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# (Plat)formatted Creativity: Creating Music in the Age of Streaming

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## Abstract

What impact does music streaming have on the production and aesthetics of popular music? Based on 15 qualitative interviews with Norwegian music creators, this article explores how music production is executed and interpreted under the paradigm of platformization. Following the concept of 'creativity constraints' – a concept highlighting the restraining *and* enabling possibilities inherent in the complex sets of constraints surrounding creative agency – this article proposes an analysis centered around three different views emphasizing *the opportunities*, *the limitations*, and *the negotiations* that are put into play throughout the processes of platformized music production. The article finds that the music creators continuously negotiate between these three different (partly opposing, partly overlapping) views when producing music, of which an exchange between emphasizing the democratizing and creatively liberating potential of platformization, and criticizing the commercializing and creatively standardizing effect platformization (and the attention economy) pose on contemporary music culture, constitutes the analysis discursive point of gravity. In this way, the article highlights various dialectics and contradictions concerning the ways in which popular music production develops under the paradigm of platformization.

## Keywords

attention economy, creativity constraints, music production, music streaming, platform effects, platformization

## Introduction

In a sense, we work backward, either consciously or unconsciously, creating work that fits the venue available to us. That holds true for the other arts as well: pictures are created that fit and look good on white walls in galleries just as music is written that sounds good either in a dance

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club or a symphony hall (but probably not in both). In a sense, the space, the platform, and the software 'makes' the art, the music, or whatever. After something succeeds, more venues of a similar size and shape are built to accommodate more production of the same. (David Byrne in *How Music Works*, 2017).

What impact does music streaming have on the production, style, and aesthetics of popular music? In recent years, these questions have raised debate in online music culture. Corresponding with the discourse regarding the platformization of culture and society (Poell et al., 2022), numerous music critics have highlighted contemporary hit-music's inextricable connection to the *attention economy* and pointed to the *assembly-line-production* of unchallenging, bland, and functionalist music. Shorter, more effective songs, optimized to generate high volumes of streams, are reportedly dominating the charts (see e.g. Pelly, 2018). Counter-debaters argue, however, that this criticism against formulaic and commercially oriented music production rather reproduces longstanding, legacy anxieties related to the mechanical and reproducible nature of the music industry. As put forward by David Hesmondhalgh (2022), the skepticism concerning the technologies' effects on music problematically reproduces old assumptions concerning the supposedly debasing influence of commerce and 'the perceived decline in the standards of musical taste and practice in society' (see Hesmondhalgh, 2022, for an overview of this debate).

This article takes this debate as a starting point to discuss how music creators execute music production under the paradigm of platformization. In particular, it addresses Hesmondhalgh's (2022) call for a more dialectical and situated approach to study platform-based streaming's 'effect on music culture'. While these processes have been subject to much criticism and public commentary in recent years, there is, to my knowledge, currently a lack in research analyzing how artists and other music creators themselves experience *negotiating* with different 'platform logics' when producing music. By focusing my analysis on the creators' own experiences related to platform-based music production, I seek to draw attention to the negotiations taking place between the suggested effects of the platforms and the creative responses of the creators. Thus, I address the artistic opportunities *and* limitations inherent in exploring streaming platforms as a creative medium for distributing music. Empirically based on 15 qualitative interviews with Norwegian music creators (artists, songwriters, producers), this article thus addresses the following Research Questions:

> To what extent does music streaming shape the creative processes of music production? And in what ways do music creators navigate within this landscape?

The article opens with a critical review of prior research on music platformization, before introducing the concept of 'creativity constraints' (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015) as an analytical lens to explore the interaction between media effects and artistic practices – a concept understanding the complex sets of constraints surrounding creative agency as both creatively restraining *and* enabling. Following an account of the study's qualitative interviews, I further propose an analysis centered on three different views emphasizing the *opportunities*, *the limitations*, and *the negotiations* that are put into play throughout the processes of platform-based music production. While articulating

the complex manifestations of platformized music production, I argue how these views are not mutually exclusive, but that they rather constitute dynamic interplays, where the creators advocate continuous exchanges between what I define as an optimistic interpretation of music streaming as creatively liberating, and a critical interpretation of music streaming as creatively limiting.

## Theoretical Framework

### The Platformization of Music

The interaction between digital platforms and cultural producers constitutes the process Anne Helmond (2015) refers to as 'platformization'. While emphasizing the emergent cultural and social significance of online platforms, platformization refers to the processes of companies, industries, and sectors organizing around digital services (social media, online apps, streaming services, etc.) understood as hubs for transactions, communication, and exchange of information. Research on platformization predominantly puts sociocultural practices at the center of analysis, of which questions and tensions related to the platforms conditioning power to determine cultural developments, on the one hand, *and* the platforms democratizing potential, empowering bottom-up, societal participation, on the other, has come to constitute the field's decisive, discursive point of gravity (Poell et al., 2022; van Dijck et al., 2018). Consequently, studies on platformization processes emphasize *both* the platforms' inherent, accumulating tendencies towards power, capital and corporate ownership, *and* the human, cultural practices related to work, democracy, and creativity, of which the platforms facilitate.

While studies on *music* platformization have mainly focused on the financial, infrastructural, and organizational disruption of streaming platforms, emphasizing changing logics related to revenues, copyright, and musical discovery (Eriksson et al., 2019; Marshall, 2019; Wikström, 2013), scattered attempts have also been made to conceptualize the streaming platform's reformatting of recorded music's style and aesthetics.[1] As put forward in the introduction, the idea of short and *compressed* music constitutes the most common perceptions in these studies (Léveillé Gauvin, 2018; Morris, 2020). One highly pronounced characteristic of this development relies on artists 'frontloading' the opening of their songs with as much information as possible, in an attempt to avoid the user *skipping to the next song* (Maasø and Spilker, 2022). Various strategies that reformulate standardized verse-structures, in order to quickly advance to a chorus or a *hook*, are thus presented as productional tactics aimed at keeping the listener 'on-track' the first 30 seconds of a song (Spotify registers a stream after 30 seconds, making the song's opening more *financially significant* than previously). Increased tempo and significantly shorter songs are other, stylistic responses to what is described as a heightened need to streamline the music, of which an elimination of traditionally central sequences (e.g. the song's intro or *bridge*), as well as simpler and *easy-to-catch* melodies, are considered concrete measures to generate higher stream-frequencies. Some studies also find that artists increasingly orient their songs towards playlists contextualized for different moods, contexts, events, and other *scenarios* (such as *the morning-coffee*, *the training-session*, or *the deep-focus-study-mode*), a phenomenon of which Prey (2018) has coined 'the contextual turn' (see also Maasø and Spilker, 2022).

Most of these proposed adaptations are explained through the terms of the 'attention economy' (Léveille Gauvin, 2018; Morris, 2020). As a result of the increased supply of available music, the *demand* is becoming greater than the *supply* of attention, consequently increasing its *value* (Léveille Gauvin, 2018). Pelly (2018) writes correspondingly on how musical trends produced in the streaming era are inherently connected to attention, 'whether it's hard-and-fast-attention-grabbing-hooks, pop-drops and chorus-loops engineered for the pleasure centers of our brains; or music that strategically requires no attention at all—the background music, the emotional-wallpaper, the chill-pop-sad-vibe-playlist fodder'. From the strategy of *frontloading* to the tactical processing of playlist-formatted music, these formulas of 'platform optimization' – the preparation and readying of cultural goods towards 'circulation, discovery and use on particular platforms' (Morris, 2020) – forms strategic efforts to acquire and retain the affection of the audiences. As Maasø and Spilker (2022) argue, the platforms' complex, 'hybrid gatekeeping mechanisms' steer and nudge music consumption in certain directions, making these productional strategies plausible attempts to obtain advantages within the platforms' technical infrastructures.

In such a perspective, the platformization of cultural goods appears rooted in a commercial and capitalist approach to creative production, of which a heightened need to produce and adapt music, to make it stream as well as possible (within the dominant platform infrastructures of music circulation and discovery), is established as a decisive, driving motivation for producing music in the platform society. It is essential, however, to emphasize how socio-technical relationships, amid human cultural practices and platforms, do not merely constitute *top-down-processes*. The concept of platformization, as a lens to explore platforms' impact on creativity, is careful to emphasize how it is the *interactions between* the actor and the platform, of which mutually dependent, shape each other. Morris (2020) underlines that platforms in effect bring 'the conflicting agendas and motivations of platform providers, content creators, retailers, users and more into the same space' of which the result is a 'dynamic and always changing set of relationships and practices'. Contrastive to the idea of the platforms' deterministic power to reformat and commercialize cultural goods, platformization thus refers to the dynamic exchanges between the technology and the actors making use of it. Congruently, Hesmondhalgh (2022) calls for research proposing 'more dialectics, more contradiction, more situated critique' of the various platformization processes that condition cultural production. While exploring the potential for a richer and more robust, emancipatory analysis of streaming's effect on music culture, he questions the validity of the criticism against streaming-formatted music (of which he generally refers to as *simplistic*). The assumptions that platforms facilitate for *bland* and *functionalistic* music, according to Hesmondhalgh, only echoes tenacious myths (previous sets of criticism) of how capitalist values put pressures on the supposedly more 'meaningful, aesthetic musical experiences'. Instead of reproducing what he refers to as earlier eras of dismissing 'other people's music', through a 'debilitating aesthetic relativism', he requests a more dialectical reading of music streaming, directing more attention towards the diverse musical practices responding to the environment in which they exist.

## Constrained Creativity

Focusing on the developmental interactions between music, media, and technology, Hesmondhalgh (2022) reviews a tradition of studies highlighting the historical *continuity* of disruptive media and technologies' ability to reformulate cultural production (Frith and Horne, 2016; Katz, 2010) – the idea that new media influence and change the current logics of creative music production is thus *nothing new*. Through his historically oriented concept 'phonograph effects', Katz (2010) describes the subtle influence of media technologies on the production of music, throughout the 20th century, of which sound recording and distribution have acted as catalysts for the pervasive and ongoing changes in music culture. Central to his premise is a relational understanding of the musicians' exploration of the given format:

> Although we often respond to technology within a context of limited options not of our own making, we must remember that, in the end, recording's influence manifests itself in *human action* [. . .] It is not the technology but the *relationship* between the technology and its users that determines the impact of recording. (Katz, 2010)

Building on this interactive perspective, this article sets out to develop our understanding of the creative practices associated with online platforms. As an analytical tool, platformization constitutes in this context a dimension of what Onarheim and Biskjær (2015) refer to as 'creativity constraints', the 'explicit or tacit factors governing what the creative actor/s must, should, can and cannot do; and what the creative output must, should, can and cannot be'. This term refers to the totality of constraints (technical, practical, social, cognitive, etc.) that conceivably affect creative agency, and constitutes the enclosing space of the more or less limiting and enabling dimensions of possibilities, the creative actor moves within. While understanding creative music production as relatively autonomous, whereby the creators' space to unfold creatively is limited by the framework surrounding him, these constraints can exist on several levels, in different dimensions. The degree of available, technical tools (instruments, recording technology, etc.) governs, for example, the creators' space to explore aesthetic expressions – the music being produced will necessarily be marked by whether it is played on a grand piano or a synthesizer, whether it is produced using analog technology in a studio, or digitally on a digital audio workstation (DAW). Moreover, sociocultural frameworks limit the normative landscape within which the creator moves. Hasegawa (2020) emphasizes, for example, how any musical style (genres, conventions, traditions), in the same way as any medium (streaming, radio, turntables), must be considered 'ensembles of constraints' which in turn require the artworks to conform within 'accepted norms'.

One can add that much existing literature that explores notions of such formatted creativity, tend to emphasize the socioeconomic logics of the music *industry*. As Hesmondhalgh (2022) points out (and criticizes), accusations concerning the debasing influence of capitalist commercialism have traditionally played a key-role in analyses critically emphasizing the standardizing and homogenizing formulas of hit-music. Following the idea of platform-optimization presented earlier, the platformization of music production similarly resonates with the idea that capitalist technologies produce

specific recipes for what is aesthetically needed to fulfill the perceived benefits of distributing music via online platforms (Morris, 2020). While platforms are, in essence, complex assemblages enabling more or less comprehensive sets of usage, the interactions between the cultural producers, the platforms and their embedded, commercial logics tend to generate, as Poell et al. (2022) puts it, 'particular *normative dimensions*' that, in the end 'guide cultural content and expression'. In that sense, platformization, as a constraint governing music production, encompasses the negotiations that occur between music creators and online platforms through which the music circulates, whereas a tension between the medium, the creative processes, and the economic conditions surrounding the creative process, becomes apparent.

Such 'creativity constraints' possess, however, a double potential as both *limiting* and *activating* in creative processes, being essential catalysts for human creativity. Hasegawa (2020) points to how creating music 'with constraints', through the emphasis on rigid compositional limitations in the design of musical creative processes, can act as artistic means to avoid the 'terror of the blank page'. Through comparisons with self-imposed dogmas in adjacent art forms (e.g. von Trier and Vinterberg's *Dogme 95 manifesto*, 1995) he explores how both voluntary constraints (by using limited palettes of pitches, sounds or instruments) and external, contextual constraints (formal, stylistic, processual constraints) can be creatively used as strategies provoking innovation and originality. As Onarheim and Biskjær (2015) underline, such self-imposed constraints exemplifies how manipulation of the creative space of action make for a resource that might 'help attain highly original creative outcomes'.

While the concept of *creativity constraints* has not yet been specifically applied to music, this study builds on this perspective by analyzing how musical practices unfold within the creative space constrained by music streaming. In that sense, the article does not aim to offer a singular definition of what constitutes creativity, nor to produce any exhaustive framework consisting of all the countless constraints framing creative work – it is solely the formatting role of platformization that forms the center of discussion. While avoiding the somewhat exaggerated dichotomy between creativity and commerce, the article moreover draws on perspectives understanding creativity and commerce as something 'co-constructed through a broader system of *creative flows and constraints*' (Poell et al., 2022: 137). Building on these perspectives, I will in the following analysis thus examine how music creators explore the possibilities and limitations inherent in creating music aimed at distribution and circulation on streaming platforms. Understood as socio-technical constructs, platformization thus constitutes the conceptual framework for exploring how constrained, formatted creativity unfolds in online music culture.

## Methods

Empirically, the study involves 15 qualitative interviews with selected Norwegian artists, songwriters, and producers, consisting of 7 woman and 8 men with ages ranging from 23 to 40. Accordingly, the informants represent the Norwegian musical field, which is often referred to as an early-developed and advanced market for music streaming (Nordgård, 2016). We can roughly divide the selection into three categories: The first category includes *songwriters* operating mainly within commercial genres associated

with pop music and electronic dance music. Through collaborations with various celebrated names in Nordic pop music, they all affiliate with one of the three major record-companies (Sony, Universal, Warner), thus being professionally employed as *music creators*. This group mainly develops musical texts in the form of lyrics, melodies, and compositions. The second category involves a group of *producers*. While collaborating with several prominent Norwegian acts, this group connects to genres designated as Nordic-pop and Norwegian-language-hip-hop and enjoys recognition as tone-setting premise-providers for the Norwegian popular-music scene. As more technically enterprising, this group is more occupied with recording, mixing, and mastering music – although several see textual design (lyrics, melodies, composition) as an integral part of these processes as well. The third category encompasses *artists* who write, compose, and perform music within a range of popular-music genres (pop music, indie, hip-hop, electronica, etc.), which are all heavily involved in both the preceding processes (songwriting and production).

The distinction between these categories is, however, fluid. While some see themselves as concoctions of being artists, songwriters, and producers, others distinctively cultivate their dedicated role. In general, it is challenging to enforce a collective term that encompasses all the different functions and approaches that people who create music in online environments, professionals as well as amateurs, apply. Terms such as music *maker*, *creator*, or *practitioner* (Cunningham, 2021; Mjøs, 2013), could all function as overarching, unifying terms. Given the digital context the creators operate within, I choose to base this article on the term *music-creator*, hereby defined as *artists, songwriters and producers who create musical content with, for, and across digital platforms – be it streaming, social media or other multimedia platforms*. Although this sample's creators advocate varying degrees of belonging to this term (as several also produce music within more traditional formats, for example in the form of albums presented on LP-records), they are all, in one way or another, inextricably connected to the digital music economy.

The interviews were conducted between December 2021 and November 2022 and lasted 40–75 minutes. The data were transcribed verbatim and coded through a theme-based analysis-strategy (Braun and Clarke, 2012), which involved identifying various themes across the interviews. Through open and inductive coding, key-categories were then identified and synthesized into analytical concepts that constitute the following analysis.

As qualitative research inherently yields *discursive data*, researchers working with qualitative interviews have little authority to say anything beyond the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes the participants choose to share in the interview situation (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015). In this study, analyzing online cultural practices, a challenge arises in the distance between what the participants proclaim, *when talking about music production*, and what they actually do *when practicing music production*. Moreover, through exclusively analyzing perceptions expressed *frontstage*, it is consequently problematic to identify whether one actually uncovers genuine attitudes argued for *backstage* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). As this study implicitly addresses the aforementioned *creativity-commerce-dialectic*, one can assume that constituted, established values within the musical field inform the attitudes being expressed. Various forms of 'industry lore' (Sundet

and Colbjørnsen, 2021), a concept describing how particular industry participants make sense of field-specific developments on a collective scale, might additionally occur – potentially uncritically reproducing widespread, normative views on (in this matter) how platforms alter music production. Although prescriptive ideals associated with *the autonomy of art* have been nuanced and criticized in recent decades, it is still in this landscape this study's participants negotiate their own legitimacy. Whereas explicit questions was asked, regarding how various platform-logics were believed to be *formatting* in the participants respective, creative processes, implicit questions regarding how *commercial motives* were informative in their processes, was also raised. Consequently, the interviews risked producing variations of 'social desirability bias' (Marquis, 2015), whereby the participants shared reflections that could be perceived to be *in line* with expected ideals associated with being an artist.

Being aware of these challenges, I explained to the interviewees how the study explores how human creativity unfolds within these frameworks, carefully charging the questions accordingly. Subsequently, the analysis neither emphasizes the concrete, developing traits of 'platformized music', *per se*, nor the particular descriptions of the creators' productional practices. Rather it focuses on how the creators externally perceive and negotiate their own legitimacy, when discussing platformized music production. In that context, I have focused my interview questions on the participants' creative processes, one of which asks whether creativity can thrive within the constraints imposed by platforms. Thus, the participants' discursive reflections on the phenomenon of music platformization constitute the primary focus of the analysis.

## Analysis: Platformized Creativity

This analysis proposes what I will define as a *dialectical* and *situated* understanding of streaming platforms formatting power on musical creativity. While the creators initially form a consensual notion of the ways in which streaming platforms, in general, catalyze aesthetic and productional changes in pop music (as they all refer to different productional examples and observations related to streaming-formatted optimization strategies, including several characteristics outlined in the theory section), there are, however, differing perceptions on the *power* and *influence* of these formatting processes. The creators are, first, hesitant when discussing the level of influence, they themselves experience being exposed to. Second, they tell of varying degrees of *willingness* to allow themselves to be formatted by these influences: Some claim they adapt and willingly allow themselves to be 'affected'; others are principled opponents of these developments and emphasize how they actively try to oppose the compositional trends the platforms ostensibly produce; while a third group advocate a more disarming attitude of which they understand this overall, technological development in light of a historical and continuous influence that, to some degree, always has characterized the evolution of music production.

Based on these differing facets in the understanding of the *platformization of music production*, I will in the following analysis discuss different perceptions of trends and paradoxes related to the idea of streaming-formatted, creative music production. I will specifically give an account of three different (partly opposing, partly overlapping) views

provided by the creators. These are: an optimistic view of *the creative possibilities* the platforms possess; a critical view of *the creative limitations* the platforms offer; and a more ambivalent view that enforces an intermediate position, of which various *negotiations* between the platforms' structures and the creators' autonomy, is played out. The last part will particularly highlight what I define as 'creative platform negotiations' and will be structured as the article's discussion.

## Creative Possibilities

Among the creators who place greater emphasis on the creative possibilities facilitated by the platforms, one can argue that a more optimistic attitude towards the platforms and, more generally, the internet's 'democratizing potential' is enforced. Central to their analysis rests an understanding of the total, expanded space the platforms possess, of which an almost 'unlimited sea of music', consisting of all possible expressions and impressions, altogether provides a greater magnitude of inspiration and creative output. This understanding builds on the ways in which streaming platforms have come to lower the barriers for people to involve in both music production and distribution, putting forward the theoretical possibility that *anyone*, *anywhere* could *make it*, regardless of their economic, network-based, or sociocultural background. In the following paragraphs, I will point to three specific examples derived from this view, conceptualized as the *new voices*, the *new genres*, and the *new approaches* of (platformized) music production.

Regarding the *new voices* of (platformized) music production, several of the creators emphasize the low entry costs of participating in online music production, distribution, and consumption. As opposed to the idea of a legacy, conservative music industry, that to a large extent was controlled by corporate agents – predominantly in accordance with white, patriarchal sociocultural constructions (Bridge, 2020) – platformization processes are, in this view, considered as catalysts for exposing *new types of voices*, providing *new styles of music*, consisting of a more diverse origin (these include an understanding of platforms increasing the exposure of different ethnicities, nationalities, genders, etc.). For one creator, the prominent rise of hip-hop – as one of the most influential genres in contemporary, global music culture – constitutes an example of this development. As a genre originating from multicultural exchanges, primarily between African-Americans and children of Caribbean immigrants in the USA (Crossley, 2005), this creator argues how the progression of hip-hop marks the ways in which disenfranchised youth of marginalized backgrounds, are granted a greater deal of influence in the digital, platform-centric era. While this argument holds an idea that previous, gatekeeping agents (especially located around the major record companies), are losing power to determine the general popular music picture, on the one hand, platforms such as YouTube and Soundcloud are, on the other hand, highlighted as key drivers of a more democratized music industry. One creator says the following:

> For many who are creative within these frameworks – and especially for producers working within hip-hop – the availability of platforms and digital tools has been crucial. There is now a shorter path from idea to publication, for a wider part of the population. This has enabled the emergence of new exciting music that never would have been produced otherwise [. . .] In the

US specifically, the audience that exists [within hip-hop] now possesses a greater opportunity to listen to the music they love. Many of those who could not afford CDs in the 90s, can now search music on YouTube for free. Thus, we now see more rap artists gaining bigger hits, of which contribute to push the genre forward.

The creator presents a cause-and-effect-explanation of the symbiosis between the increased availability of more diversified musical expressions, and the subsequent productions inspired by these expressions. By allowing more people affiliated with hip-hop to enter the scene, the genre flourishes and stimulates more productions of a greater variety. In that sense, platformization processes are seen in conjunction with a view illustrating the dissolution of constraints, advocating an *unconstrained* approach to creativity, promoting the idea that online platforms hold an (almost) unlimited creative potential. Correspondingly, the globalized nature of the growing platform paradigm is understood by several of the creators as beneficial for all different types of niche-based music and subcultural genres, which through international connections have a greater opportunity to reach out and find their specific audiences, across geographical and other sociocultural limitations. Accordingly, several of the study's creators talk about how music streaming platforms 'open doors' and contribute to producing 'new ways for expressing [themselves]'.

Regarding the *new genres* of (platformized) music production, several of the creators representing this optimistic view respectively emphasize how previous, cultural silos of creative expressions (styles, genres) are becoming torn down by online platformization processes. Illustrative of this is the phenomenon of 'genre-bending'. Genre-bending represents a kind of detachment from previous cultural frameworks, defined as 'the subversion of tropes associated with a particular artistic genre or the synthesis of multiple genres' (Wiktionary, n.d.). As a genre-transcending synthesis of different, previously strictly separated styles, several of the creators argued that this phenomenon represents a manifestation of how a new, rising generation of musicians has grown up being seemingly exposed to a greater breadth of musical expressions (compared to previous generations). Instead of belonging to different dedicated subcultures, which are uniform in their specific, respective identity markers (e.g. the cultures of punk, metal, hip-hop), several of the creators understand this mix of genres as an expression of a generation that has grown up having access to creative inspiration 'from all kinds of styles'.[2] One of the artists working within genres such as indie pop and hip-hop says the following:

With the internet and such, genres have merged and blurred. Especially in the pop world, where much is inspired by hip-hop and indie music. Me and my co-producer enjoy all types of music and like to pick up bits-and-pieces from different types of genres [. . .] Genre-bending is what people are doing now. Which I believe is a natural development as you have the opportunity to record references from all possible genres, at the minute.

Contemporary popular artists such as Lil Nas X, Billie Eilish, and Lizzo are frequently put forward as examples of this trend, respectively being exponents of fusions between rap and country, goth and indie-pop, or hip-hop and rock (Shah, 2019). Among the creators advocating this thesis, these developments are considered creatively deliberating,

whereas expanded sources of inspiration are seen as innovative forces in the overall evolution of popular music. As one creator puts it:

> All these things help push things forward and I think it's incredibly exciting that everyone with a laptop now has the opportunity to produce and release music. This development helps to influence what music we listen to and the ways in which the music sounds, because you have access to several reference points.

Looking at the *new approaches* associated with creative music production, the democratizing possibilities of platformization makes itself known through what Poell et al. (2022) describe as 'grassroot' or 'bottom-up creativity', or as what Burgess (2007) labels 'vernacular creativity' – the everyday practices of cultural production performed by *ordinary* people. As extensively defined throughout the platform literature, the platformization of music culture has thus been sown on fertile ground for the emergence of an ever-growing, *amateur segment* of musical producers (Wikström, 2013). Analogous to the examples of hip-hop and genre-bending, as representing emerging voices and genres of popular music, new and innovative ways of utilizing the available tools and media at hand are subsequently unfolding, producing new aesthetic traits. In particular, different ways of playing with digital productional tools (predominantly within the formats of various DAW's), in an *uneducated* or *untutored* manner, is (as argued by some of the creators) carving ground for new musical expressions. Following the idea of *unconstrained* productional practices, making music, as one creator labels it, 'the wrong way', represents in this perspective a detachment from established, normative, and professional productional practices. One creator points out, in particular, how a type of 'incorrect' and 'playful' DIY-approach towards music production has become defining for several, emerging musical trends produced in the era of the platforms, of which a type of 'rebellion against the established' has been given a freer scope. She says the following:

> [I think the musical development in recent years] is the result of 13–17-year-olds not really knowing what they were doing. In the same way as with punk and grunge, where you made noise and did everything wrong [. . .] you now hear hip-hop-songs where the sound peaks and clips and where everything is wrong, but still sounds *dope* [. . .] If you had gone to a technically knowledgeable person, you would probably have been told that it was wrong [. . .] [But] if things had remained as they always have been, you wouldn't hear the 808-clip or the distorted guitar, because it would have been *the-wrong-way-to-do-it*. But there is always one or two 17-year-olds who say *fuck you* to the established and go on to set new standards.

As this extract reflects, this development of people experimenting, exploring, and doing things *the wrong way*, is well known in a popular music historical perspective and several of these examples are reminiscent of comparable features and trends equivalent to earlier eras in the history of popular music. Today, however, we see platforms more explicitly putting 'creator culture' at the center of their business models, by facilitating and building infrastructures for expanded production and distribution of amateur or vernacular content (see e.g. Spotify, 2022). As outlined by Wikström (2013), the divisions between who's *professional* and who's *amateur*, between who's *producer* and who's *consumer*, are slowly getting erased in the new music economy.

Altogether, the representatives of this view advocate what I argue is a more positive interpretation of how streaming platforms have acted to diversify and creatively redeem parts of the popular musical space. As more people, at the crossroads of global music culture, have gained expanded access to both produce and consume music – in all possible forms – a new generation of music creators, consisting of more diverse backgrounds, has been able to draw on a multitude of different references, in an experimental and exploratory play with the seemingly 'countless' possibilities the platforms, the digitality and (overall) the internet proposes. As one of the producers proclaims: 'Anyone, anywhere in the world could record a song today and publish it on a streaming platform tomorrow. People can say whatever they want about that, but I believe that is a good thing.'

## Creative Limitations

Contrastive to the enthusiastic reading of the platforms' artistic prospects outlined in the previous section, stand the creators representing the opposite end of the scale holding a more critical outlook emphasizing the *creative limitations* of streaming platforms. In this part of the analysis, the idea of media and technology's formatting power to (especially) commercialize music culture, depicts the main argument. Inherent to this view is an understanding of the streaming platforms (and their integral logics) as mediums favoring certain musical features and genres, which over time contribute to homogenize and standardize music circulation, consumption – and hence also the creative processes of music production. As comparably described by Morris (2020), this view revolves around the platforms' technical construction of specific formulas for making music that are optimized for circulation in and throughout the platforms' technical infrastructure. Building on the understandings of the inexorable link between platformization and the attention economy, I will in this section thus outline two contrasting ways of producing music optimized for platform circulation which I refer to as: *attention-seeking music* and *attention-rejecting music*.

*Attention-seeking music* is, in this context, pop music that capitalizes on making use of different strategic, attention-driven sonic functions. Among the creators advocating this view, the discursive points of reference are centered around the idea that the contemporary, platformized society brings with it an informational pressure that manifests in 'lost attention', among the public, the audiences, and the users of media. As outlined in the theory section, shorter songs, high tempo, and so-called *frontloading* strategies characterize this type of music. Correspondingly, the creators tell about how they are searching for sounds that 'jumps out of the mix', how they strive to make 'hard-hitting', 'catchy', 'compressed', 'immediate', or 'overstimulating' types of music, whereas the production 'has clear functions', 'goes straight-to-the-point' (or 'right-in-your-face') and where the listener is transported 'quickly-to-the-point' (all these quotations are drawn from the data, representing a seemingly guiding mindset in the creative, platform-based productional processes).[3] Several creators link these musical features to different, popular genres such as 'hyperpop' or 'trap', and points to the self-referential approach embedded within these styles. As one creator proclaims, these types of attention-seeking music

are advocating more personal and 'relatable' lyrical functions, ultimately manifesting what she refers to as 'expressive music':

> There are many expressive genres out there nowadays and much of this music has reached a point where you have to be *hyper-relatable*, preferably in a very short time, in order to immediately perform something *human*. A lot of lyrics today, especially in American pop songs, are extremely personal: 'I-had-anxiety-at-the-pharmacy' or 'I-can't-pay-my-rent' or 'My-friends-hate-me,-but-do-they-really?' . . . These are songs that immediately try to make the music more *human* and *edible*. At the same time, you have hyperpop, hip-hop and trap where the artists like to exaggerate or even lie, and where everybody is extremely *colorful* and characteristic in how they express themselves. And this goes back to the technology, the distribution, and all the different platforms on which we express ourselves. For example, TikTok, Instagram and such.

As mentioned earlier, the *30-second-openings* reflect these tendencies in particular, whereby the music must adjust to 'capturing' and 'relating to' the audiences as immediately as possible – a tendency which TikTok and short-form video-reels are considered to be driving even further (Leight, 2019). As one creator proclaims: 'People have gone from listening to albums to songs, to *parts of songs*', while referring to the trend of particular *hooks* going viral on TikTok. While several creators adjust and deliberately exploit these aesthetic traits in their own creative processes, this accelerating, cultural development is predominantly discussed in critical terms, throughout the data (being referred to as 'formula-based', 'desperate' or even 'fussy'). One creator says the following about how the quest for attention informs his creative processes:

> I find myself getting a bit preoccupied with using sounds that *jump out of the song*. Productions that try to *grab people's attention* in a way that *sticks out* and *pops out of the speakers* [. . .] But I also try to work against it. Because you hear how desperate it sounds. I don't believe it is fertile to make art from a *desperate starting point*, or in a way that is extremely *attention-seeking*. I don't want to think that the music I make should be the most marketable version of what it can be. I rather try to make sure I don't forget that the goal is to make *art*. However, in the times we live now, I believe that this way of thinking is under some kind of attack.

Reflecting upon the ways in which these developments influence his productions, this statement suggests how music creators are, to a greater or lesser extent, occupied with tailoring music in accordance with logics associated with streaming platforms and their embedded connection to the attention economy. However, the stated resistance against getting forced to create music that mainly stimulates commercial or *marketable* requirements (in this context believed to be forces attacking the autonomy of artistic production), reflects how creatively constraining frameworks sat by platforms also drives creators to think of ways to create innovative expressions that takes both *economic* and *artistic* motives into consideration. As we will return to, these *negotiations* amid the platforms delimiting infrastructure, and the creators' autonomy, constitutes an imperative approach to the ways in which these creators think about producing music in the era of streaming.

Considering the diametrical opposite manifestation of platformized music production, *attention-rejecting music* refers to productions formatted towards specific playlists categorized according to contexts and moods. Denoted as 'background' or 'utility music', attention-rejecting music reflects a mode of musical performance in which the music is not intended to constitute the apparent focus of the listener, but rather to function as a 'sonic-wallpaper' swaying the listeners behavior or emotional response (Lanza, 2004). In this study, two creators working within the sub-genre of *lo-fi beats* are representative of this trend. Defined as a distinct *Spotify-genre*, synthesizing elements of hip-hop, boom-bap, and smooth-jazz, lo-fi beats constitutes an exclusively instrumental genre, that combines slow and relaxing beats with acoustic, analog-style instruments (Winston and Saywood, 2019). While being almost entirely mediated through the internet, the genre enjoys global success by achieving key-placements on contextualized, mood-based streaming-playlists, often labelled with names such as 'Study session', 'Lazy Sunday', 'Morning Coffee', and so on.[4] While the creators representing this genre express a genuine interest in exploring the artistic potential it holds, several of the creators discuss lo-fi beats (and other, neighboring sub-genres) in speculative terms as *cheap* approaches for *making money*. One of the creators being more critical of this trend expresses himself in the following way:

> *Soft tunes* and music that can be played in the background, is music that has won big-time on streaming. All kinds of music that is easy to listen to passively [. . .] I have a lot of producer friends starting lo-fi side-projects now, as this is music that is easy to make and because there are so many popular playlists for lo-fi beats. They think of it as a 'money-hack', where you can just release a ton of tracks, get it into a couple of playlists – and then suddenly you can generate a lot of money on the side. That kind of music wins pretty easily. It is a streaming *kind-of-thing* and constitutes its own, separate world.

While experiencing success on platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, and Soundcloud, the two creators working explicitly within this genre maintain a high distribution frequency. Building on what seems to be a well-established, genre-specific industry structure – of which apparently a magnitude of global record companies collaborates on distribution, by, among other things, constructing compilation albums and so-called 'third-party-playlists' – they advocate a strategy by releasing up to 20 or 30 singles a year. While reflecting on the success of this approach, one of the creators declares that his music has up to 100 million streams on Spotify annually and that there are continuously around 5 million subscribers to his Spotify profile. In contrast to the exponents of the attention-seeking music, of which *expressivity* and *visibility* constitutes key aesthetic components, the *artist-brand* itself seems, however, to be less important within this genre. While being among the few who make a living solely through streaming, this creator has an almost non-existent profile in the media (he almost never does interviews, never holds concerts, and has a somewhat limited social media profile). Commenting on his success on Spotify, he says the following about the public *ignorance* he experiences being exposed to:

> I have good stats on Spotify. Right now, it stands at 8 million this month [. . .] I do not follow Norwegian pop music that close, but I recently read an article about TIX [one of Norway's most

popular artists] being the most streamed Norwegian artist in 2021. But looking at his stats I can see that he has fewer monthly listeners than me. I have a lot more.

Ostensibly proceeding in silence, the popularity of lo-fi beats seems to actually succeed over artists representing the more attention-grabbing music of the hit-charts (if this anecdotal example is to be emphasized). At a time when the battle for attention is perceived and described as more intense than ever before, this branch of platformized music thus seems to constitute a pool of music creators capitalizing on *staying in the background* by producing music that requires less activity, less attention, of the listener.

Overall, this view emphasizing the creative limitations of platformization forms an idea of streaming as creatively constraining music, in a way that produces specific formulas and recipes for achieving success on online platforms. Although the exponents of attention-rejecting music (the creators of lo-fi beats) represent an artistic willingness to experiment with the logics proposed by the platforms, the creators who represent this view hold a critical attitude towards the commercial, homogenizing tendency these (partially opposing) manifestations of platformized music represent. While discussing the trend of corporate industry players specifically requesting musical productions tailored for explicit platforms and/or pre-determined contexts (as the act of composing 'Spotify-songs' or 'TikTok-tracks', or any other 'mood-based songs', are becoming more and more common objectives, throughout contemporary, professional songwriting sessions), one of the artists says the following about the ways in which *adapting to the format* contributes to the degradation of the value of music as an art form:

> There are probably many [who adapt] and I have walked into sessions in the US where people are like: 'Hey! Let's make a TikTok-song!' And as soon as people say that a part of me dies inside. Because that's not what's important. It's such the wrong focus. These people change the order by claiming that the platform is more important than the art, and that the platforms are there to take advantage of the art, instead of promoting and elevating it. I simply hate it.

## Platform Negotiations

Taken together, these two views analyzing the ways in which platformization impacts creative music production, represent an apparent paradox: The platforms' formatting power can be seen as both a space for creative *possibilities*, of which lowered barriers for participating in music production and distribution constructs an expanded, *unconstrained* space involving a greater diversity of creators and musical expressions; and as a *limitation*, of which platforms are seen as determinist forces standardizing, homogenizing, and *constraining* music, by producing specific formulas for platform-optimized music. In this analysis, however, these divergent views do not represent mutual exclusion, but rather different modes of interpreting platforms as formatting constraints guiding creative processes. As the data reveal, the creators actively advocate an ambivalent attitude towards these frameworks – they are all dynamic actors that are constantly negotiating between these different *opposing* views. While presenting a third view, which maintains an intermediate position between the optimistic interpretation of platforms as enabling creative opportunities, and the critical interpretation of platforms as limiting creative

processes, I will in the following discussion reflect on what I refer to as 'creative plat-form negotiations', of which *limitations understood as opportunities* constitute the dis-cursive point of gravity. This includes what I will describe as a dogmatic and rational view on creativity, which negotiates, balances, and consciously *makes use of* formatting dimensions associated with, in particular, the logics of the attention economy.

Among the creators who are most representative of this view, we find a creative atti-tude towards exploring music production within the artistic potential of the given format. This view revolves around an understanding of the artist being able to creatively take advantage of the 'tools at hand'. Coinciding with the ideas of 'creating with constraints' (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015; Hasegawa, 2020), and the rife artistic tradition of using dogmas as creative catalysts, several of the creators discuss the 'creative challenge' that lies in the act of producing work that 'functions well' (both commercially and artisti-cally) within the prevailing framework proposed by the platforms. One creator thus talks about how delimiting principles holds a potential to 'push creativity', while another understands the formatting principles of platformization as 'codes to be cracked'. He says the following:

> I know that when I release new music, it ends up on Spotify. Thus, I must deal with the fact that the format in which people encounter my music is on playlists such as New Music Friday. So, for me, [the basic question is therefore]: How do I make a [musical] expression that represents what I stand for, on a platform and in a format that I hate?

In this perspective, the instrumental formatting that occurs in wake of platformization is not necessarily perceived as creatively *problematic*, but rather as creative *encounters* testing the artistic capacities of the performing actor. As Hasegawa (2020) notes, such constraints (as imposed by the platforms) hold a potential to spur and guide musical crea-tivity. For several of the creators, the act of experimenting with the normative conven-tions proposed by the platforms, thus constitute creative tactics that seek to fulfill or explore the artistic potential of producing platform-optimized music (Morris, 2020). For one creator, who has made a name for herself within alternative, electronic music, the prospects of making her music more 'immediate', hence cutting down on long, 'hover-ing' intros, is understood as something to be explored artistically. While envisioning a more conceptual, artistic project, that tests what today's pop conventions allow for, she states that the prevalent notion of the audiences' diminishing 'attention span' is a devel-opmental feature that informs her artistic process.

Correspondingly, several of the creators discuss how one can 'experiment', 'investi-gate' or 'play with the format', and identifies several ways of exploring the potential that lies in coping with the demand for attention. In this context, various short-form publish-ing strategies are particularly central. For example, one creator talks about the impor-tance of sequencing distribution strategies in ways that are able to nurture the audience's devotion over time, and emphasizes both the financial and artistic potential of, among other things, releasing chains of mini-albums – an eventually well-known strategy made famous by artists like Robyn, Kanye West and others, of which series of shorter, more effective releases together form larger, conceptual wholes (Shah, 2018). Another creator similarly recounts how she successfully produced a set of short-form one-minute music

videos in the format of Instagram-reels, when promoting her last EP. This potential, of producing small, artistic glimpses across various streaming and social media platforms, is generally highlighted by several as an opportunity to build 'larger [artistic] universes' that provide space to explore and play with one's own 'artistic identity' – preferably through series of images, videos, texts, interactions with fans, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, however, these approaches of adjusting to the format is by no means new. Throughout the history of popular music, numerous aesthetic expressions (styles, genres) have sprung up in response to constantly changing media and technological innovations, which (in this context are understood as creative *obstacles*) have pushed the creative actors to find new artistic, innovative solutions (Katz, 2010). The well-known three-minute pop single was, for example, an aesthetic response which, in its time, adapted to the capacity limitations of the 78-rpm record (Katz, 2010), while the tradition of distortion (another example representing key aesthetic components associated with rock music) developed, in turn, by experimenting with sounds that pushed the volumetric capacities of the recording and media technology of the time (Bromham and Moore, 2023). In all these cases, the interaction between the medium and the creative responses of the producer, together sets out new aesthetic directions, forced forth by the producer playing on team with the delimiting capacities of the medium. In a discussion concerning the coinciding, normative constraints that exist in (more generally) creating pop music, one creator says the following: 'The key to pop music is precisely about creating something that is both new and exciting, but which at the same time is similar enough to music you've already heard before. It must sound both fresh *and* recognizable', thus pointing to the importance of creatively experimenting *within* the limiting, normative framework in which music arises. In that sense, we might understand the formatting principles of music production as both universal and continuous, in which media and technology in a historical perspective always have contributed to expand and limit the creative possibilities for creating music (Katz, 2010). For several of the creators, platformization thus mainly represents a step further in on the ever-developing evolution of the interactions between music, media, and technology, of which streaming platforms merely represent a format one simply has to creatively 'deal with'.

This third view thus constitutes a specific idea linked to the benefits of 'creativity constraints' (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015). As an extension of what I refer to as 'creative platform negotiations', this view represents the processes of exploring and exploiting the inherent possibilities and limitations that format musical productions, targeted distribution, circulation, and consumption on online platforms. By emphasizing the socio-technical interactions (Poell et al., 2022), the dialectic relationship amid platform effects and human, creative responses, these negotiations constitute an artistic approach – a creative solution – to music production that both takes inward the critical delimitations the platforms propose and that accepts or compromises with the given condition (the fixed constraints) which the platforms facilitate.

## Conclusion

Music streaming's impact on music culture manifests in complex ways. This article underscores diverse, partly contradictory modes of the platformization of music

production, unveiling three distinct views on the platforms' formatting logics. While some creators subscribe to the optimistic, democratic potential inherent of the platforms' lowered participation barriers, others critique how these infrastructures favor and limit certain production approaches. Positioned within the realm of platformization, the third view thus holds an intermediate position emphasizing the exchanges the creators (to a greater or lesser extent) are forced into, of which negotiations within the platforms' constrained space enable (and even catalyze) creative solutions – manifesting the *double potential of creativity constraints* (Onarheim and Biskjær, 2015).

In this analysis, these views are not mutually exclusive. Rather they represent legitimate, fragmented responses to the platforms' influence on musical practices, of which several different flows (both upstream and downstream) converge to a multifaceted interpretation of the platformization of music production. It is thus important to note that very few of the creators locked onto one of these views, exclusively. Throughout the interviews, they all altered (and negotiated) between emphasizing the creative potentials *and* limitations of platformized music production – consequently producing what I consider to be dialectical reflections on how music streaming formats their work, demonstrating the socio-technical interactions occurring between human autonomy and media technology (Katz, 2010; Poell et al., 2022).

While not being explicitly addressed in the analysis, I underline how the data also revealed how several other constraints surrounding creativity, in dimensions beyond that of platformization, was seen as equally important formatting principles. Financial, technical, or other resource-sensitive aspects (associated with musical skills, instruments, access to software, studio etc.) were analogously highlighted as key prerequisites formatting music production. The same applies to various cultural dimensions associated with gender, different cultural or societal currents, as well as access to networks and collaboration partners. While there exists an inherent threat in reproducing one-sided, deterministic analyzes in research on both platformization and creativity constraints (through the occasionally exaggerated emphasis on the formatting significance of media, technology, or other similar constraints), I do argue that this article's emphasis on these diverse facets of the creators' autonomous responses to the platforms' constraints, helps to nuance the most deterministic claims related to streaming (and the attention economy's) effect on music culture developments. Not only do music creativity constraints exist in a magnitude of different dimensions, but also in dimensions separate from platformization. The analysis highlights how it is the *interactions* between human creativity and creativity constraints (in this study exemplified through media technology), that together form the aesthetic developments of music production.

To address the article's introductory Research Questions, I thus argue that platforms do play a role in shaping music production, albeit with different, partly contradictory implications. Indeed, the processes of platformization involves the emergence of corporate entities that, in objectional ways, perpetuate commercialization and cultural consolidation. However, online platforms also provide expanded opportunities and accessible realms for a diverse array of creators to express themselves. While cultivating their role as what I label 'creative mediators', these

creators thus continuously negotiate their creativity in a whole range of dimensions constraining creativity – restraining and enabling various artistic outcomes. Researching the ways in which these creators respond to the affordances of these platforms is thus key to understanding how the platformization of music production, in its complex ways, unfolds.

It is important, however, to emphasize how these findings are not intended to be generalized on a global scale. While the creators drew upon what could be termed global trends (evidently through their many references to, e.g. American pop music), we must acknowledge that these interpretations ultimately arise in a Norwegian context, reflecting specific Norwegian traits (i.e. those associated with being part of a small, but mature streaming market). Thus, the study offers a situated contribution, a part of what might become a broader empirical approach (an extended emancipatory critique) to the understanding of how music platformization (in diverse modes) can be experienced across, and within specific contexts. A task for future research will thus be to continue uncovering how several modes of such diverse, musical practices unfold in different contexts, cultures, and parts of the world.

This study echoes historically, well-known paradoxes regarding technology's sociocultural impact. Optimism and pessimism related to the development of new media technology have always existed, and the possibilities and limitations they bring with them have continuously sparked discussion (Hesmondhalgh, 2022; Maasø and Spilker, 2022). In music culture, the phonograph, the LP, the radio, and so forth, have all brought with them complex sets of usage possibilities and limitations, which in turn have provoked aesthetic and productional changes (Katz, 2010). In such a context, the platformization of music production only constitutes the last step of an ongoing evolution. Arising media innovations will continue to both threaten and enable new artistic processes and research will in the near future ask comparable questions about the growth of AI, Web 3.0 or other rapidly growing technologies – emerging technologies which together will provoke new creative negotiations and musical expressions. Then as now, various constraints will continue to both limit and enable artistic developments. To quote David Byrne once again: 'Complete freedom is as much curse as boon; freedom within strict and well-defined confines is, to me, ideal.' I believe this will be the case for future music creators, as well.

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## Notes

1.  Broadly defined, music streaming also includes several other dimensions of music distribution and consumption, such as music promotion, concerts, and other types of live-streamed music (Mouillot, 2022; Zhang and Negus, 2021). This article, however, concentrates mainly on streaming of *recorded* music.
2.  The comparable trend of *collabing* is also highlighted in the interviews, whereas different creators (preferably across traditionally separated genres) strategically feature each other in order to 'tap into one another's audiences'.
3.  Overall, the data reflect critical attitudes towards these tendencies. Statements concerning 'failing attention-spans', the 'clickbait-feeling-of-pop-music', or concerns about creating music that forcibly '*screams* people in the face', are all present in the data, criticizing the attention-economy's alleged penetration into music culture.
4.  Comparably, other creators refer to the trend of producing different playlist-formatted versions of hit-singles, predominantly through acoustic versions tailored for relaxation and *chilling*, or through up-beat-remixes customized for dancing and clubbing.

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