlist, I see (names couple artists), the meaning of genres has been lost and emptied. This, for example, psychologically, music has a feature of bringing together. The feature of bringing together and creating an identity that defines you, which is inherent in music, is being destroyed. And when genres disappear, stereotypes emerge. The distribution and production companies, which have power, use this. Certain genres are combined with certain habits. People and listeners also accept this, interestingly. The constant promotion of brands like Rolex, Range, Balenciaga in rap songs, brand perception and prestige are being loaded onto genres. People who were viral at that time can make any music they want, they don't need a knowledge base. Producers also assign artists in their portfolio to genres as they please. These viral individuals enter the mindset of "what would get listened to if I did it." The fact that pop music, which holds a very large part of the capital, is not sufficiently criticized academically and socially is a very big problem in my opinion. We don't know what alternative is, what indie is. We see recommendations from famous people, "you can do it with an audio interface and a midi keyboard" and so on. Everyone in these undefined broad genres, which are not taken seriously by academia, moves as they please. There's no authority deciding whether this is music or not. There's no environment where you're properly criticized. The thing that decides whether you make good music or not is the numbers on the platform. They somehow go viral, and these people don't have a fame situation related to their music.

Researcher: What do you think about the effect of Spotify algorithms on music discovery?

Participant 8: I don't think users are aware of Spotify's features and use them consciously to consume music. When that's the case, the algorithm doesn't work properly. After training it well, the algorithm doesn't work badly. A very large percentage of users don't know how to use or train the algorithm. You need to use it very carefully. I listened to songs in throat singing style for a homework recently. Right now, my algorithm is riding a horse in Asia (laughs). When creating a playlist, the algorithm examines the names you use, and they analyze this data. You write "for sports listening," it memorizes that you do sports and suggests something. These are various gatekeeping practices, I think.

Researcher: How do you think the relationship between artists and listeners has changed during this period?

Participant 8: I think artists have become detached from society and deified. In today's technology, people can't even listen to themselves. Everyone listens to the mixed version from headphones. This situation also destroys the emotional transmission, which is one of the most important functions of music. Artists can no longer evoke emotions in society. Now when Taylor Swift or Britney Spears goes crazy, I'm not sad anymore. Aleyna Tilki went crazy, we weren't sad again. Because there's no connection between us. Her concerns and the messages she gives don't mean anything. People don't go to concerts. There's something called engagement rate. When this rate is ten percent, you're a king. It's a very funny situation. Imagine, I know a hundred people, but only ten people respond to my messages and calls. Then why do these people exist? The general managers of both Sony and Universal are from finance backgrounds. I also spoke with an other big corporation, they transferred their Head of Legal from a bank in some other country. They think we give credit and make money from music. They don't actually care about music. I think everyone needs to unite. People should come together, criticize things, and change them.

Participant 9 (Musician, Sound Engineer, Manager)

March 18, 2025, 14:00-15:00

Researcher: How do you think music creation processes have changed to meet the requirements of streaming platforms?

Participant 9: Streaming platforms highlight any kind of music that can be consumed quickly and attracts the attention of young people. There's this thing called a banner, you know, the opening page. They gather artists and music content that serve their purposes there. This time, everyone who wants to be featured there tends to make that music. For example, “trap” from a few years ago. Like LABEL C5 who made that HAVHAV track, everyone tries to make it because those guys are always on the banner. Or if you look at “New Music Friday,” that playlist also guides how people produce music, of course.

Researcher: How do you think these situations you mentioned change artists' release strategies?

Participant 9: I think artists read other platforms like Instagram, TikTok very well too. They profile the young audience on these platforms, figure out what that profile is interested in, and arrange their catalogs accordingly. Because Spotify or Apple Music don't have an environment where they can influence the music you make. They use pre-influenced templates and try their products. Based on the results of what they try, they act according to the data from all platforms working together. Meta especially has a lot of data. This data can be sold commercially anyway. I think they manage this process this way.

Researcher: Have you had a chance to observe how the proliferation of digital distribution platforms has changed artists' relationships with record companies?

Participant 9: Yeah, of course I did, it happened like this. In the past, I couldn't publish my track without a producer or distributor. But now you can put your tracks on all platforms by paying very small service fees through platforms like “CD-Baby” or whatever. This has liberated the artist. When this first came out 8-10 years ago, it was a bad thing for the artist. Because the artist had no advertising tools, okay? Production and distribution companies had such tools. But as roles changed over time, when the producer and distributor couldn't use today's advertising and content presentation tools well, individuals who could handle those things rose on their own. I mean, I'm sure many of us would use Facebook and Instagram better and more efficiently than Warner Music or Universal Turkey. The way of promotion and marketing has changed a lot, okay? I mean, have you ever seen a music listener among your friends who says “I follow Universal Music's accounts”? They always follow the

artist. Now, as the artist has also removed that production company in between and can reach their audience directly, it has become something that's also liked by people. I no longer think the function of what we call producer and distributor remains much. I mean, the producer used to be the person who spent money on the album or content. Now producers want the artist to spend money on the content. "You give us 50 thousand liras, we'll make this album for you," they say, and the person says, "I can do it myself if I have 50 thousand liras." Producers who couldn't adapt to this have ruined themselves.

Researcher: Well, do you think it still benefits a more alternative music-making artist to be independent from producers? Did this situation also benefit artists who make more different music, which doesn't conform to social media trends or couldn't be featured on banners?

Participant 9: There's a problem there. When you release a track from a mainstream producer or distributor, they don't take you into their main catalogs. They all have subcatalogs, okay? They have varieties of catalogs like local, global, global ethnic. Have you ever seen "Hedonutopia" on a banner, for example? I haven't. Because the production company or distribution company hasn't coded it as mainstream. It has coded it as "This is not a project with many listeners." So it doesn't make that investment in it either, I mean, the advertising opportunities offered to "mainstream" projects aren't offered to those projects.

Researcher: How much control do you think artists have in the process until their music enters the streaming ecosystem?

Participant 9: This varies according to everyone's conditions and situation. For example, there are some artists who have prepared the lyrics of the song and tell their third-party companions around them, "take this, you do it, call me for the vocal recording later." There are some who want to be very involved in this process. Neither is wrong or right. For example, let me give you a very interesting example. Low-budget groups or artists generally want to work with good names in the songwriting process. For example, the person does all the music in DAW. But they say, "let the mix mastering be good for this job, let's work with x, y, z people, their system is good." They allocate the budget they wouldn't allocate to anything to those people. There, they can also encounter something like this. A complaint I heard recently: "Bro, we

had this mixed, we allocated our money to him, but because we're alternative artists, he didn't care about us at all and didn't respond properly to our revisions.” Here, beyond the person's control, the industry may also have a response or such behaviors towards these people. For example, the kids don't have money, they want a good job to come out. But they don't want this. You know, you go to a private hospital and pay for the best doctor, but the doctor says shut up for a minute, don't interfere, and doesn't say anything. And you get annoyed. This is like that. They're trying to get a service to make it good. But they don't get enough attention from the side they're getting the service from if they reach someone in a certain class. They also have such a problem.

Researcher: I understand. It seems that the platform dynamics' “discriminatory” actions towards certain music genres have also infected powerful individuals within the industry.

Participant 9: Of course. Because the person in the industry, for example an arranger, says, “do I have to deal with these now?” Arrangers have other bullying. “Well, this came out, publish this,” they say. The artist says, “we don't want to publish this in this way. Send us our current tracks, we'll make our own edits.” The arranger doesn't give that either, for example. Then the money the artist spent goes down the drain. Then they get upset, “I won't work with anyone,” they say. Then the artist can't produce good music this time. Sometimes they even quit music after these events.

Researcher: How do you think artists or other people in the industry balance artistic vision and platform optimization?

Participant 9: There are those who try to do this. Sometimes there are those who are lucky and their pieces “walk” and somehow achieve good or bad popularity. There's also this situation here, one of the deficiencies in the music production scene in Turkey is this. Most of the young generation actually enters this business without knowing exactly what they want. They try to bend and conform to the “needs” of the industry before they can define their own desires and mature their own music. That's why you can't hear characteristic music that has settled in anyone. Everyone wants to do something close to what's in the “Top 10.” Maybe they enter the industry in a very idealistic way, but then you look and they've started saying, “well, I'm doing it this way, but which playlists will this enter? How many listens will it get? Should I make it a bit more like so-and-so's?” When they start this, they bring out certain “sounds”

again. Human psychology also comes into play here. People want to be liked and reach others. If the market's taste is directed towards something, you psychologically drift towards it, because you want to be seen, okay? That's a stage. Someone who doesn't want to be seen and doesn't have business with anyone makes and puts it regardless of that. Or they don't put their work on the platform at all, they press it on a CD and sell CDs. So it's like mandatory, actually it's not mandatory either, but human psychology inevitably bends there. And the artist's musical attitude is not settled. You can tell it's not settled very well because everyone makes the same music, they all resemble each other very much.

Researcher: What do you think about how Spotify's algorithms introduce and distribute music?

Participant 9: There are problems with Spotify algorithms. I use Spotify a lot. Spotify has been my music listening platform since the day it came out. I have very extensive playlists that I've created over the years. Its algorithm used to work very well in the past. But Spotify can no longer, how should I say, properly operate its tools that would enable us to discover something new. For example, about a year ago, a new feature came, okay? It gives you recommendations within your playlist. There's a feature called "*Smart Mix*." I turn on "*shuffle*" and "*Smart Mix*." "*Shuffle*" is already in a disastrous state. It's not a real "*shuffle*." It always plays the songs I listen to most in the same playlist. There are 500 tracks in the playlist, but the same 15 tracks keep playing. It throws in a few different ones occasionally, then returns to that flow. So the algorithm has gone haywire. The second point is this. This "*Smart Mix*" they talk about, the system that should offer you new things in your playlist based on your likes, also works very poorly. It offers you the same people from within your playlist again. There's "*Prodigy*" in it, 3 of them, and it recommends "*Prodigy*" to me again. Or it offers something very, very similar to it. There's a blockage in the algorithm. Apart from that, let me talk about other tools. For example, New Music Friday Turkey. I think it's very poor content. It's a very global playlist. And because it's something that fits that mainstream example, it doesn't appeal to me at all. Of course, nice things come out occasionally, too. For example, there's also a vicious cycle like this. Do you know Spotify's "*Arkada Çalsın (Background Music)*" playlist? The playlist that made me love Spotify. There are tracks in it that haven't changed for 5 years. When you open this playlist, your first track will come out differently, mine will come out differently.

It doesn't offer any freshness there, it changes according to the person. This also narrows it down more and more. Another example, one of my own tracks has been sitting on the "Emotional Electronic" list for 5 years. One also wonders, "Don't new tracks ever come in?"

Researcher: How has the relationship between other music industry actors, such as record and distribution company employees and managers, artists, changed in the streaming era?

Participant 9: Now, if we were record company directors today, if we were the head of one of the three major labels or distributors in Turkey, of course, music would be distributed very differently. Commercially, we might not be able to lead the companies to success, but it would be distributed differently. They give annual budgets to large global companies that have branches in Turkey. It says, "I'm giving you a budget of 100 million for advertising and distribution in Turkey." This includes TikTok advertising, whatever advertising, banner cost somewhere, or participating in a radio program, etc. Production companies distribute this money with collusion. By collusion, I mean, all of the advertising companies they work with are most likely companies they're somehow related to. First of all, this money already goes to the companies of acquaintances. Of course, there must be a dark side to this business. The crises that have emerged about record companies in the last 10 years have always stemmed from these, the heads of directors have always gone because of this. This is one level, and there's also the relationship of record companies with artists. There's such a deal there. Everyone tries to show their global supervisor that they're presenting the best catalog in their own country. For example, now I'm whatever manager. And you're a very popular artist. I take you into my structure for a good amount of money. Because we collect the revenues, the artist is a revenue pool. When you gather 50 artists with very good listenings, especially when you add them to your structure with their productions and editions, when you have 100 artists who have very good listenings, with 1.5-2 million listenings each month, it means 200 million listenings are passing through your label each month. And this means that Spotify first gives the money to the distributor, and then the distributor distributes it to the artist after doing its own accounting, cutting, and trimming. If they just operate that money for even a month in between, half the salaries already come out, you understand? That's why record companies and CEOs, A&Rs, the people you look at and say, "What kind of

artists are these? What do they see in them?” the reason they spin around such people is that when they gather 50 of them, they collect it from Spotify, for example. You think about those monies. The story is a bit like this. I went to a big event recently. Everyone's there, all the producers. Warner's producer is also there. There are two young kids at her table, I've never seen in my life. I said, who are these? They said, these are Warner's new artists. They were spinning around the kids. They are sitting with them at the main table too. But (names a known famous artist) is sitting in the back in a remote corner, for example. The real artist is actually her. I look at those kids' music. Well, it's not bad, but there must be some other interest, you understand? There are a lot of deals. They're trying to catch a Rising Star and present it to the global. They want to say, “Look, we've caught a 'Rising Star.'” They want to say, “We've brought it from 100 thousand listenings to 10 million listenings, we've increased the revenue.” Because listening numbers mean revenue.

Researcher: What do you think about Spotify's royalty payments?

Participant 9: Actually, I don't know exactly what royalty payments are made, who gets how much. But I think people are being cruel to Spotify. Spotify is already a system established to generate income. Of course, it will generate income, there's nothing wrong with that. With the emergence of MP3, everything went into this (points to his phone). Since you can't insert the CD into this now. Or because you can't carry 10 CDs, this technology offered is an amazing thing. And that it's streaming, the spread of the internet, this is an amazing thing. The disadvantage here is this. If we sold this as an album. Let's say we get 50 liras from one sale. I haven't bought a CD for 20 years, by the way. If I sell 1 million, I earn 50 million. But the problem is, there's no market. You would sell the CD to Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, or Antalya. But how will you sell it to Eastern Anatolia? People don't have electricity in their homes. Do you know, for example, that the cassette filling system still continues in Diyarbakır, Tunceli. Spotify, by bringing this technology, has also included people who have never bought a music CD in their lives into the system. It has made that person pay for music. My aunt has never gone and bought a CD or cassette in her life. She's borrowed from her friend or had it copied somewhere. But today, when she wants to listen to music, she goes to Spotify. It has given people the habit of paying. Look, this is a very important thing. Now, Spotify can't give money to everyone like selling CDs. Because there's a problem like this. Let's record a silly sound now, put it on Spotify with a production and

distribution company. When that gets listened to there, Spotify will give us money. Actually, this environment is also very susceptible to manipulation, of course. I think the biggest thing Spotify has done is open an incredible market to independent artists. If the throne of large global production companies in Turkey or the world is now shaking and an opportunity has also arisen for independent artists, the reason for this is Spotify.

Researcher: Well, can independent artists live this way, earn a monthly income, and sustain their lives?

Participant 9: To achieve that, there are some standards. This was the case in the cassette and CD era, too. Again, those who had money, who had advertising posters made, who fed the money to TV channels and had their clips played, their cassettes and CDs would sell. Actually, the formula is the same, but the texture is different. The same system continues. But due to circulation and technology, the business has become much cheaper. Everyone can do it. Now, I can somehow upload my own track to platforms and advertise on TikTok with a weekly cost of 200 liras. This can somehow reach 500,000 people and get interaction. These platforms have brought this. Because they've cheapened the market. The guy tells you, "Brother, work." To catch the right flow, you don't need to spend money, look. You put the right music on TikTok. Your music fits a video there. Isn't that true for more than half of the rapper phenomena we're listening to now? How was it in the past, do you know? Let me tell you about 20 years ago. Underground kids we loved would make albums helter-skelter. I did too. We would print the inner covers ourselves at the shop and attach them ourselves. We would sell them at the venue where we performed. Of course, that had another romantic situation, it was very nice, but at the end of the day, we couldn't sell more than 20 CDs at one concert. So you were limited to the 100 people who came to Peyote. But now, I can share a story from my Instagram, buy advertising, and reach 500 thousand people.

Researcher: How do you think the "playlist culture" that came with streaming affected the dynamics?

Participant 9: Actually, it was good at first. It was offering very new things. Now I've discovered a new playlist. It's called "Electronica Romantica." I said let me look, I was curious. The inside turned out to be full of trip-hop, for example. When you hear the

word *romantica*, you think maybe something else will come. But it didn't turn out like that. Global production companies might be managing what we should listen to and what we should be familiar with through Spotify. Now I can't get out of the guy's vicious cycle at all. Recommend something else to me, brother. I wonder, is it trying to engrave that in my ear through Spotify? As it keeps directing you there, it becomes your normal. You say, "Yes, I like this," and you continue like that. You're directed to this through them. I also have this thought. It's as if production companies go to Spotify and say, "Brother, you always highlight these artists of ours. Because they stand out a lot, they'll appear a lot in your income table, and you'll give me a lot of money because of them. But I'll somehow return it to you under the table. You just keep my artists in the pool." This is also something I suspect might be happening. Spotify also pays royalties. To receive those royalties from professional associations, you need to become a principal member by having a certain listenership. I have it, but because my tracks have 15-20 thousand listening, nothing comes to me.

Participant 10 (Alternative Musician)

April 14, 2025, 20:00-21:00

Researcher: How have your music creation processes changed to meet platform requirements?

Participant 10: Before, I was trying to keep up. The algorithm changed like this, it changed like that, I was getting caught up in these things a lot. What's on the agenda, how can I make it similar, what do I need to do, I was thinking from such a place. But at the point I've reached now, I've made the decision not to do any of these things and to stay away from all of them and not to be in this system.

Researcher: How have artists adapted their release strategies within Spotify's ecosystem?

Participant 10: From what I've seen, they're trying to constantly release songs, to constantly stay active. Especially right now, the thing that catches my attention the most is that people have stopped making albums. People have turned towards various collaborations to be able to get into lists. Humans aren't creatures that can constantly produce things in such a continuous way, this constant need to be active and produce fills artists' minds and time a lot. People can't perform concerts and are constantly concerned with producing content. An artist makes a song to be published on a digital

platform, but most of the time they don't think about its live performance. Now, the elements within the pieces don't have a counterpart in live instruments. The sound in the concert becomes very different from the digital platform, and the energy changes. Maybe people can't capture what they hear on platforms when they come to the concert, I don't know. Because a sound is created on platforms and everything proceeds through digital, the feeling in the concert is different.

Researcher: What kind of compromises do artists make to ensure they perform well on streaming platforms?

Participant 10: The durations have come to a certain standard. They've shortened. Now it's become a joke subject, like a 5-song album, 12 minutes, there are such funny durations. The rules are like this, and everyone does it this way. When all the songs they listen to are also like this, they think this is probably the right way to do this business. Maybe if you left that person to their own devices and didn't impose any restrictions, their music would go in a completely different direction, but now production has become more standardized. Even the instruments used and sound choices are starting to resemble each other. It's like nothing new is being produced. A song becomes very popular and its synth sounds start being used everywhere, or similar lyrics are written. In the old days, you would buy an album, sit down and actively listen to it. There wasn't such easy access. Well, of course, it's nice to be able to find everything so easily in a place like Spotify, but this time the whole thing has evolved into something like social media. It's become content production rather than music. YouTubers have become singers, fans go to matches, record their chants and upload them, these go into viral lists. I don't think Spotify is a place about music anymore, it's another place that also has music in it. Right now, it's a platform used by artists and non-artists alike for various purposes to earn income. These must surely affect the algorithm as well.

Researcher: How have relationships with record companies changed with Spotify?

Participant 10: Most people try to publish independently using Orchard. But Orchard is a subsidiary of Sony Music. Sony Music and other big companies make such company acquisitions and agreements to earn income from independent artists as well. An artist who thinks they're independent is actually still publishing connected to a place and sharing their income. Big companies are thinking "let there be more

platforms, let more pieces be published, and let us earn income from all of them” right now. They know that the more content is produced, the more income they'll earn. Quality doesn't matter, as long as there's content. Just like YouTube, there's a system that prioritizes people spending a lot of time inside. Within Spotify, there's also a system where you can discover songs by swiping just like on TikTok. This is also a system that requires you to make choices to not lose people within 5-10 seconds.

Researcher: How much control do you think artists have in the streaming ecosystem?

Participant 10: This situation affects alternative artists more. They put in a lot of effort to be able to do things. Recently, a musician I worked with had their song published and followed the song's data from the Spotify for Artists application. It made a very quick rise up to a point, then the graph immediately flattened. Probably it entered a list and when it came out of that list, it lost its interaction. Or for example, when a song is published in a TV series, interaction increases and then suddenly stops. Artists put in a lot of effort to push interaction. It's like songs don't tell a story anymore, I'm not sure what songs are for now.

Researcher: How do you think artists balance artistic vision with platform optimization?

Participant 10: They're constantly trying new things and testing the algorithm. They measure their effects with the trial and error method.

Researcher: What do you think about the intermediary role of distribution companies?

Participant 10: Now you can very easily go somewhere and publish music without any filter. This has greatly affected the quality of music. There isn't even a proper mix-mastering. Songs are being published in a quality that you would normally call a demo. These firms are in a completely commercial place.

Researcher: What do you think about Spotify algorithms' song recommendations?

Participant 10: I don't like it because when I make a list and listen to it for a week, we come to a point where my whole life is supposedly that. I can't find anything else. It kind of constricts me, I feel. Everything is inside it, but because it responds to my movements from there, it restricts and narrows. Yes, I might have listened to that list, those songs for a month, but a month later I might listen to something completely

different too. I have difficulty discovering new things, I need to spend a lot of time inside. It doesn't provide me with any convenience.

Researcher: How have the relationships between music industry actors changed in the streaming era?

Participant 10: Artists have started to lean towards collaboration. Big artists have started giving a lot of songs to others. In this way, a need to gain visibility has also emerged. A bit of a grouping situation and a spinning things around among themselves has developed. This developed as a necessity, it wasn't for the purpose of helping each other. Regarding social media, artists have a mandatory concern like "I need to produce TikTok content." All social media tools are in interaction with each other, they don't work independently. Spotify is also part of this wheel.

Researcher: What do you think about the platform economy?

Participant 10: The money Spotify pays is at a very ridiculous level. How can the value of such a frequently listened to song be so little? Therefore, those numbers don't seem like logical data to me. I can't fully understand what they signify.

Researcher: What kind of changes do you think have occurred in listener habits during this period?

Participant 10: If we think about it, things are progressing in the digital world, the production of things is very fast, but in the concert world and on stage, there aren't such big and fast changes, there can't be. The number of people who listen to music for discovery has decreased a lot. This is also among the factors affecting the decreasing interest in concerts, I think. Nobody looks at what's on alternative stages today, what's not. It seems very strange to me that in a city where millions of people live, considerable alternative artists are stuck at 200-300 tickets.

Researcher: What do you think about playlist culture?

Participant 10: Some people do this like a profession, gain followers, and sell places there. There's also a monopolization there. Everything has become intertwined now, that's why I'm increasingly distancing myself. There's so much music, thousands are added to the lists every day, but on the other hand, you can't actually get an answer to "what's new, what can I discover?" People who get onto those lists can do so according

to certain criteria or financial means. I don't think Spotify gives a realistic appearance or that it's a real place.

Researcher: What new skills do you think artists have developed to exist in the digital music ecosystem?

Participant 10: In the past, someone who sang songs just sang songs. Now they need to do a lot of things besides that. Maybe they do their own booking, think about their visual world, try to learn production. They can't fully give their energy to their main job, it also affects the quality of their performance. Because it would cost, they can't form a team, they have to do everything themselves. Right now, they're removing drummers and bassists from bands, everyone is forced to try to do things in groups of three. I guess people will start just inputting the same backing track from Spotify into the system and just doing vocals, thinking "at least it will resemble the recording," they'll be forced to think like that, I don't know. The situation doesn't look very bright.

Participant 11 (Alternative musician)

April 8, 2025, 14:00-15:00

Researcher: Do you think music creation processes have undergone some changes to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 11: Well, Instagram and TikTok also really messed up the story. The "story" culture there, for example. People started looking for 10-15 second music for 10-15 second videos there. You know, shorter, more generic, woof-woof-woof like. In fact, I think it created an effect 5-10 times bigger than what Spotify created on its own. But of course, song forms have shortened. This had been declining since the 80s, 90s, but the average song duration had never dropped to 2 minutes. It's even dropped to 1:40, 1:50 now, I guess. I mean, there's absolutely no intro. Like, the intro has to be a maximum of 10 seconds. Spotify's algorithm puts so much music in front of the listener. Nobody has patience left either. It takes 30 seconds for a stream to count. So you need to keep the listener inside for 30 seconds. If you make a 40-second intro, 95% of your listeners will leave anyway. Due to the speed of life, song durations have dropped. Songs don't have a bridge or C section anymore. You know, the verse is calm, the chorus is a bit tense, later the chord progression changes a bit, then there's preparation for the second chorus. There's no such thing anymore, it's impossible. Because you don't want to take the song over 2 minutes in this case, there won't be an

intro, there won't be an outro. Or if there will be, it will be five-second intros, outros now.

Researcher: What kind of compromises do you think artists make to ensure their music performs well on streaming platforms?

Participant 11: A friend of mine recently said, “when I wake up in the morning, if the vocal melody of the song I wrote yesterday doesn't stay in my mind, I delete the song.” You say it should be “catchy,” but does every song have to be “catchy”? I mean, shouldn't one also have an emotional depth, a melodic distinctiveness, but no. If you want to play by the rules, you act like this. And those who act like this can reach millions of monthly listeners, cracking. But if you're like me, like in my solo project, “I won't look at these, this depth is enough for me, it doesn't need to be catchy,” then your monthly listeners stay at around 700 people. I also hear things from other friends who have much-listened-to projects. Like, they say let's not mess too much with seventh chords, major seventh, ninth chords, diminished etc., let's play easier-to-digest major minor and be done with it.

Researcher: How much control do you think an artist has in the process until their music enters the streaming ecosystem?

Participant 11: This is a bit open-ended. For example, if we asked (names an artist), she would say 100% in your hands. I mean, when you play the whole game by the rules, it's like this. But there are also those who rebel on the contrary. There are many who act with a victim psychology. Especially in the alternative world. There are those who say, “I did what I was going to do, but I'm being crushed under the algorithm.” I'm a bit more in the middle. I think neither that the algorithm will crush you very much, nor that this is completely in your hands. But it is in Instagram's hands, for example. If your Instagram is strong, bro, you don't even need to be a singer or musician. If someone wants to be successful, they don't need to know like, what chord comes after A minor, chord harmonization, whatever. Instead, if they think about how to get more followers on Instagram, it's more profitable.

Researcher: Has there been a situation where platform dynamics significantly affected your creative or business decisions?

Participant 11: There are so many, yeah. Of course, someone who says they have no concern about getting streams is different. They just do it and release it. Bro, which

one should I tell you? For example, there are things like this, I get more and more irritated as I hear these, but the rule is like this. There are even situations where when you use certain words in the song title, it algorithmically pushes you forward with a 20-30% probability. After hearing things like this, when you're going to name your song "water," you name it "water is very nice come here" hahaha. There are different kinds of data like this. For example, songs that end with a question mark or exclamation mark are listened to more, things like that. So, from the song title to sound design, from song structure to the clip you'll shoot, this situation affects everything about you. Because everyone wants to be listened to at some point. It must have affected even my guitar partitions when writing, imagine. For example, I have a song. I wouldn't have wanted to start it directly with the chorus, bro, I would have wanted to make an instrumental introduction. But because it's like "I need to immediately draw people into the song, I shouldn't let anyone escape, start directly with the chorus" and so on. I started that song with the chorus, reluctantly. Now that I think about it, I've tried not to compromise too much. That's why it wasn't listened to anyway. I used to think a lot about song durations. You know, I would always try to reduce it to two or three minutes, not to exceed three. I remember this, every time I finished a song, I would be crazy happy like, "Ooo, 3.5 minutes, this song turned out really good!" I was able to keep it short, it didn't go up to 4 minutes, I used to think of this as an achievement.

Researcher: Interesting point. It seems people start to internalize these decisions as if they were their own wishes.

Participant 11: Yes, yes, of course. We immediately internalize them. Like, "I've been a musician for 25 years and I've been feeling this way for 20 years anyway," we immediately evolved there. It's an interesting, ridiculous environment. That's why I've withdrawn, because of all these absurdities. We're talking like this now, but at that time, I had come to the point where I was about to lose my mental health, literally.

Researcher: How has the relationship between other music industry actors - such as record and distribution company employees and managers, artists - with each other changed in the streaming era?

Participant 11: These are very long topics. I could sit and talk about these for hours. The simplest thing, for example, just a few months ago, I heard something somewhere.

Spotify doesn't want the big labels, you know, Sony, Universal, to grow even bigger, so it adds more independent releases to editorial lists. And record companies, I assure you, none of them know what to do right now. Come, let's go to any of their meetings. Nobody knows what strategy to follow. In the old days, it was very clear, bro. You would finish your clip, finish the song, send it to radios and TVs. Right now, social media has changed all dynamics so much. When they're going to sign with an artist, they definitely look at Instagram followers now. It's not like 500 followers but the music is very good. By the way, there are places that decide based on stream numbers too, for example, to arrange concerts. Those things aren't clear either, someone with millions of streams might not be able to fill the stage, there are very interesting situations. Also, I can't understand how people have internalized these things so quickly, turned to the popular. Bro, how could a 55-60 year old taxi driver who normally listens to Müslüm Gürses suddenly adapt to woof woof woof woof within months, not even years. I'm in shock just watching.

Researcher: How do you think the “playlist culture” that came with streaming affected dynamics?

Participant 11: For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, in 2021, when I first made my releases, editorial lists would appear the same way to everyone. But they turned that into an algorithm later too. One of my songs had entered the “Turkish Acoustic” list. It had 500,000 followers, actually let me check how many it was, (looks to the playlist on his phone) it was 539,000. I was very happy, thinking I would get a lot of streaming. But from that list, I was getting two streams a day. Because the list is now algorithmic, Spotify didn't show my song to anyone, apparently. And I'm happy that my song has entered a big list. Sometimes no streams would come, sometimes 1, sometimes 3, my nerves would jump when I saw this. It's incredible, at least don't make that algorithmic, right? I mean, you call it editorial, at least remove that phrase.

Researcher: What do you think about the effect of algorithms on music discovery?

Participant 11: I'm older now and I notice that I don't want to discover as much as before. I might have spoken very differently at 20. But when you look at it, logically, the system seems very innocent and perfect. You know, you listen, like what you listen to, and I'll constantly bring those to you. By the way, it really helps you discover new

things. Because after all, Discovery Weekly doesn't bring Alişan to me, it brings Men I Trust.

Researcher: Yes, that's true. But the interesting point here for me is that you'll never be able to reach genres that you might like but don't even know exist. Or I wonder what would be different if you didn't delegate the song discovery task to an algorithm. We used to do this in the past.

Participant 11: It definitely has that aspect too. There's Daily Mix, forget about it, it puts a different soup from the same ingredients in front of you. There's only Discover Weekly, which it calls discovery. And there, I don't think at all that it would put something that's listened to very little, like, as you said, New Jazz or Doom Metal, in front of me. In terms of discovery, it can't even be compared to “*Last FM*” that we used to use. There was pure real discovery there. Here, you don't even know what's involved, it says Discover Weekly to you, maybe it puts what it wants to “push” in Discover Weekly, you know?

Researcher: Alright. How do you think the relationship between artists and listeners has changed in the digital age?

Participant 11: This was Spotify's biggest evil, I think. We didn't know this much about how popular someone was. In the 80s and 90s, there was “Tarkan (a famous Turkish singer) sold 2 million cassettes, broke records” in the news. But that remained as a detail you saw in the main news in a country and said “Okay, yeah” and moved on. Now, for every artist you go into, underneath it's monthly listeners, trends, whatever. We see the listening numbers of each song down to its unit, like how many million, how many thousand, how many hundred, how many tens, and two for example. Just for this reason, I used Apple Music for about a year. No matter how much you isolate yourself, after all, we're human. You immediately form a value judgment. You immediately say, “Wow, the song has been listened to 3 million times, let me check it out.” Or like, you've never listened to it before, you're going to listen for the first time, it's been listened to 7 thousand times, even before opening the song, you start listening with a kind of “hmm.” Spotify has pushed people into such ridiculous things. Like I said, we knew how many cassettes, CDs someone sold, yes, but this has brought the issue to a completely different place now. Numbers everywhere, always number, number, number... It really damages value perceptions.

This is an incredibly terrible thing for a “newcomer” artist. There's a song, bro, you see 5 million. The song or the group has a troll name, and you just open it up and listen to it out of curiosity like “What has this been played 5 million times for?” and you add a stream to it. You also add a listener to its monthly listeners. By the way, I don't want to devalue the general listener this much either. Because it wasn't like that. In a world where listeners made artists popular, “Şebnem Ferah” or “Duman”, and “Mor ve Ötesi” (known Turkish musical projects), couldn't have been widespread. There was selection back then. I don't know if that selection disappeared, or if there are bots involved. I don't know, those songs, those poor quality “mixes”... I don't like conspiracies much, but you know... Spotify might be growing or shrinking any genre it wants, that could be the case, too. What kind of generation do you want to raise, you know? Music touches on too many things.

Researcher: What new skills do you think artists needed to develop to exist in the digital music ecosystem?

Participant 11: You need to be familiar with recording program technologies now, because everyone can open on a computer and make music at home. Otherwise, you fall behind. You'll shoot the clip yourself, take the photos too. You also have to do the PR. Like I said, everyone's head is very confused, labels don't know what to do either, and it falls to you. Having followers on Instagram, having popularity is a “game changer” right now. You're like a bomb ready to explode directly in that case, I mean, make a song and just watch the algorithm, sitting back.

Researcher: Thank you.

Participant 12 (Manager, Music Agency Employee, Mentor)

April 25, 2025, 12:00-13:00

Researcher: How have music creation processes changed to meet streaming platform requirements?

Participant 12: First of all, artists now think they need to produce a lot. They think they need to constantly release something new every month, every week to be highlighted more by services. This reduces both the production process and the quality of the production process. On Spotify, people mostly discover through playlists. Since

listeners listen to songs and discover from personalized accounts on playlists, there's a race to grab attention from the first seconds on the production side. This approach has also affected song durations. If your song is long, you can't have listeners listening to atmospheric sounds for minutes like in Pink Floyd, these are very risky now. If you're not producing in the classical music or electronic music side, generally the possibility of long songs entering lists is lower. As artists see themselves as "content creators," there are changes like the narrowing and lower quality of production processes. Economically, there's also no scenario where you can immediately get your money from direct sales, like CDs and records. Now the song first needs to be listened to for a certain period and number of times. You also can't withdraw your revenues without filling a certain balance quota, it's a long process. Since artists can't earn income in the short term, different problems arise.

Researcher: What have you observed specifically regarding release strategies?

Participant 12: There have been very big changes in the music industry period by period, and people have always thought "the industry is finished." In the old days, when pianos started entering homes, classical artists were worried too. But he says, "Afterwards, interest in music increased more. Because actually, music entered more homes. Then jukeboxes came, then CDs came, and so on. Right now, we're at such a threshold period with streaming services. But right now, the industry is pulling itself together, industry revenues are increasing more and more. If the process is managed well, the industry can be positively affected by these developments and continue on its way. But of course, that transition process is shaped according to the expectations of the actors mentioned, which causes the entire production and consumption setup to change and the industry to struggle during the process. Now it's become like you need to tell your production correctly to those channels so they can bring you together with listeners. Normally, you could say, "Oh, I was listened to a lot, I sold a lot of CDs." The listener would enter the shop and buy your CD. But right now, the market is very wide, to be visible, you need to find your listeners in the current communication tools. Previously, there were music programs, newspapers, magazines, culture and art supplements. Stages would open at festivals. There were organic tools you could use when planning your own roll-out process. These days, artists are experiencing more of a situation of trying to attract the service's attention to become more popular. There are certain formulas and they need to be applied.

Researcher: What do you think artists do to ensure their music performs well on streaming platforms?

Participant 12: Having a relationship with digital services and working with the right distributor is necessary to convey the right information to them. In the example of Ezhel, he sent his album into the universe independently with DistroKid, and he's one of the most listened to musicians in Turkey right now. But this is a one-in-a-million thing. Right now, your record label, your logistics, your distribution are all concentrated in the digital distributor. Can they manage the catalog correctly, is there a team behind you, how much money do they invest in technique, infrastructure, interface, license agreements, how many places do they forward information to, can they solve problems, do they have meetings with service providers, you need to research these details extensively. Apart from these, timeline is also very important. So much content is uploaded to services. Let's say 30% use the pitching tool. Editors select from thousands of songs, and you're writhing saying “pick me, pick me.” Everyone has now learned to upload their release a month in advance and forward the information. You need to understand what's expected from you, what's expected in those processes, and provide information and uploads accordingly. The issue doesn't just pass through the service. You need to analyze what kind of content your listeners want from your social media channels with a team and develop these aspects as well. Not “let the service give me a chance, let me be on a list,” but a strategy of “let the service notice me” needs to be implemented as well. So, you need to carry all these together. The visual side is now much more important. Right now, the places where musicians can meet people and grab their attention are generally Instagram and TikTok.

Researcher: How have relationships with record companies changed during this period?

Participant 12: This has both good and bad sides. First, artists have now realized they can be responsible for their own productions, and record companies have had to adapt to this. Kanye West published his entire contract line by line, Taylor Swift released the “Taylor's Version” album, for example, to regain her rights. Artists have started to form their own small record companies by coming together. The role of the record company is no longer like it used to be. We're at a point where you need to build your own team and your own crew. When you go to Avrupa Müzik and agree to pay a few

thousand liras without reading the contract and then say I can't get royalties, nobody takes you seriously. If your production is important, if it's valuable, then I need to give it that value. I know the stories of many artists like this. A song listened to by millions, but they took five thousand liras at the time and now can't make money from their production. Okay, there's definitely an unpleasant situation here, but did you turn and look at your contract, did you read it? This transition process has made people aware of this issue. In terms of independent music, for example, Orchard is Sony Music's, yes. But if you can make your own decisions, if you can manage your catalog, it's more to your advantage to use independent platforms carefully. At the end of the day, you become an independent musician because you make these decisions, you follow them, and you hold your catalog. I tell those who want to work with Sony to confirm their plans, to scrutinize whether they really need it. For example, if someone who wants to be in Sony's catalog has a short-term need for money and aims to duet with another artist from that catalog, it's a logical plan. But apart from that, they also need to not put themselves in a position where they give all their rights to Sony, make money in the short term, but can't earn any income afterwards, they need to think and calculate these well.

Researcher: How do you think artists balance artistic vision and platform optimization?

Participant 12: In any process that contains production, it's not possible to be without ego and comparison. So it's very normal for people to be influenced by what's popular. But the most important and most difficult thing for an artist to do is actually to try not to be influenced by these and find their own voice. Every person making music may not be able to say "friends, my new single is out, listen to it" every month because the algorithm wants it that way, or may not want to say it. The issue of platform optimization creates a pressure on musicians. Artists think they need to do certain things to reach people. When you find your own language, you stop being a content creator and become an artist. People will continue to do what's popular, it's a reality of today's industry. It's also very related to the genre you produce. You need to create a strategy by understanding how Spotify works and blending it with approaches that are right for you.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on the effect of Spotify's algorithms on music discovery?

Participant 12: We all know now how important algorithms and personalization are. But I think this blinds music discovery. I don't like it. I open noise-style things to sleep, and now in my “Discover Weekly” there are also birds chirping, chantings being done. It's a system closed to discovery. Pandora, for example, was very good in that regard. You open something, and the algorithm comes and says “let's recommend you a million things like this now.” It's a visionless logic. I'm a person who wants to discover completely different genres and artists, but algorithms can't give me this. One of the most listened to playlists on Spotify in Turkey is called “Play in the Background.” I think this is incredible data. It's become something opened for music to play in the background during this period.

Researcher: How has the relationship between music industry actors changed during this period?

Participant 12: I think it's more destructive now because we're all exposed to so many things. On the other hand, people can make international connections more easily. There's a network where communication can be established more easily, but I don't think it's being used correctly. Especially in our industry, I think you really need your own commune. There's no knowledge transfer and mentorship mentality in our industry. This is a big deficiency.

Researcher: What do you think about the new intermediaries that have emerged during this period, such as digital marketing agencies, playlist curators?

Participant 12: Some of these are completely fraudulent. That's why you should never work with any digital media agency or list curator without being very sure. You pay playlist curators with many followers to pitch your songs to them. Among them, there can also be those who do fake listening, fake clicking operations. I experienced similar problems with an artist through an organization like this. Not a list curator, but an application. The artist used this application without asking me. You buy clicks for your song in a counter logic. We suspected bot usage when the clicks depleted very quickly. You also can't detect how and with what system these clicks are made, after all, you can't go and demand an account. You can't get such data from Spotify. So here, you're just forced to trust what this application tells you. Even worse, let me tell you what happened to us. While there were names like Sezen Aksu, Nilüfer (known Turkish singers) in the similar artists section, after using this application, it completely

changed. It was filled with people with no listeners at all, but really no listeners, like Elif, Ayşe, random names. The entire Spotify algorithm got messed up. We struggled a lot with this, sent a bunch of emails to the distributor, here and there. When you make your song get listened to, the service's chance of noticing you also increases. That's why artists want to turn to these kinds of things. Artists don't have the time and budget to conduct a more effective organic PR. We couldn't get an answer from Spotify either, they can't give an answer beyond "the algorithm determines these." Spotify is a closed box on these issues, you know.

Researcher: What do you think about the changes in listener habits in the digital era? How has this situation affected artist practices?

Participant 12: Unfortunately, listeners have become lazy now. Listeners who trust the service, listen to what's suggested to them, who don't actively discover have emerged, I think. I think services have had a big impact on this. There's also the situation of constantly highlighting what's popular. And of course, there you need to examine many things together. For example, you enter an artist profile on Instagram. They have 10 million monthly listeners on Spotify, one of their songs has been listened to 100 million times. But nobody knows them, doesn't know who they are, can't sell tickets if they have a concert. I directly witnessed this at my previous workplace. They went viral on TikTok. Three of their songs were listened to a total of 300 million times. Only 2 tickets were sold at the event. Using music just for content or to adapt to trends is a strange thing. Everyone is trying to get used to this. This affects the industry in every area, it also greatly affects the live stage. It also causes another artist to look and say, "My God, this guy has been listened to 1 million times," and feel bad about their own work and themselves. I hope this situation improves in the long term.

Researcher: What are your thoughts on playlist culture?

Participant 12: I think this playlist culture is generally very toxic. Unfortunately, in any release process, the success criterion for record companies, musicians, or us as other parts of this industry has become getting onto a playlist. This is also very toxic for the production side. Success should definitely not be thought of in this axis. But you do think about it. Because playlists give a chance to reach more people in a short time. If we're really going to access music and do PR through playlists, then services need to be much, much more sensitive about this. Right now, I'm very disturbed by

these very generic playlists like “Turkish Coffee”, “Arkada Çalsın (Background Music)”, “Turkish Rock”, which have absolutely nothing to do with music discovery or valuing music, working entirely on easy consumability and being stuck in narrow genres. This is experienced much more intensely especially in our region. For example, in America or abroad, we can see much more value-oriented editorial playlists aimed at discovering different artists or different genres. By the way, I also hate this “World” genre or playlists. Why is everything except the West “World”? People who are more sensitive, who really understand music and music culture need to do this job. Unfortunately, these conditions don't exist in our region right now. I hope it improves.

Researcher: How do you think the relationship between artists and listeners has changed in the streaming era?

Participant 12: I think it hasn't changed that much. The artist needs to establish a relationship and tell a story. You need to give people the feeling of “I'm part of something” somehow. The relationship that needs to be established is the same, but how it will be done, which tools will be used has changed.

Researcher: What kind of new professional relationships do you think have emerged in this era?

Participant 12: The first thing I'll mention is the social media and digital marketing side. Then comes AI, I think.

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