



Free music streaming for Kenyan independent artists: A blessing in disguise?

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Abstract

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has left an indelible mark on the music industry, driven by technological innovations. In Kenya, on-demand music streaming and downloading platforms have emerged as potent tools, empowering independent artists to access broader audiences without the traditional reliance on record labels or physical distribution channels. However, this transformative model has ignited debates within the industry. While some artists thrive in this access-based ecosystem, concerns loom large over the platforms' intermediary roles and the meagre royalties disbursed to artists, underscoring an urgent call for equitable compensation. This study takes a qualitative approach, utilising in-depth interviews and secondary data analysis, to delve into the impact of free music streaming and downloading platforms on independent artists in Kenya. It unravels a complex tapestry of both positive and negative impacts on these artists. The discussion concludes by shedding light on the opportunities that have arisen for artists due to the prevalence of free music streaming services. Ultimately, this study puts forth recommendations geared toward fostering a sustainable and fair music industry. It seeks to deepen our comprehension of the evolving dynamics within the Kenyan music industry, inform policies and strategies tailored to the digital age, and attempt to address the persistent concerns surrounding artist compensation and the role of technology in the field.



Introduction

The music industry's evolution from the analogue to the digital era has profoundly shaped its growth. Before the digitalisation era, music consumption centred on live performances and the sharing of sheet music (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018). Consumers primarily accessed music through concerts and musicians earned from ticket sales and sheet music distribution. Thomas Edison's phonograph invention in the late 19th century revolutionised music consumption, transforming performances into tangible products like vinyl records, cassette tapes, and CDs, enabling ownership. Simultaneously, the radio provided free access to music, altering audiences' engagement with musical content and creating new marketing avenues for artists. Notably, Hesmondhalgh & Meier (2018) emphasised that the transformations in music consumption during the 20th century resulted from a "complex interplay between socio-cultural changes and the strategies of capitalist firms, especially those within the consumer electronics sector" (p. 1558). This led to the monetisation of music through formats like vinyl records, magnetic tapes, and cassettes. The emergence of compact discs (CDs) marked a pivotal shift towards the digital era, setting the stage for further advancements in the digitalisation of the music industry.

The turn of the millennium marked a significant shift from physical records to digitalisation, as platforms such as Apple's iTunes music store introduced users to the convenience of purchasing and downloading music directly onto their devices. This shift was accelerated by the proliferation of consumer electronics internet connectivity alongside music cloud storage and sharing, ending physical music distribution. Wikström notes that "the internet makes physical music distribution increasingly irrelevant, and the incumbent major music companies have been required to redefine themselves to survive" (2014, p. 10). The year 2008 proved pivotal with the emergence of streaming and cloud-based music services that played a crucial role in reshaping the entire industry. Spotify's success and innovative approach to music distribution became a model for many other platforms that emerged in the wake of the 21st century. Today, streaming services have become the norm, and users can access music from anywhere in the world, legally or illegally. Casagrande notes that "the consumption of digital files has become a normal practice for music customers" (2021, p. 5). The access-based services "store music to be in the cloud" (Casagrande, 2021, p. 3), providing a convenient and accessible way for users to listen to their favourite songs. The music streaming industry has grown significantly recently, with many users opting for music streaming services (MSS) over traditional listening methods.

The transition to the digital era was largely prompted by the illegal sharing and dubbing of artists' albums. Napster, a peer-to-peer piracy site created in the late 90s by Shawn and Sean, links computers and allows users to share MP3 audio files. "The launch of Napster in 1999 is considered by many to be the start of large-scale unauthorised online file sharing" (Quintais & Poort 2018, p. 811). The alluded illegal music sharing through the internet prompted legal platforms such as iTunes and Amazon to conditionally sell music. Quintais & Poort note that with the shutdown of Napster in 2001 due to legal court battles, iTunes became the first digital platform to legally download music through its store. The iTunes business model disrupted the traditional model by fuelling consumer behavioural change, eventually affecting the generic music revenue (2018). While record labels promoted their album, iTunes shifted its focus to selling single tracks. This new business model raised the initial concern of whether the payment for a single track adequately compensated the music creator, record labels and artists. However, this model did not last long as industry players saw it accelerating piracy. Online piracy posed a significant threat that industry players viewed as the greatest obstacle to their development. Quintais & Poort (2018) claimed that "in 2005, the major US studios lost \$6.1 billion to piracy, 38% of which took place online" (p. 813). MSS, fronted by Spotify, was launched in 2008.



Spotify promoted streaming over downloads, prompting the development of digital rights management (DRM) technologies. DRM was designed to protect music files, prevent unauthorised copying and distribution, safeguard artists' rights and ensure fair compensation in the digital era. MSS would soon mushroom, and by 2015, music sales globally had started to rise. Magaudda (2021) argues that by “the end of 2019, the Spotify catalogue included about 50 million songs listened to in more than 30 countries by about 250 million users, with half of them accessing the service through a premium monthly subscription (p. 11). According to the IFPI 2023 report, “global revenues from streaming continued to increase in 2022, seeing double-digit growth (+11.5%) and reaching US\$17.5 billion” (IFPI, 2023, p. 13).

As MSS expanded, debates arose over artists' revenue payouts. Artists started to raise concerns regarding the revenue split formula. The pro rata model adopted by MSS exhibited exploitative propensities, especially among independent artists. Major recording companies favoured the pro-rata model due to their immense influence and market power, which disproportionately benefited well-known artists. Independent artists expressed concerns over this inequality, leading to a push for the user-centric model (Hesmondhalgh, 2021) as a more equitable alternative in the music streaming industry. Simon noted that “artists' share of music revenues is small due to intermediaries and fragmented music consumption” (2019, p. 9). These debates remain prominent, particularly for independent artists in developing economies like Kenya. Artists continue to express their discontent regarding the effectiveness of MSS. Hesmondhalgh (2021) alludes, “it seems clear that the current system retains the striking inequalities and generally poor working conditions that characterised its predecessors” (p. 3610). This paper attempts to shed light on these inequalities, digital music's positive impacts on the artist, and finally, the opportunities it offers. This paper aims to illuminate the disparities in free music streaming services, delving into their effects on artists and the opportunities they present. It concludes by questioning whether MSS have genuinely benefited independent artists in developing economies, specifically exploring if they are a blessing in disguise for Kenyan artists.

Literature Review

Historically, music has never been freely shared except through the radio or illegal sharing. The advent of deliberately sharing free music through MSS has ushered in a transformative era in the global music industry. As discussed in the introduction, the shift from traditional music consumption models to digital streaming platforms has reshaped how music is created, produced, distributed, and consumed. This section reviews existing literature on the free MSS, its impact on independent artists, and opportunities presented within this emerging digital paradigm.

Music Streaming Services (MSS) and artists

The music industry's evolution has been significantly disrupted by digital technology and streaming platforms worldwide (Dhiman, 2023; Kgasago, 2022; Carter, 2020). The internet has driven a shift from physical music formats to digital downloads and, finally, to streaming services. This shift has also transformed music creation, production, distribution, and consumption. Dominant music streaming platforms like Spotify, Deezer, Apple Music and many others offer users vast music catalogues via monthly subscriptions (premium) or advertisements supported (freemium), altering music consumption patterns (Hracs & Webster, 2021; Simon, 2019). This shift has democratised access to music, creating new revenue streams and marketing opportunities for artists and labels (Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Qu, Hesmondhalgh, & Xiao, 2023). MSS, exemplified by Spotify's 2008 launch during the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), has revolutionised the industry by providing ubiquitous, legal access to music. More importantly, “digitalisation bequeathed new forms of labour that produce new forms of commodities” (Heuva, 2022, p. 435-436). These new commodities can be



shared through MSS. The MSS models, freemium and premium models, offer choices to users and generate artist revenue through either advertisements or subscriptions.

Alongside the new forms of music commodities that emerged in digital capitalism the internet and the social network sites (SNSs) also turned online activities of the music artists and their fans (audience) into commodities that are sold to advertisers (Heuva, 2022, p. 436).

MSS has been credited with rescuing the music industry from further decline. The decline, which was accelerated by the conversion of music into a digital file, took a new turn in 2015 when MSS surpassed physical sales as the primary source of artist revenue. Improved internet connectivity, affordable smart devices, and the growing presence of MSS and social media platforms drove this shift. Digitalisation has “contributed to blurring the lines even more since the affordable production, distribution and promotion services enabled independent artists to become first-tier artists” (Adamo, 2020, p. 40). However, the rapid expansion of MSS has sparked concerns about fair artist compensation, prompting ongoing discussions and reforms for a more equitable distribution of digital music's benefits among stakeholders. These concerns are particularly pronounced in developing economies due to purchase power, corruption, and socio-political challenges. The changes in the African music sectors have some characteristics that do not mirror what has happened in the West (De Beukelaer & Eisenberg, 2020). Free music streaming in these regions has especially harsh consequences for independent artists. This underscores the necessity for a comprehensive inquiry to assess its current state.

Monetisation Strategies and Revenue Models

MSS introduced two significant revenue models for artists: freemium and premium. Freemium models offer free access to music for users, supported by advertisements, while premium models provide an ad-free experience for a subscription fee (Mai & Hu, 2023; Killa & Upadhyay, 2022; Kirui et al., 2022). In the freemium model, artists receive compensation based on the number of streams and advertisement impressions. This model allows streaming platforms to generate revenue through advertising, with artists benefiting from a portion of this income (Hracs & Webster, 2021). In the premium model, users pay a monthly fee for an enhanced, ad-free experience. Artists are compensated based on their share of total streams, with revenue from subscription fees distributed among artists according to their streaming numbers (Gomes et al., 2021; Hesmondhalgh, 2021). These revenue models have provided legal and convenient music access for users and created diverse revenue streams for artists, ensuring fair compensation from MSS (Antal et al., 2021). With social media platforms as a marketing tool, artists have created diverse revenue streams. Kirui et al. (2022) and Nyathi and Maguraushe (2023), among other scholars, have identified alternative revenue streams for artists, including brand ambassadorships, endorsements, influencers, and live performances, beyond traditional record sales. Nyathi and Maguraushe (2023) also justified this assertion by stating, “To harness more wealth, Zimbabwean musicians should think of more creative ideas like merchandising” (p. 637).

However, the pro-rata payment model employed by MSS faces immense criticism due to unequal payouts that seem to favour established artists over independent and upcoming artists. Hesmondhalgh (2021) notes;

In the present ‘pro-rata’ system, even if that user never played a single recording by superstars such as Drake or Taylor Swift, a proportion of that user’s subscription fee would go to the owners of rights to those superstars’ recordings and underlying compositions, split according to terms agreed in various contracts and agreements that vary between countries on how rights revenues are divided (Hesmondhalgh, 2021, p. 3608).



Antal et al. (2021), Hesmondhalgh (2021) and Kirui et al. (2022), among other scholars, highlight the limited transparency of music streaming platforms as posing hurdles for artists, particularly independent ones with dedicated fan bases, to grasp their earnings per stream. As emphasised by Tovar (2021), platforms like Spotify and Apple Music diminish artists' bargaining power due to intricate royalty distribution among rights holders. These challenges have ignited industry debates, propelling the pursuit of a fairer compensation model. Hesmondhalgh (2021) advocates for a user-centric model, proposing equal payment per stream, asserting that it "may be more equitable, potentially paying less to superstars and more to less-streamed artists" (2021, p. 3608). The aim is to ensure transparency, equity, and improved terms, particularly benefiting independent artists in developing economies. However, a pertinent question arises: even with consumers paying a modest monthly subscription fee, such as 10 USD for unlimited music access, are they enjoying music at an almost free cost? Compared to the traditional business model, this shift has enabled consumers to access music with minimal financial commitment, contrasting with the past when purchasing physical records was standard practice. This transformation underscores the challenges and opportunities of free music streaming for independent musicians. Addressing payment opacity, this study aims to advocate for a more equitable system, aligning with the evolving dynamics of the music industry in developing economies.

Impact on Music Industry Economics

The economic impact of free music streaming on artists, record labels, and the music industry has been a subject of debate since the onset of the millennium. Free music streaming platforms have significantly altered the revenue landscape traditionally dominated by album sales and concert tours. Research by Hracs and Webster (2021) emphasises that while free streaming services offer extensive music accessibility, the revenue generated, especially through ad-supported models, is considerably lower than traditional sales. This assertion is reinforced by scholars such as Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021), Aly-Tovar et al. (2020), Antal et al. (2021), and Mutavati and Muranda (2023). This shift has profound implications for artists, whose income streams primarily depend on royalties from streaming (Simon, 2019; Carter, 2020; Morgan, 2020). As MSS gain prominence, artists often rely on extensive streaming numbers to compensate for declining revenue from physical sales.

Additionally, the transition towards free streaming has led to a significant impact on record deals. Labels now emphasise digital metrics and streaming popularity more than traditional album sales (DeWaard, Fauteux, & Selman, 2022; Hesmondhalgh, 2021). These changes, as elucidated in the studies conducted by the authors mentioned earlier, represent a pivotal moment for the music industry. This situation necessitates re-evaluating compensation structures and developing fair revenue streams for artists and labels in light of the digital paradigm shift, online piracy, and the decline in physical record sales. Nyathi & Maguraushe (2023) alludes;

Nowadays, music can be found on many social media platforms and websites, but not in a profitable way. As a result, the sites make it unavoidable for people to obtain music files online. Because of the increased sharing of illegal music, piracy has become a trend, making it difficult for music composers to profit from their intellectual property (Nyathi & Maguraushe, 2023, p. 17).

Positively, MSS has undeniably catalysed a transformation within the music industry, offering unprecedented opportunities for independent artists globally (Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Maasø & Hagen, 2020; Simon, 2019). Unlike the constraints of traditional music distribution channels, MSS has shattered geographical barriers, providing artists with a platform to connect with diverse audiences worldwide (Chimbudzi, et al., 2021). Through these services, artists can now freely express their creativity, establishing connections with fans across continents and their presence in global music's expansive realm. This newfound accessibility has become pivotal, enabling artists to achieve critical



success, a fundamental factor in building their fan base (DeWaard, et al., 2022; Kirui, et al., 2022; Qu, et al., 2023). Artists effectively leverage their fan base to generate income, particularly on MSS, where their earnings are intricately tied to the number of streams. This underscores the symbiotic relationship between artists and their global audience. Notably, independent artists from developing economies like Kenya have embraced this trend, enabling them to share their music globally. However, this study delves into a crucial question: To what extent is this impact viewed as free MSS? This study seeks to unveil the nuanced dimensions of this free MSS, shedding light on the tangible implications for independent artists navigating the landscape of music streaming services MSS in developing countries.

User Experience and Interface Design

MSS has strategically prioritised user experience as a critical element to attract and retain audiences and facilitate the transition to premium plans (Hracs & Webster, 2021; Qu et al., 2023). Advanced interface design techniques exemplify this focus on enhancing user engagement, allowing MSS to tailor playlists and recommendations to individual preferences (Anderson et al., 2020; Webster, 2020). These personalised experiences, enabled by sophisticated algorithms, create immersive environments where users can seamlessly discover content aligned with their specific interests and preferences, cultivating a deeper connection and satisfaction with the platform. Implementing user-centred design in the digital soundscape captivates users and underscores the pivotal role of tailored interactions in shaping modern online platforms. Moreover, MSS employ strategic tactics, such as tailoring playlists based on users' listening habits and utilising algorithms to suggest similar music, thus enhancing user satisfaction and prolonging user engagement (Hracs & Webster, 2021). Freemium streaming models further enhance user interaction by incorporating features like social sharing, collaborative playlists, and artist-curated content, fostering a sense of community around music (Wheeler, 2023). However, freemium platforms often impose limitations such as restricted skips and periodic ads, subtly encouraging users to upgrade to premium models for an uninterrupted, ad-free experience and additional features like offline listening (Gomes et al., 2021; Tan, 2021). The delicate balance achieved through tailored content, interactive features, and controlled access creates a captivating user experience, enticing users to consider premium subscriptions for an uninterrupted and enhanced music streaming journey.

However, despite this appeal, statistics indicate that freemium services remain more financially lucrative for artists than their premium counterparts (Aly-Tovar et al., 2020). This suggests that consumers have not fully embraced the premium model; instead, they gravitate towards freemium services, which provide access to music without the burden of financial constraints. Notably, this preference for freemium services has taken a distinct turn in developing economies, where the impact is not entirely positive. In such regions, the dominance of freemium models can adversely affect the music industry and artists (Kirui et al., 2022), as the revenue generated from these models might be insufficient to sustain the livelihoods of musicians and creators. This underscores the complex dynamics within the music streaming ecosystem, where balancing accessibility, artist compensation, and sustainability remains a critical challenge, particularly in regions where economic disparities are pronounced. It is against this backdrop that this study is necessitated.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

The proliferation of free MSS has brought forth various legal and ethical challenges within the music industry (Howells, 2020; Choi et al., 2022; Abdikhakimov, 2023). Copyright issues and licensing agreements are at the forefront of these challenges, as streaming platforms must ensure their content is legally acquired and distributed (Nyathi & Maguraushe, 2023). Navigating the complexities of copyright laws, especially concerning user-generated content (UGC), becomes critical



(Abdikhakimov, 2023). Moreover, artist compensation poses a significant ethical dilemma; while MSS offers free access to users, ensuring fair payment to artists and copyright holders becomes paramount. Striking a balance between providing free access to music and compensating creators appropriately involves intricate negotiations and innovative revenue-sharing models (Hödl & Myrach, 2023). Services often rely on advertising revenue and freemium models to generate income, with a portion allocated to compensate artists. Still, these models sometimes raise questions about the adequacy of such compensation (Tovar, 2021). Ethical challenges also emerge in how MSS address issues of cultural appropriation, ensuring diverse representation, and respecting artists' creative rights (Arya, 2021). Consequently, streaming services continually grapple with these legal and ethical complexities, striving to uphold fairness, artists' rights, and ethical standards while providing free music access to users. This could harm independent artists in developing economies, calling for in-depth interrogation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate artists' experiences with free music streaming services and their impact on revenue generation. Data was collected through in-depth interviews to comprehensively understand how artists interact with this phenomenon. As Barrow (2017) suggests, lived experiences encompass "the ways in which people live in relation to a phenomenon" (p. 94). The interview participants were selected from Kenyan artists, identified through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diverse perspectives. The research framework draws from the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003). UTAUT identifies four key determinants – performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions – that influence the intentions of both independent artists and fans regarding their use of free MSS. This approach offers a comprehensive view of independent artists' interactions with these platforms and their implications for the music industry in developing economies.

Results and Discussion

This section delves into the negative impacts, positive effects, and opportunities arising from the availability of free music streaming services (MSS). It examines drawbacks associated with free music streaming, highlights potential advantages, and discusses emerging opportunities within the music streaming soundscape.

Negative impact of free MSS

In the study, respondents highlighted the adverse effects of free MSS on independent artists from developing economies. Thematic analysis revealed two primary challenges for artists in this digital landscape: financial struggles and complexity due to oversaturation. Independent artists face constant financial concerns, hindering their access to a broad fan base enjoyed by major-label artists. These challenges are amplified due to limited resources and other socio-political challenges. Though expanding global reach for independent artists, MSS offers meagre payouts per stream, requiring millions of streams for substantial earnings. One respondent (Personal communication, May 2022) lamented;

This (MSS) has personally affected me as an artist, but I cannot tell you exactly how it has affected me because the understanding is quite complex. I cannot imagine how much money I would be having, every single moment someone played (streamed) my music (Personal communication, May 2022).

Scholars such as Antal, Fletcher, Ormosi (2021), Hesmondhalgh (2021), Kirui et al. (2022), and Tovar (2021) echo these sentiments, highlighting these opposing realities of MSS, the global reach of



independent artists against the meagre earnings that accompany it. As discussed by the scholars mentioned earlier, platform capitalism places independent and upcoming artists in a disadvantaged state over established artists signed into the major recording labels. The pay-outs through the pro rata model are exceptionally low, compelling artists to push for millions of streams to receive substantial earnings. This intricate financial web poses a constant concern for artists striving to sustain their livelihoods in the streaming era. The digitisation of the music industry was anticipated to enhance independent artists' financial conditions, as Venkatesh et al. 's UTAUT theory (2003) suggested. While digitalisation has pushed artists to achieve critical success through unprecedented global exposure, it has simultaneously entangled artists in a web of financial intricacies. The evolving nature of digitalisation should demand a re-evaluation of compensation structures that ensures that artists, regardless of their origin, receive fair compensation for their creativity.

Respondents also highlighted the widespread digital piracy, diverting potential revenue streams for artists as consumers resort to unauthorised sources instead of legal MSS. They reported that, despite ubiquitous access to music, which has opened doors to various alternative revenue streams alongside record sales, they struggle to earn significantly compared to the analogue era. One respondent (Personal communication, May 2022) alludes that;

...it (free MSS) is really affecting us, because you can do a song and release it today then tomorrow it is all over and you have no cent from that (Personal communication, May 2022).

Nyathi & Maguraushe (2023) and Quintais & Poort (2005) have also made similar assertions raised by the above respondent. These scholars, amongst many others, have attributed the further decline of the music industry in the early millennium to the rise of online digital piracy. With the rise of MSS, digital piracy continues to be rampant due to the availability of unauthorised music records on social media platforms and pirate sites. This has normalised illegal music consumption among internet users, especially in developing economies, where laws governing these unauthorised files are rarely implemented. Besides exploring alternative revenue streams, a comprehensive approach is essential to tackle online digital piracy, especially in developing economies. Implementing legal measures that include strict enforcement of copyright laws and penalties for piracy can act as a deterrent to digital piracy. Concurrently, leveraging technological innovations such as DRM tools, blockchain technology, advanced tracking systems, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) can help identify and prevent the illegal distribution of music. Education campaigns targeting artists and consumers can raise awareness about piracy's ethical and legal implications, encouraging a culture of respect for intellectual property rights. Finally, fostering global collaboration between governments, law enforcement agencies, internet service providers, and artists can facilitate the sharing of expertise and resources, leading to a more unified and coordinated effort against online piracy. This holistic strategy, encompassing legal, technological, educational, and collaborative measures, is crucial in effectively addressing the persistent issue of digital online piracy in developing economies.

The respondents also highlighted that the market complexities and MSS saturation exacerbate the struggle. The sheer volume of online music content makes standing out an uphill battle, while algorithms and curations further complicate matters by shaping what users listen to, sometimes sidelining lesser-known artists whose work might not align with mainstream tastes. Respondents raised concerns about the proliferation of MSS, which can make it difficult for them to identify where their fan base is concentrated. One artist alluded that;

It (digitalisation) has really segmented the market because for instance, long time ago a family would sit together and watch programs (music programs that used to air on TVs) but now each person is on



different platforms thus the market is broadened but at the same time segmented since your song could be big on one quarter of the audience and not on the other.

This segmentation of digital platforms has complicated the MSS landscape, as artists are expected to be visible across all platforms. Another respondent (Personal communication, May 2022) noted that;

...if I have music on iTunes and I have to keep telling people to go listen to it, I am working for iTunes and have become their marketer. But if I can find a way for people to discover me on iTunes, then iTunes starts working for me (Personal communication, May 2022).

Consumers' preferences for MSS drive the above-said challenge. Curated playlists on these platforms are crucial for discovering independent artists, often constrained by limited resources. Adamo suggests that "if Spotify allows users to discover new and unpopular music, then Spotify allows unpopular artists to be widely exposed" (2020, p. 9). However, the intricate nature of curation and algorithms, coupled with intermediaries who profit from complex revenue distribution networks, results in significantly reduced earnings for artists. These intermediaries often take substantial cuts, further impacting independent artists' income. To navigate these complexities, artists should grapple with streaming challenges and grasp the intricacies of licensing and royalties, ensuring equitable compensation for their work, as suggested by Antal et al. (2021) and Hesmondhalgh (2021), among other scholars. Diversifying revenue streams becomes a crucial strategy, with artists exploring alternatives like merchandise sales, crowdfunding, and music licensing for films and commercials (Nyathi & Maguraushe, 2023). Furthermore, cultivating a global fan base is paramount, yet hindered by disparities in digital infrastructure, economic conditions, and legal frameworks across countries. Consequently, artists ought to assume the role of entrepreneurs, seeking innovative ways to engage their audience, including virtual concerts and exclusive content, to forge a sustainable path amid the multifaceted challenges brought about by digitalisation.

Positive impact of free MSS

According to most respondents, MSS has undoubtedly transformed the music industry positively by significantly enhancing artists' critical success through global exposure. According to the respondents, this significant achievement of MSS lies in their ability to improve the accessibility and global reach of music. These respondents agreed that music consumers can access an extensive catalogue of songs from various corners of the world, demolishing geographical barriers and ensuring music's availability to a worldwide audience. One respondent (Personal communication, May 2022) noted that;

It is a catch-22 situation. On one hand, streaming platforms make music accessible to a wide audience, benefiting the industry. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that artists and those involved in the production are fairly compensated for their performances. The question remains: how can we guarantee income generation for both the performers and the production teams when their music is used on these platforms? (Personal communication, May 2022).

The accessibility has notably elevated the visibility of artists, particularly independent talents from developing economies, who previously struggled to access the global stage. Several scholars, Hesmondhalgh (2021); Prey et al. (2022) and Simon (2019) agree that MSS has effectively levelled the playing field, providing an equal platform for artists regardless of their geographical or financial constraints. This democratisation of music distribution not only allows talent to shine without the necessity of major record label support but also introduces audiences to a diverse array of artists and genres they might otherwise miss out on. This encapsulates the essence of the UTAUT theory, which aims to facilitate conditions that were challenging before the era of digitalisation (Venkatesh et al.,



2003). These services introduce consumers to new music through sophisticated algorithms and curated playlists, broadening their musical horizons and nurturing emerging artists.

Several respondents also agreed that MSS has created abundant opportunities for artists worldwide. One notable avenue identified by these artists is the increased potential for live performances. One artist alluded to that,

The number one earner for musicians is concerts, and you'll find that to get to that place where you are invited to perform, your music is just popular [sic].

Yet another respondent (Personal communication, May 2022) noted that;

Free streaming is not killing the industry, it is opening many doors for me. If we use it to our advantage, one is able to get endorsements, you become known by a larger mass, it is easy to get events or media airplays when your content is doing really well (Personal communication, May 2022).

As these respondents clearly explain, artists gain recognition on MSS, making them sought after for live shows. This exposure enables artists to showcase their talents to diverse audiences, creating an additional revenue stream. Furthermore, MSS plays a pivotal role in building online fan bases. Through these platforms, artists can directly engage with listeners through social media, fan communities, and interactive features, nurturing a devoted online following. This expanded digital fan base bolsters the artist's alternate revenue streams and is a solid foundation for future creative endeavours.

MSS are also instrumental in generating substantial financial benefits for artists. According to some respondents, these platforms create revenue streams through paid subscriptions and advertising, providing artists with royalties based on the number of streams their music receives. One respondent (Personal communication, May 2022), while referring to MSS revenue streams, indicated, "It has also made me earn from my music. Hard work is needed here to push my content and produce regularly to keep my audience busy."

MSS plays a pivotal role in generating substantial financial benefits for artists. These platforms establish revenue streams through paid subscriptions and advertising, providing artists with royalties based on the number of streams (Nyathi & Maguraushe 2023). MSS has established two models: freemium and premium. The freemium model provides users with limited experiences, often disrupted by advertisements, to entice consumers to upgrade to the premium model (Hracs & Webster, 2021; Qu et al., 2023). The convenience of these MSS, especially premium models, encourages users to subscribe, ensuring a steady income for artists over time.

Nonetheless, the pro-rata payment model remains a subject of debate. Regarding subscriptions, the monthly fee per consumer appears minimal compared to the number of streams during the same month. Consider Spotify, which charges \$10.99 per month for unlimited music access. Would it be accurate to claim that consumers are accessing music almost at no cost, compared to the traditional model where consumers pay a similar amount for an album? However, the network effect amplifies this situation. While it benefits some artists significantly due to the high volume of streams, it creates challenges for independent artists.

Additionally, these MSS offer opportunities for artists to feature their music in curated playlists or advertisements, further increasing their visibility and income. MSS eventually provides valuable data analytics, allowing artists to understand their audience better and tailor their content to meet listeners' preferences, potentially increasing their earnings. As discussed earlier, the global reach of MSS enables artists to connect with fans worldwide, expanding their audience and, consequently, their revenue.



Through innovative marketing strategies and collaborations facilitated by MSS, artists can harness these financial benefits, supporting their music careers and fostering a sustainable livelihood.

Opportunities from Free Streaming

MSS offer numerous opportunities within free streaming models, reshaping the music industry soundscape. One notable advantage lies in revenue enhancement, as free streaming is a gateway for potential income growth. While consumers may fail to pay directly to the artists, their engagement translates into increased visibility for these artists. This visibility often leads to higher attendance at live events, bolstered merchandise sales, and augmented fan interaction, collectively contributing to artists' revenue streams. One respondent alluded that (Personal communication, May 2022);

When I command a certain influence, then I find endorsements from phone companies. My individual brand can be a very big money maker if I strategize well. If I build it well. The music itself may not make enough money but if I am able to build a brand, opportunities will create it and possibly make more money than the music records (Personal communication, May 2022).

The assertion made by the respondent above aligns with the perspectives of scholars such as Hesmondhalgh (2021), Maasø and Hagen (2020), and Simon (2019). According to these scholars, MSS continues to evolve and transform, adapting to the changing music industry landscape. MSS platforms have expanded and reinvented themselves to cultivate a broad listener base, which, in turn, has attracted advertisers and sponsors. This growth enhances their reach and establishes the groundwork for sustainable revenue models (Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Maasø & Hagen, 2020; Simon, 2019). This scenario eventually creates a dynamic ecosystem that encourages artistic innovation. The prevalence of free streaming continues to foster a desired music industry change, prompting independent artists and labels to explore inventive strategies, such as exclusive releases and special content, to captivate and retain audiences in this evolving digital landscape. The positive outlook, therefore, is evident in the impact of music releases, where MSS offer a global platform for artists, enabling them to reach audiences worldwide instantaneously, amplifying their influence and fostering a sense of community among music enthusiasts across the globe.

Conclusion

Kenyan artists face a paradoxical situation in the complex soundscape of free MSS. While these digital platforms grant unparalleled global exposure, allowing independent artists from Kenya to share their music without the limitations of physical distribution, they bring forth significant challenges. Thematic analyses highlighted prevalent challenges, including financial hurdles such as monetisation issues, revenue loss, and declining earnings due to the complexities of payment algorithms. Additionally, the industry grapples with oversaturation, navigating intricate streaming systems, managing the overwhelming music volume, and facing a lack of production appreciation. However, these challenges have inadvertently catalysed a transformative process within the digital era. Artists, compelled by necessity, have honed their skills, engaged uniquely with their fan base, and explored diverse revenue streams. This adaptability has created a thriving independent music scene, reshaped the industry and necessitated resilience.

Amidst the obstacles, the digital era has emerged as a 'blessing in disguise' for Kenyan artists. It encourages creativity and innovation, pushing musicians to redefine success and establish strong online connections. Free music streaming platforms, despite their complexities, have become a catalyst for artists, fostering a resilient and adaptable community. However, future research should study user behaviour and preferences within these platforms, especially in Kenya, and explore consumer preferences. There is a need for innovative monetisation models tailored for independent artists exploring their financial sustainability.



Furthermore, research into streaming platforms' revenue distribution fairness and impact on artists' earnings, along with digital literacy and effective marketing strategies for Kenyan independent artists, would provide valuable insights into the evolving music landscape. Future research must delve into the intricacies of user behaviour and preferences, specifically within the Kenyan context, exploring innovative monetisation models and addressing digital literacy issues. By understanding and navigating these challenges, Kenyan artists can continue thriving, turning the constraints of the digital landscape into opportunities for growth and artistic expression.



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