Article

Hip-hop music producers' labour in the digital music economy: Self-promotion, social media and platform gatekeeping

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Abstract

There has been much debate concerning the changing nature of cultural production and distribution in the digital creative economy. Music production work has been especially affected by promotional conventions established by social media and music streaming platforms. This article critically builds atop perspectives on the platformisation of cultural production to investigate how independent hip-hop music producers develop their careers in the era of digital media platforms. It examines how traditional media and digital platform gatekeepers affect producers' abilities to professionalise, promote creative work to audiences and manage precarious conditions for their labour. Insights from interviews with 15 producers from 8 countries are analysed and discussed to provide a nuanced view of the conditions for music production careers in the platform era of the digital creative industries.

Keywords

Creative labour, cultural production, digital music economy, platforms, social media

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Introduction

Cultural production and distribution practices in the digital creative economies have been transformed by attendant changes to labour conditions, technology and media infrastructure. Scholars have observed the rise of figures like the 'produser' (Bruns, 2016) and the 'new amateur' (Prior, 2010), describing creative practitioners which complicate traditional distinctions between amateur and professional by their uses of digital technologies. In particular, individuals in many parts of the world can create professional-quality media due to increasingly affordable creative technology, and rapidly distribute it to audiences online. Some independent digital media producers – whether construed as content creators or traditional artistic roles like musicians or filmmakers – have built careers based on such practices. These developments take place within an online media landscape now characterised by platforms: infrastructures that operate as institutions, markets and interactive frameworks for cultural production (Poell et al., 2022: 5–6).

In the context of the digital music economy, scholars have undertaken critical analyses of platform power asymmetries. Notable research has addressed issues affecting artists such as low payout rates, 'winner-takes-all' competition and obscure playlist placement systems (Bonini and Gandini, 2019; Meier and Manzerolle, 2019; Morris and Powers, 2015). Yet some have viewed these relations less dispiritingly. David Hesmondhalgh (2021a, 2021b) has warned against making simplified, elitist and clichéd critiques of how digital streaming platforms may affect music culture. Similarly, Nancy Baym's (2018) 7-year study of musicians highlights that many artists develop rewarding careers in an era dominated by social media platforms and music streaming services. Granted, artists' careers may involve different work practices to professional musicianship in an earlier era of the music industry, especially given the contemporary emphasis on relational and emotional labour online. Nonetheless, the musicians in her study are fundamentally understood as 'communicators, seeking to give and gain social meaning, and laborers, seeking to make money in contexts dominated by capitalist market logics' (Baym, 2018: 26). Such a diversity of views on music creatives and platforms warrants further study.

Balancing both critical and empowering perspectives on the platformisation of cultural production, this article investigates cultural producers' labour practices, their motivations and the platform ecosystem in which they work. Our focus is on hip-hop music producers, which we situate as a particular kind of online cultural producer (Hutchinson, 2023), working within a significant genre context considering the prominence of hip-hop in digital culture (Gamble and Campos Valverde, 2021). We are especially interested in how digitalisation and platformisation have affected the career development and promotional practices of music producers. To do so, this article addresses two interconnected research questions to better understand the perceptions and conditions of contemporary music production careers, especially in producers' own words. The first is: how do music producers conceive of their careers in the era of digital media platforms? The second is how do both traditional media gatekeepers and platform systems affect producers' abilities to professionalise? Guided by these lines of inquiry, we consider everyday labour, technological practices and perceptions of value, to better comprehend the conditions for careers as a music producer in the platformised creative industries.

The platformisation of music production and distribution

Since the early 2010s, Internet media platforms have disrupted a range of traditional music industry sectors, especially music consumption (Wikström, 2020). The declining popularity of physical sales formats in favour of on-demand streaming has seen information technology become the 'most powerful sectoral force shaping how music and culture are mediated and experienced' (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018: 1555). Indeed, one of the most noteworthy shifts in the last two decades has been a transition from what we call, admittedly as short-hand for a complex media ecosystem, the 'traditional' model of music consumption – sustained largely by record labels, contracted artists, radio programmers, sales of music in physical formats – to the 'digital music economy', so-called for the importance of digital technology to its everyday functioning.

Around the turn of the millennium, online digital download stores, such as iTunes, eMusic and 7digital emerged (Rogers, 2013: 82–83), aiming to reduce the frequency of peer-to-peer sharing, which had proliferated along with everyday Internet use and become demonised by record labels as 'music piracy' (Haupt, 2008). Such distributors can be understood as early digital music platforms: virtual marketplaces connecting artists and users to media products, in this case digital audio files. Other sites that started life as social networking services, such as MySpace, blended downloads with on-demand streaming (Rogers, 2013: 88). Gradually, websites prioritised independent uploads and more direct social connections between artists and fans. Soundcloud, Mixcloud and Bandcamp – all founded in the late 2000s – enabled music producers to freely upload music for listeners to play in-browser alongside artist artwork, images, videos and commentary (Haynes and Marshall, 2018; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019). Such sites affected the dynamics of how artists promoted their work and engaged with audiences. On the one hand, digital access to music 'resulted in lower entry barriers and less dependence on major record labels and the established centers of music production' in the Global North (Hracs, 2016: 41). On the other, the popularity of platforms have arguably enabled the technology companies running them to exploit the cultural labour of producers (in and beyond music), leveraging power asymmetries and aspirational entrepreneurship to intensify the precarity of creative work (Duffy, 2017: 211 passim).

Presently, the most popular way of listening to music is using on-demand music streaming services, which gained widespread use throughout the 2010s and have been lauded by the music industry as a remedy to piracy (Sun, 2018). Yet the earlier diversity of music distribution services has now shrunk to an oligopoly of major digital streaming platforms in the West, chiefly among them YouTube, Spotify and Apple Music. Tencent (KuGou, QQ Music) maintains a similar stranglehold over the Chinese music market, with a limited number of regional competitors, such as Joox in many Asian countries, and Anghami in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite growing international Internet access (International Telecommunication Union, 2023), music distribution in the streaming era remains largely dominated by a few powerful nations: in 2020, the United States and China collectively accounted for 15 of the 20 most used digital music distributors (Ochai, 2022: 98–99). Such distribution structures shape how cultural producers approach their everyday labour, influencing which tasks they prioritise in pursuit of promotional and financial needs.

In 2022, two-thirds of global recorded music revenue was attributed to digital streaming (IFPI, 2023b, 11). The major distribution platforms mostly use subscription or freemium (advertising-punctuated, limited listening) revenue models. Moreover, the majority of copyright and royalty income remains clustered in the Global North, with Europe and North America accounting for nearly four-fifths of global royalty collections: 56% Europe; 23% North America; 15% Asia Pacific; 5% Latin America and Caribbean; 1% Africa (Nurse, 2021: 266). In this sense, the digital music economy appears consistent with the hegemonic dynamics of the traditional music market. What is more, the low cost and easy access of streaming platforms significantly privilege the experiences of the end-user (Anderson, 2013), that is, the listener. As such, artists have described feeling more intense competition to reach users through a crowded, centralised and opaquely managed 'black box' (Eriksson et al., 2019; Meier and Manzerolle, 2019: 556).

Jeremy Wade Morris (2020) argues such competition is a fundamental logic of digital platforms, culminating in the 'optimisation of culture'. Platform effects contribute to a saturated ecosystem of media distribution. Music streaming platform playlists, for example, are sustained by a hybrid of human curation and algorithms. Playlists help to stop users being overwhelmed by an abundance of choices (in this case a large proportion of the world's recorded music), a problem streaming platforms have themselves created (Jansson and Hracs, 2018: 1618–1620). Artists are therefore increasingly dependent on playlist placements and may accordingly make music to suit specific playlists (Prey, 2020). This practice exemplifies broader trends in contemporary independent musicianship, where individuals are gaining awareness of a variety of means to find audiences, promote their work and build online communities in the digital music economy (Haynes and Marshall, 2018). Music educators describe preparing their students for 'portfolio careers' (Bartleet et al., 2019), spanning a range of roles to achieve professionalisation. Ng and Gamble (2022) have connected such multi-faceted practices to cultural entrepreneurship, particularly the unique case of hip-hop producers exploring new strategies for promoting music and building audiences.

Hip-hop in the digital music economy

Indeed, hip-hop music producers are at the forefront of innovations to find sustainable careers in the digital music economy. This is partly because hip-hop is one of the most popular genres worldwide (IFPI, 2023a, 17), but it also speaks to how Black cultural expression has distinctly informed the evolution of digital platforms. André Brock (2020) has observed, in a non-essentialising way, that 'Black folk have a natural affinity for the Internet and digital media' (p. 5). Such a claim is supported by the work of Kyra Gaunt (2016), which demonstrates how Black youth creativity fuel trends in popular music culture that are remediated online in collapsed contexts like YouTube. As a Black art form and set of creative practices, hip-hop has been subject to long-standing patterns of racial classification and exoticisation, especially as it became codified as a music genre. In her study of US commercial radio, Amy Coddington (2023) suggests that rap music's symbolised Blackness challenged the radio industry's conventional race-based programming. Hip-hop continues to be affected by racialised industry structures, especially the data-intensive organisation of streaming platforms, which 'replicate the sorts of

inequalities long pervasive throughout the music industries' (Coddington, 2023: 130). Such pressures persist for hip-hop long since its globalisation, with ethnically and culturally diverse communities worldwide now participating in a Black creative mode of expression (Singh, 2021: 8–12). Accordingly, we approach hip-hop producers in a similar fashion to Jabari Evans and Nancy Baym (2022), who explored how Black youth in Chicago engage in various platformised labour strategies to develop their music careers. Building on their study, we adopt both a tighter focus on uses of online media platforms and a broader scope on platform tensions that are experienced by hip-hop producers globally.

We define hip-hop producers as multiskilled digital musicians (Hugill, 2018) who combine digital technology, songwriting, instrumental performance and audio engineering to create much of the musical content of hip-hop songs: that which is usually paired with vocals (Schloss, 2004: 1–2). The term 'beatmaker' is sometimes helpful to distinguish this kind of hip-hop music 'producer' and the broader notion of a 'cultural producer', yet the implied focus on instrumental music – the beat – is too narrow to represent the conventions of modern hip-hop production. In addition, we do not consistently use 'beatmaker' as it neglects how producers are increasingly recognised as performing artists in their own right. For example, in addition to producing music for major artists like Drake, Future and Nicki Minaj, American producer Metro Boomin has released chart-topping albums where he is credited as the lead artist accompanied by a cast of featured vocalists. To add further confusion, emerging hip-hop producers *are* frequently digitally engaged *cultural producers* who partake in a wide range of creative activities like livestreaming, hosting events and developing educational courses (Ng and Gamble, 2022).

Aspiring hip-hop producers today are highly dependent on navigating the changing conventions of music and media distribution on digital platforms. Such platform-dependence presents challenges to developing professional careers, given that 'online cultural uses developed faster than the rate at which policies and measures to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions were adapted to the digital environment' (Ochai, 2022: 114). To put it plainly, many of the platform power asymmetries we have mentioned were established in lieu of policy which might better protect artists' interests. National cultural policies have updated too slowly and remain inadequate to support artists in navigating the digital music economy. In developed creative economies such as Australia and the United Kingdom, more robust policies recognise that artists need to be digitally literate, but they often fail to provide financial, professional, or educational support for contemporary creative practices despite positioning music as a cultural good (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023; Scott, 2022). In the light of the above platform effects and general lack of support from governments regarding how to compete in the digital creative industries, independent hip-hop producers today face a range of challenging contexts in which to professionalise and sustain creative careers.

Methodology

With digital platform effects on creative production in mind, we address the labour conditions and practices of hip-hop music producers. To do so, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with music producers across the globe. 13 of our interviewees described

themselves as hip-hop producers and the other two identified with the neighbouring genre of electronic dance music (EDM). Participants were selected according to their position in major hip-hop markets, with emphasis on diverse representation of the Asia-Pacific region and the Anglosphere, particularly countries in which we ourselves are immersed as community members and producers. We aimed to develop findings from both the foundational hip-hop contexts of the United States and varied global hip-hop scenes across the Asia Pacific. Our sample also reflected different levels of professionalisation, from budding 'bedroom producers' to well-known artists with transnational record deals. Participants and their locations are listed in Table 1.

We also aimed to achieve gender balance, resulting in a 2–1 ratio of male to female and non-binary individuals, which we found to be far from ideal yet adequate within the male-dominated sphere of popular music production (Brereton et al., 2020). This reasonably diverse representation enabled us to compare various professional and creative values informed by platform contexts.

Although every interviewee was offered pseudonymity, all consented to be named, which is perhaps unsurprising given the importance of personal and public authenticity in hip-hop culture. We chose to retain artist names in recognition of such cultural norms, which also enables cross-referencing artist statements made elsewhere and animates ethical debates in Internet research concerning the right to have one's identity preserved (Franzke et al., 2020: 10–11). All but one of our interviews were conducted in English (the exception, with Question SEQ, in English and Japanese supported by an interpreter) and focused on topics which explored producers' everyday uses of social media, participation in digital infrastructures for publishing and distribution and paths to professionalisation. We developed questions drawing reflexively from our own positionalities as hip-hop producers (one semi-professional, one hobbyist) and the literature on digital transformations of creative work. While this enabled us to harness our knowledge of the

Table 1. List of participants and locations.

Music producer name	Location
BABii	The United Kingdom
Birocratic	The United States of America
Ciel	Canada
Fiendsh	Thailand
Pastels	Australia
Peachgf	The United States of America
Phuse	The United States of America
Pinkhairproducer	The United States of America
Saib	Morocco
Spell	New Zealand/Australia
Seneca B	The United States of America
Swerv	Australia
Question SEQ	Japan
Yung Skrrt	The United States of America

field and conventional practices, we also understand our insiderness as one of many perspectives that is itself contained, limited and not universally accepted. A semi-structured set of questions was used across all interviews for cohesion, while allowing us to manage our experience of the field by way of a 'continuous oscillation between insider and outsider' perspectives (Singh, 2021: 84).

In addition to these interviews, we conducted extensive digital ethnography with our participants who have active online communities, primarily across Instagram, Twitch and Discord. This approach highlighted how deeply social media use is embedded into everyday working life in the contemporary music economy (Hine, 2015). Ethnographic observations were gathered over a period of 2 years from March 2021 to March 2023, informing the questions used in interviews. In all, our mixed-methods approach yielded rich empirical insights into hip-hop producers' careers in the digital music economy and how platform norms affect practices associated with professionalisation in the contemporary creative industries.

We noted throughlines and disparities across our interviews and divided them into the following three overarching themes: the diversity of creative labour tasks, self-promotion on social media and livestreaming platforms and platform gatekeeping. Notably, relatively little attention was dedicated to discussing compositional and songwriting aspects of these creatives' work: we ironically observed, with several participants, that few music producers can afford to spend most of their time actually producing music. Each of the below sections demonstrate how contemporary (especially hip-hop) music producers encounter a developing range of work opportunities and challenges in the platform era.

Diversification of creative labour on digital media platforms

Echoing the model of Brian Hracs' (2016) study of Toronto-based independent musicians, hip-hop music producers in our study have adopted similar DIY (do-it-yourself) tendencies in their creative work. Hip-hop producers overwhelmingly stated that the importance of social media and digital platforms for marketing, publishing and distributing their music has required them to diversify their skillsets to include 'business', 'managerial' and 'technical' tasks (Hracs, 2016: 42). Undoubtedly, this forms part of a broader trend in creative careers whereby social media has amplified the need to 'maintain high levels of visibility' by engaging with 'each platform's features, policies, audience analytics, and data tools' (Burgess, 2021: 23). Keith Negus (2019) previously observed that 'musicians have found themselves redefined as "content providers" rather than creative producers' (p. 369), a sentiment shared bitterly by the majority of our interviewees. In some ways, this has reduced the need to collaborate with other professionals (e.g. marketing strategists) compared to traditional record production processes, though it increases the individual's workload.

Such broader labour overheads carry significant time-costs for independent artists. Moroccan lo-fi hip-hop producer Saib described a mismatch between audience perceptions and the administrative realities of creative labour:

From an outsider's perspective who has no real knowledge about how the music industry works, they would only see the music and/or maybe live shows, or someone going on tour . . . But behind that, there is a lot of administrative work, a lot of paperwork to do, a lot of promotion to do and work on . . . I feel for all these young producers, social media is basically a big percentage of the overall work of a musician's career nowadays.

The need to self-manage and self-promote emerges from how an artist's career capital is conceptualised in the platform era. Social media platform followings and streaming platform play-counts demonstrate audience potential to labels and corporations, and producers have accordingly focused on developing such metrics as credential resources. Pinkhairproducer, from Texas, emphasised how critical it is for artists to spend time improving their visibility metrics, 'especially now that TikTok's here and Twitch is here and all these [other] social media platforms where, you know, it's not really about the music anymore. It's about the numbers'. Toronto-based electronic music producer and DJ Ciel reflected similarly on the predominance of her social media activity, which she does 'every day . . . almost a two-to-one ratio where I'm actually spending like two-thirds of the day on other, non-production, work and only a third of the day on [music] production'.

While this emphasis on activities other than music-making exemplifies Hracs' (2016: 42) observations concerning de-specialisation and multi-tasking, not all producers we interviewed disliked the variety of their daily tasks. For Thailand's Fiendsh, posting on social media was an important way to showcase his connection to the Bangkok music community, gaining more gig bookings and gladly connecting with other artists. Similarly, Los Angeles-based Yung Skrrt highlighted how establishing a diverse creative skillset benefitted his multi-faceted career as a music producer and Twitch streamer. Notably, however, the demands of combining labour roles intensify when working across several platforms and promoting creative outputs among different audiences: Yung Skrrt related that

it's a lot harder being your own producer and being your own artist and being your own social media manager and being your own . . . [streaming software] OBS creator and being your own video editor . . . I have to do everything.

We have suggested that such developments – towards multi-tasking and multi-faceted creative work – have been intensified by the platformisation of cultural production. Yet according to the hip-hop producer and DJ Spell, who is based in Naarm, this varied digital labour is a natural progression of DIY traditions in hip-hop culture:

Coming up through hip-hop, there was always a DIY part of the culture that was encouraged . . . paint your jacket yourself, you know, customization, fat [coloured custom] laces, paint your shoes. It's all about DIY, it's a DIY kind of culture: make the most out of what little you have, make your own mixtapes . . . record them yourself, do all the artwork yourself, make the fliers yourself, print them yourself, photocopy them yourself, you know, like all of that, that was all kind of always there from the start. It's just rolled over into social media . . . and it's just kind of a modern-day version.

Spell's comment highlights how the self-directed, entrepreneurial mind-set of hip-hop producers remains an important part of online promotional practices. Jabari Evans and Nancy Baym (2022) have similarly identified this mind-set in hip-hop youth who produce digital media content in pursuit of online visibility and influence, or more vernacularly 'clout'. Ciel and BABii, electronic music producers, described similarities to the DIY hip-hop mind-set in neighbouring music cultures, with the latter suggesting that although 'you kind of *have* to do everything yourself . . . it's great because everyone learns multiple skills and . . . that makes things true to people's own vision'. Yung Skrrt, too, makes a strong case against outsourcing administrative and creative work supplementary to making music, stating that 'if I was not the one doing the things that I want to do, it wouldn't be done right'. Such accounts provide a helpful reminder that comprehensive creative career management can be artistically gratifying (albeit still tiring and time-consuming) for some musicians.

Self-promotion on social media and livestreaming platforms

Among all tasks considered supplementary to making music, the creation of promotional material for social media stood out. Self-promotion and self-branding have become increasingly significant parts of popular music culture in the digital age, as Leslie Meier (2016) has highlighted. Compared to an earlier period when promotional practices were predominantly overseen by record labels and other management agencies, each artist today is tasked with developing their own artist-brand (Meier, 2016: 4), maintained by circulating marketing materials on streaming and social media platforms.

The producers we interviewed described developing videos, photos and other media content as promotional material to increase audience engagement with upcoming music releases and live performances. While some signed artists, like Naarm-based Pastels, mentioned receiving assistance from record labels with her digital promotion strategy, others reported spending significant time and energy producing promotional content for their social media profiles. Fiendsh suggests that undertaking such promotional activities is inevitable, since 'we need our work to be known so we can make more work'. Indeed, online visibility emerged as a critical factor for many of our interviewees. For Spell, social media content creation provided one crucial means for establishing and sustaining an audience based on his prior credentials:

> [I am] an example of, like, fucking [DMC] World Champion DJ with no followers and no money and no job, no gigs, and then, [I asked] like, 'well, how am I going to get the followers, you know? Make videos'.

American lo-fi musician peachgf noted that platform communications suggest social media companies are similarly eager for producers to engage in self-promotional practices:

> platforms, especially SoundCloud, are really trying to get you as an artist to start getting interested in [promoting your work] . . . The people in charge of advertising on SoundCloud

are really going all out. Seriously, I get a thousand emails with stuff like 'show us how *you're* the most promising undiscovered producers on SoundCloud!'

Furthermore, independent social media content production aligns with the increased recognition of hip-hop producers as popular artists in their own right. Saib pointed out that

> without social media, producers would still be just making beats for rappers and no one would know about them . . . Now, social media kind of gives a platform for all these producers to show what they can do, and people can actually put a face on the producer and get to know more about them.

However, most of our interviewees described feeling pressured to creatively deploy social media to stand out among an increasingly saturated market. Yung Skrrt explained that making social media content provides 'another way to show yourself as a producer' and described the necessity of thinking 'outside the box, 'cause there's, like, millions of producers on this planet, and it's like, everybody's making hard-ass beats. What are you going to do that's going to be different from everybody else, and get the attention?' Such questions can prompt frustration or diminish creative integrity. For New York's Birocratic, for example, 'marketing myself feels like stuffing my soul into a box'. Nonetheless, producers' need to clearly distinguish their artistic identity through social media promotion closely aligns with musician ADR's observation (in Waugh, 2017: 237) that '"carefully curated streams of images and bits of text" now constitute an artist's "self-created context"'.

The perceived demands for sustained self-promotional activity reflect broader trends in social media cultures, associated with, for example, (micro)celebrities and influencers (Abidin, 2020; Marwick, 2013). After we discussed this topic, Spell himself observed that 'it doesn't just go for music producers. This goes for anyone and everyone'. Partly, this shift speaks to neoliberal sentiments about how creativity can be exploited in social media platform contexts. Notably, platform companies appear to view cultural goods primarily as market commodities rather than as holding intrinsic cultural value – a perspective that governments have also often taken towards music in cultural policy (Leung, 2016). Our interviewees variously recognised the need to play on the terms set out by platforms, with the Naarm-based producer and event manager Swerv suggesting that 'to build a following . . . it has to be the right platform for you . . . it has to suit your personality and your values and your goals and what you're trying to achieve'. The American producer and DJ Phuse confessed that 'I can't be focusing on all these social medias at the same time'. He described negotiating the demands and affordances of different social media platforms:

> you know, you're putting content into the app, or whatever it is, and you're trying to get something out of it: either new followers, or even just like and comments on your page . . . if I care about success on one of those platforms, you'd have to kind of really be on it all the time.

Evidently, the use of social media for self-promotion is an important means of gaining exposure, associated with a range of professional incentives, yet it can also be a tiring and unrewarding aspect of producers' careers in which they feel beholden to platform demands.

Nonetheless, some producers highlighted alternative ways of framing social media for self-promotion or altogether resisting the self-curational norms of social media platforms (Li, 2023). For example, Birocratic has tried to ignore pressures to brand himself online while he has professionalised, hoping for a more straightforward connection to audiences:

> The branding exercise bums me out . . . I find myself just wanting to share and just be genuine and like discuss things and nerd out about stuff . . . It (music) should just be out there and people can find their way to it.

It may be that livestreaming offers one way to facilitate this kind of connection. Yung Skrrt described his additional work in livestreaming his creative production process on Twitch as 'so easy, to just do exactly what you do beat-wise, except just put it online and do it live'. The extensive time he spent livestreaming reduced the time that he would otherwise spend creating promotional content for social media, as he clipped videos-on-demand (VODs) of his streams to turn into short videos for distribution on YouTube and TikTok. Spell described a similar process and credited his popular YouTube video of competing in a Twitch beat battle with valuable recognition from at least one high-profile producer. Contrary to justified concerns about how Twitch exploits power asymmetries with livestreamers (Partin, 2020), Spell appreciated that 'all that Twitch care about is the live aspect [so] I can take the VOD from Twitch and I can repost it to YouTube', enabling him to reach audiences across different platforms.

Moreover, livestreaming can be lucrative, potentially lessening the need to undertake other profitable platform activities. Pinkhairproducer described earning sufficient, albeit unsteady, income by running his Twitch channel: 'I don't know the exact number every month, it fluctuates from month-to-month, but I know that I'm gonna be getting a pay-check where I'll be able to, you know, sustain and live off of'. Yung Skrrt described the significant yet variable economic potential of his Twitch streams similarly, recalling when 'there was one person who randomly found my stream and gifted like 650 subs in one night and like 69, 000 bits in one night and was just like that's crazy . . . it's just so lucrative'. Such success stories sit alongside many abortive attempts to branch out into livestreaming, like Swerv and Phuse, who began streaming during the COVID-19 pandemic but returned to more stable work when able. For Swerv, streaming merely 'helped a little bit . . . when I wasn't able to work'. Still, producers who never earned substantial income from streaming highlighted other benefits of their time on Twitch, such as connecting with other producers and gaining online exposure which helped grow their audiences on other platforms (e.g. Instagram), thus acting as a form of cross-promotion. For the most successful livestreamers, the Twitch Partner Programme improves revenue splits, so Spell and Yung Skrrt pursued partnership with the platform. Pinkhairproducer has additionally leveraged his work as a producer and streamer to join the Twitch-run selective programme The Collective, which provides online educational workshops, guidance and industry connections for music livestreamers. Pinkhairproducer reflected on

> getting amazing help from them today and opportunities that I would have never gotten [sic] if I wasn't in the program. They featured me on [Twitch's] front page and we had this thing called

a relay raid . . . They're partnered with Rolling Stone, United Masters, DistroKid, Discord . . . and anything new that comes to Twitch, we at The Collective, we get access to that first.

Such platform-led initiatives assist music livestreamers with a range of career development opportunities, yet admittedly Pinkhairproducer had already developed a sizable audience through years of consistent work creating for the platform. Arguably, something like The Collective is a poor alternative to traditional employment, devoid of conventional benefits and securities for workers, yet it may suit independent music producers whose careers already comprise a diversified set of creative practices. In this regard, platforms can support producers undertaking promotional activities or offset the need for profile-building by facilitating direct connections to industry partners.

Other hip-hop producers do not spend much time or energy on self-promotion, approaching their production work more casually or part-time alongside stable work outside of the music industry. Seneca B highlighted the varied levels of professionalisation involved in music production, as her financial independence from music enabled a reprieve from tasks like social media promotion:

I personally don't feel too much pressure . . . part of it though is because I have a full-time job. . . . I think it is a real thing if people want it (music production) to be their full-time job, like, I think there's a lot of pressure to do everything you possibly can to make that happen.

Like Seneca B, the Japanese producer Ques is not a full-time artist and envisions his social media activity more like a 'sound diary' and an important part of communicating 'what kind of person you are and what kind of life you are making'. These two examples demonstrate forms of participation in the digital music industry disentangled from market incentives, and emphasise the cultural and personal value of music production labour. In his work on video game commentators on YouTube, Postigo (2016: 343) queries a similarly complex relationship between hobbies and work for digital media producers. For many of our hip-hop producer interviewees, given a lack of cultural policy support for their work in their respective regions, the spectrum of casual-to-professional labour is equally marked by a range of creative incentives and market pressures intensified by platform norms.

Platform playlist gatekeeping

We have so far focused on the perceived need for producers to use a range of platforms actively and proficiently. These perceptions partially rely on received wisdom about successful engagement for career development, complying with the conventions of platformised cultural production. Hip-hop producers also discussed more tangible ways in which platforms sustain power inequities. Not only do independent musicians need to create a consistent stream of self-promotional content to compete for audience attention (Arditi, 2021; Marshall, 2021), but they are also beholden to opaque gatekeeping practices, particularly by the major streaming services. Almost all of our interviewees relied on streaming royalties for at least part of their income, yet this was described as a precarious, unpredictable and difficult revenue source to maintain. Aside from low payment

rates to artists, which have been discussed widely (see Hesmondhalgh, 2021a), the musicians in our study chafed at the lack of transparency around high-exposure playlist placements.

With hip-hop accounting for almost a quarter of all Spotify streams in 2023 (Spotify, 2023), the producers we interviewed find themselves in a contradictory position: the overall market share for their genre is significant, yet it is also a highly saturated and competitive segment. One of the most substantial impacts a streaming service can have on artist exposure is track placements on popular playlists. The leading playlists are arguably the crux of Spotify's curational ecosystem, and they carry weight on competing platforms too, able to take a song from relative obscurity to thousands or even millions of listeners in the best-case scenario. As such, streaming services lure artists in and encourage them to cultivate a mind-set of aspiring to get songs placed on playlists, positioning artists in contention for the platform's favour (even though the service itself is ultimately dependent on the music it makes available). In the case of Spotify for Artists, the musician-facing platform that provides certain audience metrics, Birocratic suggested that

> it has that sort of competitive hook, and I've found that it kind of gets people thinking in this sort of commercial way very early on [in their careers]. They (Spotify) make it very compelling to see music as some sort of a career path and to provide the stats so it becomes socially competitive.

While playlisting can be a useful form of intermediation for curators and artists themselves to guide audiences towards media content (Bhaskar, 2016), it has become a distinct gatekeeping tool in the hands of music streaming platforms. Spotify has concentrated platform power to the extent that 'of the 25 most-followed playlists, 24 are maintained and curated by Spotify' and 'playlists owned and curated by Spotify also cover more than 75 per cent of the followers of the top 1,000 playlists', sustained using a combination of algorithms and staff decision-making (Aguiar and Waldfogel, 2021: 656). Moreover, the leading playlists are dominated by songs from major record labels, who also own and operate their own playlists, sometimes concealed as distinct-sounding brands (Aguiar and Waldfogel, 2021: 657). Major label support thus provides a distinct advantage to artists seeking exposure – much like in the traditional music economy – with significant challenges presented to independent artists without connections to such playlists nor experience pitching songs to the platforms.

Several of our interviewees bemoaned their limited abilities to achieve lucrative playlist placements. Pitching requires appealing to playlist curators either through the support of a record label, facilitated by pre-existing relationships (Jansson and Hracs, 2018: 1620), or by submitting a form in the platform interface. Yung Skrrt spoke colourfully about the challenging process of pitching songs independently, with disappointing results: 'in terms of Spotify playlist placements, it's so random . . . I literally will submit for playlisting all the time. Every time I do a new release I'll submit: nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing'. On rare occasions, experimental approaches have unexpectedly paid off for him:

I'll literally scream at them in the fucking prompt, just all caps, like, 'YOU NEED TO FUCK WITH ME, I'VE RELEASED A BILLION SONGS, I'M THE BEST.'., a full paragraph, all caps text. And then they'll put me in [the playlist] *hyperpop* or something, you know, like, with two days' advance [notice]. There's so much involved with that. You could submit the best song ever . . . It's just so fickle and finicky and unpredictable.

In a similar account of Spotify's precarious pitching system, Seneca B pointed out that the Spotify For Artists platform only allows artists to submit a track for consideration once. For her, this exacerbates the sense that the platform is a 'black box' and that curatorial decisions are a 'highly guarded secret'. For artists like Fiendsh, who have previously benefitted from international record label-supported distribution and playlisting, access to this network of editorial playlist curators still remains elusive. Streaming platforms' control over these intermediary practices undermines the supposed democratising promise of accessible music distribution to counter traditional industry gatekeeping (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Hence, Seneca B suggests that this model carries similar power asymmetries to an earlier era of the music industry, just with a little more unpredictability: 'I don't think it's really changed a tonne, except that every once in a while someone will have their song explode for no reason'.

Nonetheless, artists are inclined to continue participating in this system because playlist placements can have significant effects on listener numbers and therefore royalty payments. Our interviewees discussed a number of corollaries. Ciel mentioned a quasi-underground market of large third-party playlists that exists to exploit artists by soliciting payment for song placements. She alluded to middlemen services like SubmitHub and Daily Playlists which have stated aims to improve artists' chances of having playlist submissions approved. Engaging these intermediary services also carries a risk, as streaming platforms have become rife with botted playlists, which can lead to artists being banned if they are identified (rightly or wrongly) as automated uploads. Alternative streaming platforms like Soundcloud and Bandcamp, which have limited capacities to form playlists comprising songs by multiple artists, are not so 'mired in this playlist culture' sustained by the major distributors, according to Birocratic. The capacity of alternative platforms to remain competitive in reaching audiences may be limited, however (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019), with significant structural changes made to Soundcloud and Bandcamp changing ownership several times since this interview. Despite the difficulties with getting playlisted experienced by most producers in our sample, Pastels described several successful placements attained both independently and through her Canadian label, Nettwerk Music. Label sponsorship may therefore continue to provide artists with an important means of career development given platforms' intermediatory power.

Negotiations between labels and streaming companies have led to new industry standards concerning samples in music, which represent a significant intervention into hip-hop's creative practices. The major digital streaming platforms have intensified screening for copyright violations, and labels share a risk-aversion towards music built on prior musical recordings (except by artists signed to their own rosters who, conversely, have been encouraged to conspicuously sample and thereby reinvigorate hits on the label's back catalogue**).** Sampling is a core tenet of hip-hop music (Schloss, 2004; Williams, 2013), indeed integral to making beats across many styles. The producers we interviewed

observed an increasing reticence from labels to sign artists making sample-based music and an accompanying difficulty getting streaming services to accept tracks to the platform. Spell, who generally integrates short, subtle and carefully manipulated samples of pre-existing audio recordings into his beats, has never had these intensifying restrictions threaten his independent releases onto streaming platforms. Others reported rejections from labels or overbearing copyright claims: Seneca B, Saib and Birocratic all identified a distinct shift in the disposition of lo-fi hip-hop labels that developed in the 2010s, increasingly rejecting artist submissions that clearly contained sampled material. Independent and emerging artists looking to get songs placed on playlists, let alone streaming services at all, describe feeling a need to make music that does not contain identifiable samples. Such developing conventions around playlist placements and copyright restrictions present significant barriers to hip-hop producers developing careers in the platform era.

Conclusion

The music industry has always presented a range of structural barriers to independent artists seeking to professionalise. Digital transformations in the creative industries may have intensified certain power inequalities while democratising access to music distribution and establishing new competition concerning social media visibility. For hip-hop producers (and other artists), difficulties associated with developing careers in music production now intersect not only with traditional industry stakeholders like record labels but also gatekeeping processes sustained by online media platforms. While we have focused on how platform effects shape music producers' labour across the board, future research could productively examine how power asymmetries relate to the politics of identity, especially the considerably racialised and gendered dynamics of the digital music economy. It would also be beneficial to study artists working in different genre contexts.

Our interview-based study explored the perspectives of digitally engaged hip-hop producers concerning their careers and platform uses. We presented reflections on how work as a producer has become an increasingly diverse, nuanced and multi-faceted role in the social media era, with accompanying time and energy costs. The most time-consuming (and, perhaps, dreaded) part of establishing a creative public profile concerned making promotional social media content to reach audiences in an oversaturated attention economy. This echoes broader sentiments concerning the importance of relational labour in popular music culture (Baym, 2018), especially by artists who have publicly bemoaned their labels' insistence on making TikTok videos to support music releases (Taylor, 2022). Some producers described alternative forms of self-promotional content, like livestreaming, which enables them to undertake music production as a form of streamed entertainment, though with unreliable economic outcomes. Finally, we examined some ways in which platforms prevent producers from developing fulfilling or economically viable careers. Our interviewees described having to play almost entirely on platforms' terms, pitching tracks to playlists and abiding by stricter copyright standards.

This article reinforces prior research around power asymmetries associated with the platformisation of cultural production while also highlighting opportunities for

compliance with, or resistance to, platform effects. Alongside particular grievances, music producers reported ongoing aspirational accounts of participating in the digital music economy. All shared the view that existing conventions established by online media platforms and accompanying audience expectations has increased the range of demands on their creative labour. Many especially scrutinised how poorly creative work is valued and remunerated by music streaming platforms. As online media platforms have concentrated sufficient power over the production and distribution of creative content, emerging artists now face a complex ecosystem of challenges to developing careers in music production.

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