

Surge of Streaming Services: Back to Square One for Artists

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

The surge of music streaming platforms has allowed them to brand their products as “all the ways people love enjoying music come together in one app” (Apple Music). On the surface, this statement is one that cannot be refuted; however, with a keen eye does one notice the that these platforms forget a group of people that ‘love enjoying music’ – and that is the artists themselves.

Branding themselves as the platforms that are moving needles for fans and artists has captured the love for streaming platforms for avid listeners and record labels but turns a blind eye to the artist, who while now having a larger reach still seem to struggle to reach a broader audience while foregoing larger paydays. As a result, while music streaming platforms are a new form of technology that essentially has brought life back into the music industry, simultaneously it happens to be drawing life out of the foundational people that are the engines of the industry.

This dichotomous relationship is truly not surface level, and quite often artists are drowned by the overwhelming labels and for the first time the streaming platforms themselves. To truly analyze the relationship and what are reactive measures, technological determinism is a mechanism that will aid in help identifying how the technology is the guiding force in this situation but we, as a society, have the ability and autonomy the make decisions regarding what the music streaming platform can potentially provide for all parties. Ultimately, this paper answers the following question: To what extent has the surge of streaming platforms crippled musicians financially and publicly?

Research Question and Methods

The relationship between streaming services and actors within the music network have led to the researching the extent that streaming platforms have disabled musicians financially and publicly. This research question is essential due to the magnifying glass it puts on the music streaming industry and highlights the improvements that need to be made for artists in the future. Moreover, identifying the ways in which streaming platforms and artists interact is important in building an equitable foundation for all stakeholders that gain to benefit from the surge of the streaming platforms. The question of the reparations faced by musicians in light of the increase of users of streaming platforms is evaluated using historical case studies and discourse analysis.

Historical case studies give the ability to gain a contextual understanding of the background of the problem as well as the ability to truly gather the facts of the streaming platforms in their popularity as well as the drawbacks they create. Through historical case studies, facts and figures include statistics about music industry revenue growth (Garcia, 2019), contribution of streaming services (Garcia, 2019), and the breakdown of artists financial gains (Luckerson, 2019). Historical case studies set the stage in drawing out the potential issue of greed and motive filling the minds of the streaming platform while exploiting the foundation artists. Moreover, this method helps establish where crossroads have been met in terms of bettering the process of streaming platforms but have come up short in their quest of improvement.

As an additional method, discourse analysis allows for a more focused and tailored approach in answering the research question at hand. Discourse analysis offers a means to interpret the data and information of how streaming services are hindering artists through various

literature reviews and interviews among industry giants and the opposition as well (Luckerson, 2019). Simultaneously, this method provides the manner to interpret the benefits of the various approaches to better the model used by streaming platforms and provide the ability to demonstrate diverse positions that are given through narratives.

Overview of the Impact of Streaming on the Music Industry

Whether if artists sit on Billboard Music charts or as an independent bedroom songwriter, the new wave of artist entails oneself to promote their brand, music, and platform into streaming platforms. The breakthrough into ‘mainstream’ music for artists is through the leveraging of music streaming services and it has become a big part of what artists do in terms of marketing campaigns and making sure that people know they are accessible on these streaming platforms – not only is it crucial, it is a necessity (Garcia, 2019).

The tantalizing premise of streaming has been a success story in many ways. Strategy firm MIDia Research noted that since 2017, recorded music revenues ballooned to \$18.8 billion – within that, streaming accumulated 30% of the year-on-year growth and its revenue climbed to \$9.6 billion in what is coined the ‘engine room of growth’ (Garcia, 2019). The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) touted the fact that double-digit growth within the music industry was driven by the increased revenues from paid subscription services (Garcia, 2019). Streaming services are the only steadily revenue growth the music industry has incurred since the major bubble in the 2000’s and record labels and artists were taking advantage of the one spark the industry was provided.

The addition of streaming services provided the momentum for a dying industry. This success has been great for many artists who enjoyed increased label budgets, larger built-in audiences, and passive income. With the increase in revenue for major labels due to streaming

services, smaller artists signed to those labels can benefit from increased marketing. The more a label makes, the more it is able to invest into its roster of artists, giving those a chance who may not have had it otherwise. This also helps unknown artists who aren't signed to labels. They now have an opportunity to be discovered by PR reps who are funded by the additional resources the industry is enjoying. If the label wasn't doing as well, they would be forced to double down on the artists that are already making money instead of looking for new talent.

To truly garner a financial foundation from the music they create, artists cannot leave that risk to only being seen by a small audience. A large fan base is essential; however, with the time it requires to gather the support you need to be a full-time musician comes at an opportunity cost to artists who yearn for the lifestyle that the streaming services that provide the fix to the void. With the success of large streaming services like Spotify or YouTube, finding that audience could only take one viral song. Justin Bieber is an example of an unknown artist that found success because of the videos that he and his family posted on YouTube that quickly went viral. Without the large, built-in audiences those streaming platforms provide, musicians wouldn't be able to get nearly as much exposure using traditional methods of advertising and promoting.

With each song streamed, artists make fractions of a penny for their work. Although this isn't a large amount of money, once the song is published on Spotify the hard work is over. All future money generated from that song becomes purely passive income – which is why the streaming service model is quite decorative in their pitch to artists and record labels of kind. The more songs an artist has in their catalog, the more opportunities that artist has to make passive income and the more are they pushed by record label backing to gain the traction they might get. Physical CD sales could be expected to sell quickly when a new album was released, but sales would quickly decline until album sales were minimal. Now, artists have the chance to

continually make money from every individual song, without anyone needing to buy their music; leading to a resurgence for the music industry but loopholes to follow.

Technological Determinism and Streaming

This paper focuses on the question of the extent in which music streaming services has disabled artists in multiple facets from the framework of Technological Determinism.

Technological Determinism claims that the “development of technological artifacts and systems determined broad social changes” (Kline, 2015). Accessibility and ubiquity are aspects that have been the engine that powers music streaming in which one can access unlimited music for monthly subscriptions rather than buying a handful of songs for the same fiat cost. In the middle of this, proponents of Technological Determinism play a role, specifically Media Determinism, in which innovation was a byproduct of social changes.

The current climate surrounding Technological Determinism have shifted the discussion to a ‘softer’ approach. Soft Determinism alludes to the fact that “technology is the guiding force in our evolution but we have a chance to make decisions regarding the outcomes of a situation” (Goguen, 2004). This notion is particularly applicable to this research question in the means that streaming services are byproducts of our evolution; however, the effect it has on the artists financially and publicly are more reliant on the decisions that society can make.

The opposing side of Technological Determinism suggest that limits exist within the realm such as the lack of a solid explanation of how technological innovation works but rather is more of an explanation of how technologies are constructed. (Ganiu, 2014). Some other criticisms entail the determination of the technologies use and control by man as well as how technology is not always progressing and can have negative outcomes. As such, music streaming platforms are an example of the thin line between progression and negative outcomes.

While there is opposition, there are supporters of Technological Determinism demonstrating how social and cultural shifts have resulted from using technology as cited by historian Rosalind Williams. In addition, arguments by Sally Wyatt urges the important of Technological Determinism for the purpose of being used by social actors in certain situations.

Technological Determinism is the framework that provides the most in directly answering the research question – specifically, looking at the fact that while technology is not pushing social change, it can impact behavior and decisions and vice versa. This is demonstrative of streaming platforms being the technology that filled a void of accessibility, affordability, and ubiquity but also have society make decisions that more positively change the outcomes.

Analyzing Relationship Between Artists and Music Streaming Services

This paper offers an overview of the topic of music streaming services and their surge leading to a deprivation for artists in multiple facets. Artists have been struggling (much of that expedited by the pandemic) financially and publicly to make a living or gain traction in their industry. This was demonstrated by the use of the pro-rata model adopted by streaming services and requires a shift to a more user-centric model – one that allows listeners to pay the artists they actually listen to. This paper arrives at this answer by first exploring the deprivation financially through the analysis of the pro-rata model and then the erasing of the ‘middle-class’ of the music industry by the streaming services actions. Following this, the paper examines the user-centric model and the benefit it provides to all artists but mainly creating a more equitable platform in which listeners and fans are directly correlating their subscriptions to the artists they listen to. Finally, the analysis looks at where user-centric is lacking and the potential of progress in the future.

A Business of Fractional Pennies

During the past three years, the pandemic saw income dry up artists as concert bookings sustained and the outreach became limited for smaller artists. While Spotify and other major platforms are painted as the enemy, the shift to streaming has made the industry one filled with growth after years of decline. As streaming came to be, musicians combed through their royalty statements and were instantly alarmed about the fractions of a penny received for every stream click. The central point of musician's critique is specifically on how that money is distributed with major record labels posting huge profits and not enough of streaming's bounty making its way to musicians. With a focus of over-rewarding major stars at the expense of everybody, it has become impossible for any 'non-star' artist to earn a living wage. Filled with anger and anxiety over the degradation of creative music labor, musicians face long odds in changing the landscape – especially when there's solidarity among independent artist and silence within successful pop acts.

The weapon that is used by the streaming platforms to financially cripple artists, specifically upcoming and independent artists is through their business model. Most streaming platforms, if not all, use the pro-rata streaming model. By using this model, streaming services have been able to divorce habits of listeners from the allocation of the money. Instead of divvying up a given listener's \$10 per month to the artists he or she streamed (excluding Spotify's approximate 30 percent cut), the subscription money is put into a collective pool that is distributed by aggregate play counts across the platform. Think of it like having your paycheck fluctuate based not only on your own performance, but on the performance of everyone else in your industry as well – the better your colleagues and competitors do, the less money you make. In this model, all the money collected from subscribers or ads for a given month goes into a

single pot, which is then divided by the total number of streams. If, say, Drake had 5 percent of all streams that month, he (and the companies that handle his music) get 5 percent of the pot — meaning that, effectively, he gets 5 percent of each user’s money, even those who have never listened to his music.

With this model, estimates show that the payout rate for records are at about \$4,000 per million stream which equates to less than half a cent per stream (Sisario, 2021). In conjunction with the roadmap that a record goes through before making the funds to an artist, it would require hundreds of millions of streams for a musician to net anything substantial for their living – one that would be hard for artists that are niche or struggle to garner the attention they deserve. On top of the plenty stakeholders that required to get paid prior to artists, services such as Spotify providing a free tier allows users to listen to music with ads, reducing the average amount that they contribute to the pot. Services like Apple Music who do not offer a free tier pay about an average of a penny per stream (Nijenhuis, 2021) but the difference is negligible in the grand scheme of things.

With the breakdown per stream being one of the only measurable ways that is transparent, the equity issue stands alongside that metric to really shine light on the overarching problem. Counters have measured that the number of artists that generated more than \$1,000 was around 185,000 of them and with over six million artists on major streaming platforms, that means that approximately 97 percent of them fail to reach a threshold level (Sisario, 2021). On the other hand, only 472,000 artists have crossed the threshold of streams to be considered under service’s ‘professional activity’ meaning those artists have more than ten tracks released and more than 1,000 monthly listeners and even in this subset only 39 percent of them were highlighted to earn at least \$1,000 a year (Sisario, 2021). The fact that artists struggle to meet

these thresholds in addition to the miniscule payment structure, streaming services are evidently putting barriers that are limiting the financial gain artists can have.

One example of upcoming artists breaking out but still struggling financially is that of pop duo Frenship. In 2016, the duo had a breakout hit with “Capsize” and it was quickly added to prominent playlists on Spotify notching over 40 million streams in just 10 weeks. This single itself yielded \$150,000 in payments and while Spotify gave them their careers, the song immediately failed to crack the Top 40 of Billboard Hot 100 chart the minute they signed with Columbia Records (Sisario, 2021). Even with a successful 570 million streams, they have struggled to captivate their audience with other major hits, demonstrating that consistency is key but one song cannot truly change an artist’s life.

Older artists are at an even more disadvantage. Eve 6, an alternative-rock band, 1998 hit “Inside Out” has accumulated over 100 million streams on Spotify but due to the contract in the past, they earn nothing on streams and all royalties go to record companies.

The model used by Spotify and major streaming platforms using the pro-rata model is financially crippling for artists. The manner that the payments are structured alongside in inequity that is represented by artists put barriers for them to strive financially.

Pro-Rata Model Killing the Music Middle Class

The pro-rata system is detrimental to artists financially but simultaneously publicly as well. Features like playlisting, in which Spotify selects songs for curated lists with artists that have gigantic followings as well algorithmic recommendations, contribute to the network effect in which popularity snowballs into more popularity while drowning out niche genres. This disadvantage that upcoming and minor artist creates a gulf between music’s haves and have-nots.

This approach hurts smaller artists who do not attract gobs of casual fans or rack up passive listens through Spotify's increasingly influential playlists and hinders their opportunity to grow their image globally.

Zoe Keating is a cellist based in Vermont who recently leverage Spotify's Wrapped feature. She was able to generate over 2 million streams from 241,000 fans from 65 different countries with a combined 200,000 hours of music (Luckerson, 2019). Keating, despite the worldwide engagement, only was able to amass \$12,231. So, what went wrong is the defining question. It's that not only is she being crippled by the payment structure but the fact that she is a niche artists, Spotify limits her branding in curated playlists in which listeners are provided a huge search map to just find her. Keating mentioned that this situation is "really contributing to income inequality in music" (Keating, 2019). She added that "it might have been possible to make a middle-class living on your music in the past. In the current streaming economy, the only way to survive is to be huge" (Keating, 2019). The use of the pro-rata model's byproduct combined to hurt artists in such sorts.

In addition to not helping niche artists, the surge of streaming platforms has essentially removed the middle-class musicians in the sense that artists who do not conform to top genres (pop, hip-hop/R&B, or country) lack motivation to create niche music in various genres due to the incentivization that streaming provides to those genres. In the pay-per-stream model, artists are motivated to accrue spins, rather than devoted fans, by any means necessary. A catchy three-minute earworm that begs to be played ad nauseam generates more revenue than a longer, less repeatable track, even if the same number of people listen to each song every month. Artists are responding to this financial incentive by releasing shorter songs more frequently. But musicians

like Keating, whose instrumentals can be as long as eight minutes, lose out by not making songs that adhere to norms of radio-friendly consumption or genres.

By doing so, this model essentially has created rankings amongst fans. At the most basic level of fairness, this model fails because it makes some fans more valuable than others, despite everyone paying the same price for a subscription. The average Spotify user streams about 25 hours of content per month (Luckerson, 2019). If you stream less than that, you're generating less money for the artists you care about than the power users who listen to Spotify constantly. Personal accounts by Sharky Laguana, a San-Francisco musician, detailed how listeners "that are streaming 24 hours a day are dramatically more valuable than others even though [they are] both paying the same \$10" (Laguana, 2019). In wiping the middle-class of musicians, Spotify and other streaming services simultaneously are doing the same with fans. And while it may not affect the day-to-day of fans, who think they are supporting the artists they listen to, equity is again a warning factor but this time with fans and listeners.

The model continues to be wary of criticism with the fact that one example demonstrates extreme lengths of fraud that niche artists go to in order to generate revenue. In 2014 the funk band Vulfpeck generated \$20,000 in royalties through Sleepify, an album of silent tracks that it encouraged users to play on repeat overnight as they slept (Luckerson, 2019). Though Spotify expressed appreciation for the project as a "clever stunt," less honorable people have gamed the system as well. According to an investigation by Music Business Worldwide, a scammer in Bulgaria generated as much as \$1 million in royalties in 2017 by setting up about 1,200 dummy premium accounts and having them stream playlists of fake artists for months (Luckerson, 2019). And while not explicitly fraud, a cottage industry has emerged of composers making generic, ambient background music under fake aliases. These songs end up on Spotify-branded

playlists such as Ambient Chill and Peaceful Piano, where they can generate outside revenue if they soundtrack coffee shops or boutique clothing stores for hours a day (Luckerson, 2019).

The middle-class of musicians is a safe haven for listeners and artists who yearn niche genres of music for peace and tranquility. Pro-rata model is one that chips at it constantly and with the pandemic expediting the process, musicians are seeing the worst they have ever experienced – not only financially, but publicly as well. The system is rooted deeply in the sense that it innately hurts fans and listeners of these exact artists as well.

Fans Paying the Artists They Love

According to a number of proponents, there are other solutions that can be experimented with to see whether the solutions alleviate the pressures faced on artists. The solution is to switch to a user-centric model.

In this system, a subscriber's monthly payment would be split among the artists whom that individual listened to. Light users would reward the few artists they regularly stream with greater royalties. Heavy users would have their subscription money split among a wide swath of acts. This would realign the streaming era more closely with the economics of the age of physical media, when niche acts that managed to build a small but loyal fan base could make a living – with equity being the main theme of this approach.

The back and forth over the royalty payment models has been humming along in the music industry for years, but the wave and shift might be on the horizon. Case studies such as the French company, Deezer, with 7 million paying subscribers is implementing the user-centric model with the goal of creating “closer links between artists and their audiences, because it lets fans support artists more directly” (Holland, 2019). Alexander Holland, Deezer's chief content

officer aims to help fraudulent behavior on streaming platforms and introduce new revenue generations for artists that those listeners are connected to.

However, this is where uncertainty and clarity become an issue. The flow of money is a discussion that is in the forefront as the question begs to be answered. It's unclear whether a flow of money toward less popular tracks would most substantially benefit up-and-coming artists or someone like Drake, who has a consistently popular back catalog. But the shift would make intuitive sense to fans and eliminate some incentives for bad actors. And even small fluctuations in royalty rates, percentage-wise, can have a huge impact when you're a small act and every dollar counts.

The impacts of this transition is tough to predict and would vary from artists to artists. A Finnish study in 2017 looked specifically at a pro-rata model and the comparison against the user-centric model. Under the pro-rata model, the top 0.4 percent of tracks in the respective country accrued about 10 percent of royalty revenue. On the other hand, the user-centric model, the same tracks would only get 5.6 percent where more revenue is equally distributed among less popular tracks. Spotify's Will Page, the Director of Economics, has rebutted this model with the argument that switching would change the complexity of Spotify's foundation. Tying millions of user accounts to millions of artists accounts on a rolling basis (in this case monthly) would raise their administrative costs significantly. His argument continues claiming that "extra costs possibly wipe out the revenue gains for less popular artists" (Page, 2019). The skepticism arises in the fact that Spotify provides year-in-review graphics for each personalized user calculating their habits when it considers music and listening. Artists get in on the action, too, sharing their own versions of the Wrapped graphic with data on total streams, number of listeners, and the countries where those listeners resided. The data collectively reinforced the power of Spotify's

brand: It's global, it's personalized, and it's increasingly omnipresent – but seems that this shift is an infringement on their true ideals.

Technological Determinism describes the force of technological innovation and how the technological progress shapes the change in society (Guguen, 2004). Using Technological Determinism through the lens of Soft Determinism, the force of technological innovation is the surge of streaming services where the change in society is the shift in the landscape of the music industry. While it cannot be said that technology is fully accountable for musical engagement, it does, in turn, help influence how people listen to music – which leads to how it affects the listening habits. Looking back at the earlier sentiment, within Technological Determinism, society has the ability to make decisions – and in this case the technological innovation is the tool but the decision of which business model and how to better it rests on the people that have control.

There are some loose ends that need to be addressed that may help understand how artists can improve their lifestyle given the need to be successful on streaming platforms. The first is to consider petitions with larger artists' backings. There have already been slight movements by Taylor Swift and JAY-Z whom have restricted supply to certain streaming platforms in light of advocating for other artists. But at the same time, the threshold of how long can they hold out from other platforms before realizing their opportunity cost financially and popularity in the long term.

Another serious question to consider is whether the record labels are truly the puppet masters behind the restriction of artists being able to benefit. With more and more artists growing in popularity while being independent (seen evidently through artists like Chance the Rapper and Russ), it would essentially render record labels useless. Rather than forego the power to the

artists, there has been speculation that contracts and action by record labels have been with the intention of keeping artists inferior to them. Within these two lingering question, the future of artists truly getting the freedom they yearn from the streaming services may be vulnerable without the proper regulation of record labels and without the backing of already successful artists.

The research itself, is not without limitation in constraints and scope. In regard to constrains, research was limited because of the gatekeeping of information by these larger corporations and streaming platforms with the data they accumulate on each artists and the metrics that measure their success. With testimonies provided, it was easy to gather the per stream revenue; however, brand deals such as ones Drake and Apple Music have had, do not shine light on the inner keepings and the potential upside the platforms might provide to artists they want on their roster. In terms of scope, looking solely at artists is quite narrow minded as it takes more than one person to write, produce, and publish a song. While accounting for various percentages to various individuals, there was uncertainty if these were profitable for the people working behind the scenes and whether they are worse off than the artists themselves. This lack of scope does not put to perspective of the larger issue that may be residing or whether it is solely a deprivation of artists only.

This is just the beginning for possible change and research. While there have been shifts in the thought of business models for streaming services, a user-centric model has not been tested enough to see whether if it is sustainable in the long run. There is no guarantee artists who generate millions of streams will agree to such a model and there is no guarantee that it is an equitable system for every artists out there. Further research should be directed toward identifying whether there needs to be a different platform altogether for niche artists or a

different model itself. With the user-centric model being already out there, some models have made ground such as the transparency-oriented model which essentially allows artists to set prices and publish the songs on their platform with a small fee going to the streaming service. As users buy the songs, they get to own it for a certain purchase voucher or can stream it for couple cents once. This gives the keys to the artists and is a possible avenue for further exploration.

Conclusion

This research finds that a user-centric model adopted by streaming services would essentially provide a more equitable landscape for artists to gain a strong following and earn a livable wage. With the pro-rata model clearly leaning one way over another, the user-centric model is one that helps with the main theme of equity that has been plaguing the music industry. After years of depression, streaming services have provided a spark in what was a dying industry, but the progression does not stop there. The analysis provided is essential in exploration to truly witness whether the shift provides the benefit it claims to give artists. Through the lens of Technological Determinism, there was a clear necessity for the innovation of streaming platforms but the decisions regarding how they operate is where this framework provides guidance. Both historical case studies and discourse analysis demonstrate the purpose of the shift and the need for more progression by the streaming services. There is no one tell all solution for the problem, and further research should be able to optimize equity and profits for all stakeholders in the long run. Through the proper avenues of experiment and system design, there is a manner in which stakeholders of the entire system benefit with tradeoffs. The light has finally been displayed on the situation of inequity that plagues the foundational people of the music industry with the artists, but progress is far from done in giving back to the very people who make the creative songs for whom everyone else greatly benefits from.

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