

Entrepreneurial Trends in Music Distribution: Managing Digital Platforms and Startup Environments

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Abstract

This study analyzed the entrepreneurial dynamics within the music distribution industry using the blend of qualitative and documentary research methods. It focuses on digital platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, and SoundCloud. An oral interview was conducted on Twenty (20) musical artist and two (2) music producers and thematic analyses were used in analyzing the responses of the respondents. These platforms have democratized access to music. It enables artists and small labels to reach global audiences and utilize marketing tools previously reserved for major record labels. However, they present challenges such as intense competition and the complexity of copyright laws. Challenges of the sustainability of viable revenue models in a market dominated by streaming services are also identified in the study. The study adopts a qualitative approach, interviewing twenty musicians and two producers, complemented by thematic analysis and documentary research. Findings indicate that while digital platforms have facilitated a significant shift from physical to digital media, thereby democratizing music access and bypassing traditional gatekeepers. The platforms also introduced a revenue model that disproportionately benefits popular artists. This has implications for smaller or independent musicians who struggle with fair compensation and sustainability. The research concludes that the music distribution industry must reassess its payment structures and explore innovative technologies to create a more equitable ecosystem that supports all artists. Recommendations include implementing fairer royalty distribution systems and developing strategies to reduce the carbon footprint associated with digital streaming services.

Keywords: *Streaming Services, Music Distribution, Digital Transformation, Artist Compensation*

Background to the study

Music distribution has undergone profound transformations with the advent of digital platforms. Mbhele, & Ramnandan (2020) asserts that, the digital platform alters how music is produced, marketed, and consumed globally. According to Psomadaki, Matsiola, Dimoulas, et al. (2022), this shift from traditional physical media to digital services has disrupted established business models and democratized access to music markets. This led to a surge in entrepreneurial ventures within the music industry. Digital platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and SoundCloud have become the cornerstone of music distribution. It provides artists and small labels with unprecedented reach and marketing tools that were once the exclusive domain of major record labels (Geurts, & Cepa, 2023).

The shift to digital platforms in the music industry has introduced expansive for entrepreneurs and startups engaged in music distribution. These platforms offer unprecedented access to global markets and potential for scalability. Jones (2017) argues that the platforms, present a complex array of obstacles that impede the success and sustainability of new ventures. According to Parker, Van-Alstyne, and

Choudary (2016), the issues confronting startups in this sector include intense competition from established and emerging platforms, the difficulty of securing viable revenue models in a market dominated by streaming services. Also, the challenge of navigating copyright laws and digital rights management.

Despite the transformative impact of digital platforms on music distribution, there remains a gap in academic research concerning the entrepreneurial dynamics in this evolving sector. Market saturation and differentiation are critical issues that warrant further investigation. Many startups find it challenging to stand out with unique value propositions that appeal to a broad spectrum of artists and consumers.

Streaming platforms dominate the industry and provide minimal compensation to artists. It is therefore imperative for startups to devise innovative revenue models that support both the businesses and the artists they promote. Startups in the music distribution industry face considerable regulatory and legal challenges. This is due to the complexities of copyright and digital rights management across different jurisdictions. The rapid pace of technological advancements demands that startups continually innovate and adapt. It requires leveraging on cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain to enhance their services and operational efficiency. Attracting investment is challenging in this high-risk industry. This calls for effective strategies to secure venture capital and other funding sources to sustain and grow business operations.

Research Questions

-  How do startups in the digital music distribution industry innovate revenue models to support both their business growth and fair compensation for artists?
-  What strategies can music distribution startups employ to navigate the complexities of copyright and digital rights management in various jurisdictions?

Literature Review

Early Forms of Music Distribution

Vinyl records dominated music consumption in the mid-20th century but began to decline with the advent of digital media (Holt, Wiedner, et al, 2023). Recently, they have made a comeback among audiophiles who praise their superior sound quality and the tangible experience they provide. Vinyl enthusiasts argue that digital formats cannot replicate the warmer, more authentic sound of vinyl (Watson, and MacGarvie, 2023). However, vinyl records are fragile and take up more storage space, which makes them less practical for everyday use.

Figure 1: Records Called Long Play



Source: http://www.avelamia.com/201906_elegias.htm.

Cassettes and compact discs significantly influenced the evolution of music media. Introduced in the 1960s, cassettes gained popularity for their portability and became integral to the mixtape culture of the 1980s and 1990s, despite their susceptibility to wear and sound quality degradation over time (Canyakan, 2017). Compact discs, emerging prominently in the 1980s, improved sound quality and durability, dominating the music industry for a time. However, Castelan, & Khodja (2015) notes that, both cassette and compact discs also facilitated music piracy and were eventually eclipsed by more convenient digital formats like MP3s and streaming services, despite their initial benefits.

Figure 2: The Most Popular Cassette Brand of the Eighties, TDK's 90 Minute Cassette Tape



Source: <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/local/dundee/549836/music-cassettes-new-vinyl/>.

According to Meneses (2012), since the early 20th century, radio has consistently shaped listeners' preferences. It has also introduced a wide array of genres, establishing itself as a pivotal force in the music industry. It rapidly popularizes songs, making it an essential platform for emerging artists and a key player in the music scene. However, digital media's rise has lessened radio's dominance. Critics also

often target radio playlists for their limited diversity and the heavy influence from major record labels, which tends to restrict the variety of music that reaches the public (Ruth, 2020)

Figure 3: Radio Receivers Used in 1930s-40s



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_receiver

Television has transformed songs into multimedia experiences by adding a visual element to music. According to Kaplan (2023), Music channels like MTV have revolutionized the industry by turning music videos into cultural icons, shaping public perceptions and trends. However, television has also drawn criticism for its approach to promoting music. Kruk and Alexander (2019) notes that, television often emphasizes marketability over genuine musical talent, favoring artists' visual appeal and personal style over their actual musical abilities.

The Digital Revolution

Music distribution platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, and SoundCloud have democratized music access through the digital revolution. According to Skog, Wimelius, & Sandberg (2018), these digital platforms allow artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers like record labels and reach a global audience directly. Yin (2013) asserts that, the platforms enhance user experiences with features like curated playlists and personalized recommendations, facilitating new music discovery. However, this accessibility shifts revenue models primarily to subscription and ad-based earnings, disproportionately benefiting popular artists and leaving smaller or independent musicians with minimal payouts.

The streaming-based revenue system, with its per-stream royalty rates that are fractions of a cent, has sparked particular contention, requiring artists to accumulate massive streaming numbers to earn significant income (RIAA, 2018). This system has raised concerns about the sustainability of careers for less established artists. The influence of streaming algorithms on music production encourages a

homogenization of music. Nielsen (2015) notes that, artists and labels prioritize tracks likely to perform well in digital formats, potentially stifling originality and diversity in music.

The digital music distribution revolution, despite its advantages of instant accessibility and vast music libraries, has also facilitated market consolidation. The environmental impact of maintaining data centers for streaming services adds a significant, often overlooked, carbon footprint to the industry. According to Castelan & Khodja (2015), the shift away from physical media means the loss of tangible elements like vinyl or CD collections. Addressing these challenges requires a reevaluation of payment structures to ensure fair artist compensation and strategies to mitigate environmental impacts while preserving artistic diversity in the digital music era.

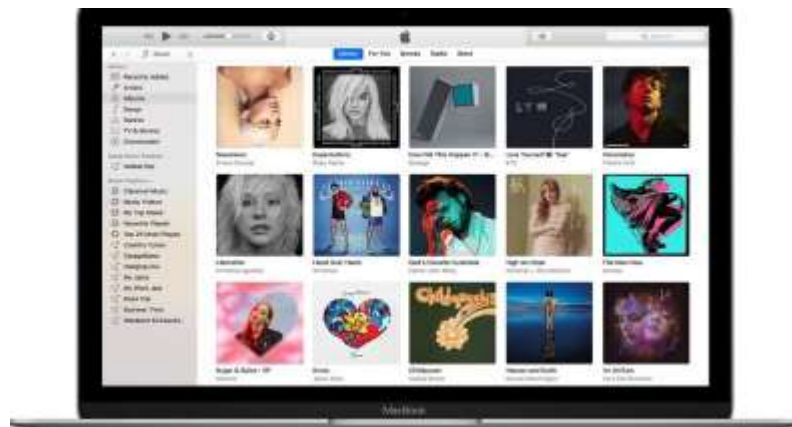
Rise of Online Music Stores and Digital Downloads

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the transformative rise of online music stores and digital downloads in the music industry, driven by advancements in internet technology and changes in consumer habits (RIAA, 2018). This era started with challenges from piracy and file-sharing sites like Napster, which highlighted the demand for digital music access while disrupting traditional copyright norms. The introduction of Apple's iTunes in 2003 revolutionized the scene by providing a user-friendly platform for purchasing individual songs or albums, seamlessly integrating with the iPod and changing the way music was consumed by promoting digital libraries.

Figure 4: Apple iPod



Figure 5: Image of Apple Music Service, iTunes



Source: <https://www.apple.com/itunes/>.

Source: <https://demo.accesspressthemes.com/>

storevilla/product/ipod-classic-160gb-black/

This digital transition necessitated a significant reevaluation of the music industry's business model as revenue streams shifted from physical album sales to digital platforms. Artists gained the capability to

distribute music directly online, circumventing traditional industry gatekeepers, while record labels had to navigate declining physical sales and explore new monetization strategies, including digital rights management. Concurrently, the decline of brick-and-mortar music stores underscored the industry's pivot towards digital solutions.

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Streaming Services as the New Norm

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Figure 6. Global Scale Brands Offering Stream Service in the Digital Music Industry Today



Source: <http://www.ooc.com.tw/2016/04/22/edmschool001/>.

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Ulrich (2012) argue that, despite their widespread adoption, streaming services face criticism, particularly regarding the fairness of artist compensation and impacts on the creative landscape of the music industry. The debate continues on how these platforms evolve to support a more equitable music ecosystem while still expanding their global reach and integrating new technologies like virtual reality to enhance listener engagement. As streaming services continue to grow, they keep transforming the music industry, both in how music is distributed and how it is experienced by audiences worldwide

Social Media and Music Sharing

Social media and music sharing platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have revolutionized music distribution (AudienceNet, 2018). It enables artists to reach global audiences directly and independently. These platforms facilitate easy access to music, community engagement, and direct fan interaction, which enhance artists' visibility and fan base.

However, the music industry faces significant challenges due to the overwhelming volume of music available online, which dilute individual artists' visibility and impact. Despite the broader reach, many artists struggle to effectively monetize their work due to low streaming royalties and the platforms' financial models that often favor the platform more than the creators. The pressure to maintain a constant online presence negatively affect artists' mental health and detract from the quality of the music itself.

Entrepreneurial Strategies in Digital Music

The digital music industry in Nigeria employs several entrepreneurial strategies that mirror global trends while adapting to local needs (Ifeduba, 2013). These strategies according to Ayeyemi, & Omodele (2024), include the use of digital distribution and streaming platforms such as Boomplay and Apple Music. These platforms facilitate global reach and provide data for refining marketing strategies. According to Adedeji (2023), Social media platforms are pivotal in engaging with fans and building artist brands. Partnerships with international artists and local telecom companies, along with organizing live events, boost revenue and artist visibility (Adedeji, 2022). Innovative monetization models such as direct-to-fan sales, crowdfunding, and subscription services for exclusive content also play crucial roles. These strategies are not without challenges. The revenue-sharing model of streaming platforms results in inadequate compensation for emerging artists. This makes it difficult for the upcoming artists to earn a substantial income. The market is becoming increasingly saturated, making it hard for new talents to stand out without investment in marketing. The industry's heavy reliance on international platforms sometimes overshadows local services that is suited to the Nigerian context (Erhiegeke, 2023).

Improving internet accessibility, especially in rural areas, and strengthening copyright laws and enforcement is paramount towards the protection of artists' intellectual property and fair compensation. Developing robust local platforms and supportive policies for emerging artists help mitigate the challenges posed by market saturation and dependency on international services. These concerns are crucial in harnessing the full potential of Nigeria's dynamic music scene. Demirgen, & Esin (2016) notes that, advancements in technology like blockchain and AI, as well as possible regulatory changes, hold potential for improving how artists are compensated and how their rights are managed. This technology is believed to create fairer practices within social platforms. These developments lead to more equitable business models that not only support artists' financial needs but also respect their artistic integrity and control over their work.

Economic and Business Model Transformations

The music distribution industry has undergone significant shifts, primarily influenced by advancements in technology and changes in consumer behavior. Music was initially sold in physical formats like vinyl, cassettes, and CDs, with revenue generated through physical sales controlled by major record labels and retail outlets. The advent of digital downloads in the late 1990s and early 2000s, epitomized by platforms like iTunes, disrupted this model by enabling consumers to purchase individual tracks instead of whole albums, reducing costs related to physical production and increasing accessibility, although it also spurred issues like piracy.

The introduction of streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and Tidal in the 2010s marked a pivotal transformation, shifting the industry from ownership to access. These platforms generate revenue through subscriptions and ad-supported free tiers, with artist payments based on streaming metrics. This era not only democratized music distribution, allowing smaller artists and labels easier market entry but also made streaming the dominant revenue source in the industry, surpassing physical and download sales.

The industry continues to evolve with platform diversification and the integration of services like podcasts and live streaming to enhance user engagement. Emerging technologies such as blockchain and AI are being explored for fairer royalty distributions and personalized music experiences. These developments suggest a future where artists have greater control over their careers and deeper engagement with fans, potentially leading to more personalized and economically efficient music distribution models.

Legal and Regulatory Landscape

In Nigeria, the music distribution landscape is primarily governed by the Copyright Act of 1988, which grants musicians and composers exclusive rights to their works for 70 years posthumously. This protects them against unauthorized usage. Music distribution platforms operating in this space are required to secure proper licenses to distribute copyrighted content, ensuring they comply with the law. The enforcement of these copyright protections is overseen by the Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC), which actively combats copyright infringement.

Platforms must manage performance rights and mechanical licenses, often through Collective Management Organizations (CMOs) such as the Musical Copyright Society of Nigeria (MCSN) and the Copyright Society of Nigeria (COSON). These organizations facilitate the collection and distribution of royalties and ensure that platforms obtain the necessary permissions to reproduce and distribute music recordings. Platforms often utilize Digital Rights Management (DRM) technologies to prevent the unauthorized redistribution of digital music files.

Operational compliance extends beyond copyright laws to include data protection under the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR), which mandates platforms to safeguard user data. Music distribution services also need to navigate the complexities of taxation and revenue sharing, influenced by Nigeria's focus on taxing digital services. All these factors necessitate careful legal and contractual considerations, including forming agreements with record labels, artists, and other platforms to delineate terms on revenue sharing and licensing.

Ethical Considerations and Artist Rights

In the realm of music distribution, ethical considerations center primarily on ensuring that artists receive fair compensation and maintain control over their works. Fair payment models, particularly in the context of streaming services that tend to offer minimal payouts per stream, are crucial. The protection of intellectual property rights is paramount, guarding against unauthorized use and piracy, and securing fair compensation for any use of their music, including samples and covers.

It is essential for artists to have significant input into how their work is utilized and presented, ensuring they retain control over the artistic integrity of their music. Contracts with labels and distributors should be transparent, highlighting terms and clauses in simple language to prevent exploitation. Ethical practices extend to leveling the playing field for all artists, particularly independents and newcomers, by removing barriers to major distribution channels. With the increasing collection of data in the digital distribution age, safeguarding the privacy of both artists and listeners is another critical ethical pillar.

Technological Innovations and Future Trends

The music distribution landscape in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation due to technological advancements, notably through the adoption of digital streaming platforms like Apple Music, Spotify, and local services such as Boomplay and uduX. These platforms have democratized music access, enabling Nigerian artists to reach a global audience and increase their revenue. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become crucial for music promotion, integrating music players to allow songs to trend rapidly and reach extensive audiences.

Payment technologies, including mobile money solutions like M-Pesa and Paystack, have simplified how listeners purchase music, boosting digital sales and subscriptions. Emerging technologies like blockchain are being explored for music rights management, offering artists transparent control over copyrights and royalties, potentially reducing reliance on traditional record labels. Artificial intelligence is also reshaping music production, allowing artists to produce high-quality music more affordably and efficiently.

The future of music distribution in Nigeria is likely to see more innovative trends such as 3D and virtual reality concerts, providing immersive experiences that transcend physical venue limitations. Direct-to-consumer distribution models are gaining traction, enabling artists to forge closer connections with their fans and retain more control over their profits. Moreover, data analytics is becoming a vital tool for targeted marketing, helping artists and labels to tailor their strategies based on detailed insights into listener preferences and behaviors. These technological shifts promise to further empower Nigerian artists and revolutionize the music consumption landscape.

Consumer Behavior and Market Dynamics

Consumer behavior in music distribution platforms has drastically shifted from physical media to digital services, with preferences strongly leaning towards streaming services like Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube due to their accessibility and comprehensive libraries. This change is further fueled by personalization technologies and recommendation algorithms that significantly influence music discovery and user engagement. Additionally, the widespread availability of smartphones and high-speed internet has made it possible for consumers to access music anywhere and anytime, further driving engagement on these platforms. Emerging technologies such as blockchain and high-resolution audio are also making their mark, aiming to enhance user experiences and add value.

The music distribution market is intensely competitive, with major entities like Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Music taking the lead, alongside a rise in niche platforms that focus on high-fidelity and artist-centric offerings such as Tidal and Bandcamp. Economic models based on subscriptions and advertisements dictate not only platform revenues but also how artists are compensated, a factor that

continues to evolve with the industry's dynamics. Moreover, copyright issues and royalty distribution remain central challenges. Looking forward, the industry may shift towards more artist empowerment and equitable revenue models, spurred by artist-led initiatives and potential legislative changes, with ongoing innovations in AI and machine learning expected to refine user personalization and predictive music curation even further.

Methodology

The study adopts a blend of qualitative and documentary research methods. A total number of twenty (20) musical artist and two (2) music producers were interviewed. Thematic analyses were used in analyzing the responses of the respondents. This approach was used to understand how distribution platforms affect their work and revenue. Documentary research in this study includes reviewing existing literature and case studies on the digital transformation within the music industry, which helps contextualize findings and offers a historical perspective on the evolution of distribution methods.

Estimation of Results

It is estimated that the shift from physical to digital music distribution platforms has significantly democratized music access, allowing artists to reach global audiences directly. However, this transition has introduced a revenue model that disproportionately benefits popular artists, leaving smaller or independent musicians at a disadvantage. The study suggests a pressing need for the industry to reassess payment structures and explore innovative technologies to create a more equitable ecosystem that supports fair compensation and sustainability for all artists.

Discussion of Findings

The shift from physical media to digital formats has democratized music access. This enables artists to reach global audiences without traditional gatekeepers. This transition has introduced a revenue model that disproportionately benefits popular artists, leaving smaller or independent musicians at a disadvantage. Streaming services, while increasing accessibility and convenience, raise concerns about fair compensation and environmental impacts due to data centers. The study highlights the need for industry-wide reassessment of payment schemes to support artists across the popularity spectrum and propose strategies for creating a more equitable music ecosystem that addresses economic disparities and environmental concerns.

Conclusion

The evolution of music distribution platforms has dramatically reshaped the music industry, moving from physical media dominance to a digital and streaming-centric landscape. This shift has democratized access to music, allowing artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach global audiences directly. However, it also presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of fair compensation for artists and the sustainability of traditional music entities. Streaming services, while providing unprecedented access and convenience, have introduced a revenue model that significantly benefits popular artists at the expense of smaller or independent musicians. As the industry continues to evolve, it must address these disparities and explore new strategies to ensure a more equitable ecosystem for all stakeholders involved. This might include reevaluating payment structures and integrating emerging technologies to enhance artist compensation and audience engagement.

Recommendations

- Regulators in the music industry should implement a fairer royalty distribution system that benefits both emerging and independent artists along with established ones. This should include minimum guaranteed payments for streams and a more transparent reporting system to ensure that artists are adequately compensated for their work.
- Music artists and their producers should develop strategies to reduce the carbon footprint associated with digital streaming services. This should involve investing in more energy-efficient data centers, utilizing renewable energy sources, and innovating more sustainable technology solutions to support streaming infrastructure.
- Regulators in the industry and producers, should encourage the direct engagement of artists with their audiences by leveraging platform features such as artist-curated playlists, live-streaming events, and interactive fan experiences. These initiatives will help artists build a sustainable fan base and increase their visibility independently of traditional label-driven promotion strategies.

Policy Implication

The policy implications include the need for a revised royalty distribution system that ensures fair compensation for both emerging and established artists. This involves setting a minimum guaranteed payment for streams and creating a transparent reporting system to properly compensate artists for their work. Strategies should be developed to reduce the carbon footprint associated with digital streaming services. This will involve investing in energy-efficient data centers, using renewable energy sources, and developing more sustainable technologies to support streaming infrastructure.

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