

WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY: FROM TRADITIONAL TO  
DIGITALIZATION OF MUSIC AND PLATFORM CAPITALISATION  
SPOTIFY VS. TIKTOK

by

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## **Introduction**

The entire history of music is now on the internet yet the dominant players in the music industry such as Warner Brothers, Sony Music Entertainment, and Universal Music Company succeed to single out various subgenres from going mainstream and as a result obstruct artistic personal taste and expression to the current time. The contemporary music industry receives a lot of criticism from the public and music critiques of being repetitive and extremely similar. However, the coming of Spotify, - music streaming service in 2006 changed the scene of music production and dissemination for major labels who enjoyed excessive control over the market throughout the years. Spotify revolutionizes music consumption patterns and broadens artist's reach to new markets. In 2016, music became an inseparable part of Tiktok, - video sharing social media which revolutionized the medium of music and entertainment with creative user-generated content. Tiktok makes room for various music genres regardless of their timeline. From old to new any song that has ever been released has the chance to be heard again. Then Music gradually becomes an expression of each platform's atmosphere and each develops its legacy. From the digitalization of music, the industry caught unaware of the digital tide (Bolza, 2008) and thus faces condemnations of failing to deliver a rich assortment of rock, hip-hop, rap, electronic, R&B, classical, punk, etc. genres. In this manner music industry falls short to give an equal voice and obtain a democratic environment for artists of all sort. This project aims to study the contemporary music landscape from aspects of diversity, modernity, and originality in the two platforms. By modernity what I intent is the artist's responsibility in capturing the trends of current time which has reference to Charles Baudelaire's concept on modernity. According to Baudelaire's ideas, it the artist's subjectivity that highlights the trends of a certain period of time. The famous modernism motto "make it new" (Canto LIII) by Ezra Pound is an additional footnote that is touched upon regarding modernity. The search for "the new becomes a model for a constant change in modern life (Bledsoe, 2016) and "a national obsession" that drives the creation of more blockbusters. (Anderson, 2006) However, the music industry for long held back from modernity and carried on the basis of formulaic standards. Also understanding the industry's nature with an investigating eye towards the changes which either fail or succeed to emphasizes the uniqueness of present time and modernity. How technology helps the industry to

be a more democratic place. In most industries the rise of technology cuts out the middleman thus perhaps it could eliminate the recording labels too. Also how technology alters the properties that describe the quality of today's music. To get a clear acknowledgment on the above questions I critically overview the sequence of conflicts, the corporation's business relationships, and artifacts that shape both platforms to exhibits the interdependence of music and technology and what changes it bring as regards diversity, democracy and modernity.

### **Literature review**

#### ***Popular Music, Technology, and the Changing Media Ecosystem, Pop Music, Culture and Identity* by Tamas Tofalvy and Emilia Barna. *Continuity and Change in the Relationship Between Popular Music, Culture, and Technology: An Introduction***

**Tamas Tofalvy Pages 1-19**

Tofalvy describes popular music as a commercialized widely appealing song designed by the music industry and targeted towards teenagers and young audiences. Nation, gender, history, and especially technology are factors that deeply influence and reshape the evolving nature of popular music. Although technology revolutionized music consumption and creation, music still is very dependent on cultural artifacts, policies, corporations, and other stakeholders. These factors have higher pressure on the revision of music identity than the technological advancements. This book questions the role of culture in the diffusion of music and points that popular culture hasn't been altered immediately by technology. What the transition from physical sales to streaming services does mostly is to enable music to become the most famous form of data deep-seated in different media and platforms and make it very accessible to everyone. But the cultural narrative is the dominant force in the music configuration. In other words, how we employ technology gives meaning to its functionality. Thus despite the platform capitalist effect on music, it is the cultural artifacts that eventually shape the narrative of the music industry

#### **Music Scenes as Infrastructures: From Live Venues to Algorithmic Data**

**Paolo Magaudda Pages 23-41**

Alongside Tofalvy, Magaudda also admits the importance of infrastructure role in music scene studies. The role of infrastructure implicitly points to the works of Marshall McLuhan and its famous phrase “the medium is the message”. Magaudda states with the rise of digitalization many communications and media theorist’s turn their attention to the notion of infrastructural- turn to unravel the crisscrossing of media practices and digital platforms. Music scene studies focuses on the content circulation and the power of infrastructural logics affecting our relationship with music and how music is experienced in terms of genres. In relation to platforms reinforcing the identity of music Gillespie shed lights to the meaning and the role of platforms. The term *platform* is not neutral, but is rather part of digital companies’ “efforts not only to sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph, or condemn, but to make claims about what these technologies are and are not, and what should and should not be expected of them,” establishing “the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them” (Gillespie 2010, 359). Therefore, Magaudda concludes music circulation is integral to the power of algorithms that are organizing people’s choice.

### **From Music Scenes to Musicalized Networks: A Critical Perspective on Digitalization Stéphane Costantini Pages 43-58**

In this section Costantini overviews the collaborative aspects of music activities that take place in social media between artists and fans and its relationship to the economic activities. The hegemony of social media as a place where music is marketed grows significantly and is adopted heavily by musicians. How these interactions establish a rapport to the aspect of economic activity in the context of music digitalization is what sets apart the notion of market and proto market. Proto-markets in contrast to markets are arenas where performers and audiences are brought together in a space that is not entirely commodified by any product. Although artists’ activities and interactions on social media and musicalized networks have economic motives their level of activity cannot have so. In proto-markets main imperative for artists is to distinguish themselves from the values associated with the mass market. (Costantini, 2020) This notion also seems to us to imply that the understanding of the ways in which musicians are integrated into the industries that produce them must be questioned on the basis of the relationship these industries have with the proto-markets. (Costantini, 2020)

### ***The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson Pages 1-200**

Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail* delivers a commentary narrative of the western mass media and its decades of transmitting culture and entertainment that came to halt by the web which enables the growth of niche markets. Anderson notices in the golden ages of TV blockbusters it has become a national obsession that it sets off a common experience in people's collective memory. However, the web put a stroke in mass media's wheel coming to be a place of unfiltered exploration outside the mainstream media. Anderson observations show for the first time hits and non-hits compete with each other on digital space resulting in decisive changes in the entertainment and music industries. Besides, the mass media model loses its hegemony and exclusiveness by the democratic sharing of information on the web. Anderson notices the concept of what we know as hits transform when the problem of scarcity of space and medium is overcome with unlimited digital space. Anderson concludes that with the abundance of online shelves, hits lose their meaning, popularity, and monopoly. In other words, access to a market without an end stretches the boundaries of success and shifts the only focus from mainstream to millions of niche markets. One great example that springs to mind while reading this section is how before digitalization ten million in physical sales are regarded as best-selling. On the contrary, to be on top now requires more than five hundred million streams if not billions. Therefore, Anderson explains hit markets are being challenged and radically transformed with the availability of non-hit markets that form a larger market. Niche markets vs the mainstream is the central theme in Anderson's book and I use it as a testimonial that shows the expansion of democratic music dissemination is possible with the growth of the niche markets. Anderson confirms in the new economics that emerges from shattering the mass media every non-hit track will sell something in the digital space. To understand how much will the non-hits sale Anderson presents the 98 percent rule which is introduced firstly by Van Adibe the CEO of ECAST a digital jukebox company. Van Adibe notices that 98 percent of 10,000 albums available on jukebox sales at least one track per quarter. To clarify Adibe's finding, Anderson states that because consumers take a look at almost anything available on the jukebox even the non-hits will sell something which reveals the logic behind unlimited online libraries. Anderson reveals a new economy in digital space where the aggregation of one track per quarter builds a huge market of niches as big as a hit market if not bigger. For him, it is no surprise that the non-hit songs may not sell in big numbers but surely all will sell something. Coincidentally Anderson's finding is what

Spotify is doing today. In February 2021 they announced that 60,000 tracks are being added each day to their platform ([Ingham, 2021](#)) The Long Tail proves that most online businesses make the most out of adding up to their unlimited music inventory. Likewise, Spotify I believe takes a step in hope of increasing the chances of consumers streaming any of those 60,000 daily tracks at least once which may not generate much profit for each artist but boost the general demand for more music consumption and supply. Anderson concludes with low costs of reaching out to people and availability of unlimited choice, the era of mass culture comes to an end.

## **Methodology**

This research is entirely conducted on the basis of secondary and past data to assess the digitized music scene from aspects of diversity, democracy and modernity in the platforms of Spotify and Tiktok from 2019 to 2021. To have a clear perspective on the digital music scene it is crucial to understand what has changed in terms of music creation, dissemination and sales. For this reason, an overview of the industry's transformation from physical sales to digital sales and finally streaming services is briefly presented. I bring examples of some of the industry's cultural influence that overweight's the technological advancements to understand if Tofalvy's presented ideas are actual.

To be specific about the music industry's strong influence on the way technology is being exploited I set the scene by using main turning points in the form of previously recorded events. Events that changed the dynamics of the industry in a chronological order sheds light on challenges that postpone the digital evolution which is widely spoken and recorded in the history of the traditional music industry. Visual charts and statistics are used from *Statista* and *RIAA* databases to track sales revenue and introduce reasons that predisposes the traditional industry towards big changes. These changes are heavily documented and theorized in Anderson's "*The long Tail*" and Tamas Tofalvy & Emília Barna "*Popular Music, Technology, and the Changing Media Ecosystem*" which are serving as the main sources of this research and lays the foundation on which the secondary data from music blogs find meaning. This paper walks you through the transformation of music industry from traditional to digital and chooses "*The Long Tail*" theory as the starting point since it closely narrates the shift that takes place in the industry. Without having a comparison of the mainstream media model vs the niche it would be difficult to sense

how much accessibility technology brings to people. Besides technology also gives more power to the big players in the industry. The long tail theory is used as a milestone based on which the subsidiary data is approved. The data collected from commercial music blogs are used as a subsidiary and un-academic source of information that gives account on the important events of the music industry. In this way the main layout of the research is set by employing the theories and studies presented in the main scholarly sources and expanding on them by subsidiary data from un-academic commercial sources. To what extent the subsidiary data conforms or contradicts with the scholarly findings reflects the state of industry and music in terms of democracy and diversity. Afterwards each platform is assessed individually based on the theories that are presented in the scholarly sources and finally I draw a comparison on which brings more diversity and democracy in the age of digitalization. A section is also dedicated to describe how much today's music is relevant to its time using the ideas and thoughts behind the philosophy of modernism and postmodernism. The results show repetition in today's pop music and recycling contents from the past is an occurring trend over excessively used by famous musicians. The high concentration of big label's music on the top Spotify's charts may proclaim that labels and Spotify are in the same side. However, Spotify's interdependence on labels creates challenges for the platform to render more democracy to the independent artists.

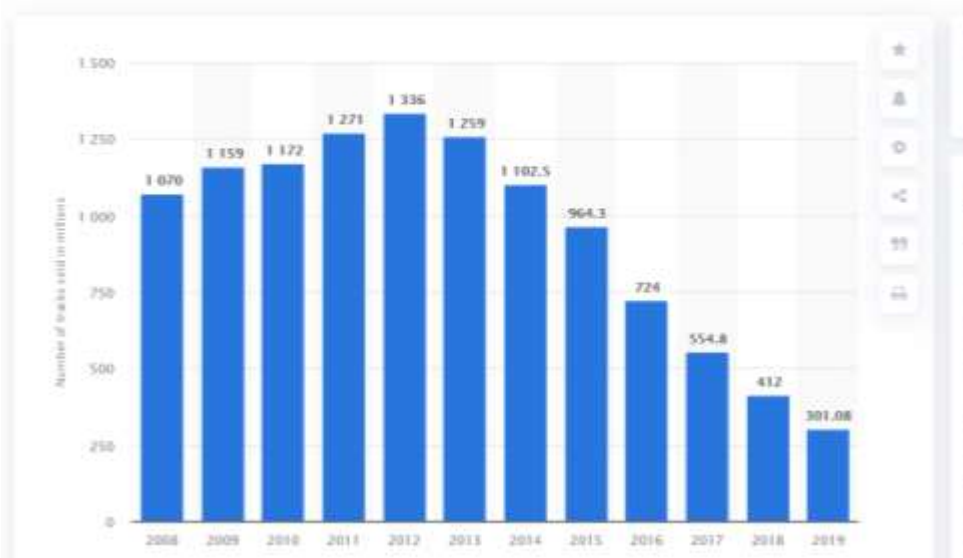
### **Spotify Saved the Music Industry Yet the Cultural Artefacts Remain Strong**

Chris Anderson in the long tail points to the emergence of niche markets on the web. Niche markets growing popularity costs the traditional media to lose its prior economic forces. Anderson compares the peak of mass cultural dominance in the late nineties which begins with the advent of the popular press with today's digitalized world. In the golden era of TV people pretty much consumed the same music and TV shows. With digitalization, high-cost shelves give away to the low-cost and very accessible virtual music libraries. The digital space changed the economics of music distribution, supply, and formation. Now the necessity of selling big and being efficient with the physical shelves becomes senseless due to the zero cost of digital distribution and storage. The niche markets satisfy the need of different subcultures and an

unlisted group of people who were once forced to fit into the “one for all formula” but not anymore. These changes as Anderson concludes put the era of mass culture to an end. However, the growth of niche markets doesn’t result in the elimination or replacement of mainstream media. Mainstream media continues to be the popular medium except its economic force shrinks. (Anderson) The best-selling albums of all time in the U.S come from the seventies and eighties and none comes after the 2000s is a great example elaborated by Anderson that shows a decline in the economics of the traditional music industry. In 2006 the music industry realized that CD sales were rapidly fading away. Paid digital downloads became popular but had slow growth posing big worries to the labels. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) states that paid subscriptions superseded by album sales reinforce consumer's appreciation of track-based music consumption. This may be a good illustration of the changing habits of music consumption as of now playlist becomes more popular on account of Spotify.

### Digital music track sales in the United States from 2008 to 2019

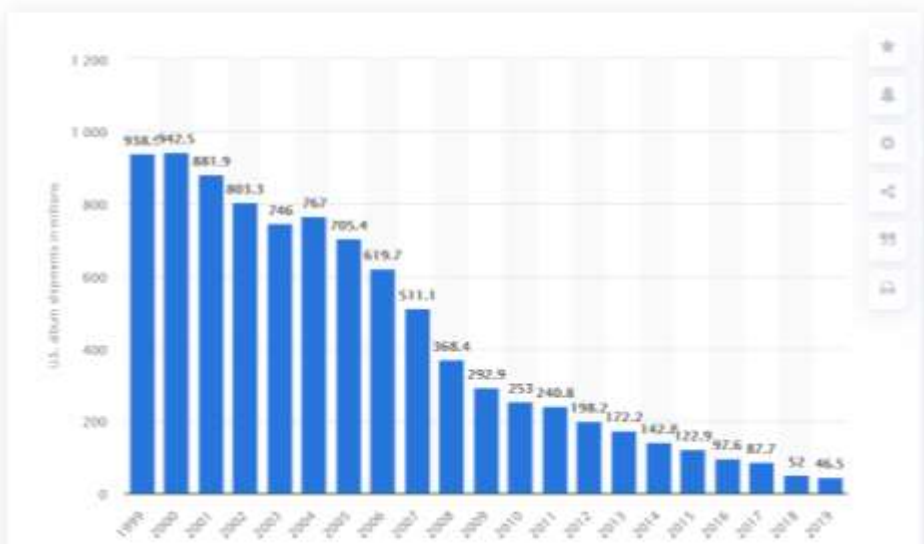
(in million units)





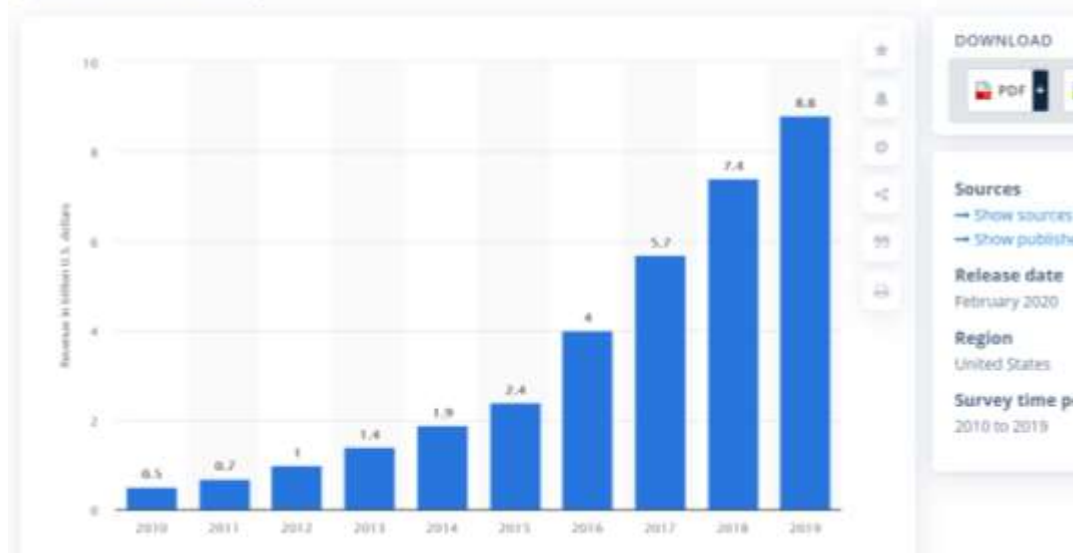
## Physical CD shipments in the United States from 1999 to 2019

(in millions)



The revenue from digital downloads does not pay back the loss of revenue from CDs according to *“The Economist”* which discloses turmoil in the industry. The chart above shows the fall in the shipments of physical CDs in the U.S with a sharp decline from 2006 to 2007 highlighting the departure of the music industry from the physical sales. In the same year Spotify launched its platform. On the other hand, from 2008 to 2009 the sales of digital tracks increased giving rise to the Black Eyed Peas *“I Got a Feeling”* single to top on the list of best selling digital singles of all time in the U.S. with 8.7 million sales. As of 2019, no other hit exceeds the digital sales of *“I Got a Feeling”*. The second best selling digital hit goes to Adele's *“Rolling in the Deep”* released in 2010 when digital track sales are on the rise. The third is the Imagine Dragons *“Radioactive”* which was released in 2012 at the peak of digital sales. After 2012 the industry witnesses a drop in digital sales yet a steady spur in streaming revenues.

**Revenue from music streaming in the United States from 2010 to 2019**  
(in billion U.S. dollars)



Josh Friedlander, the senior vice president of research at the Recording Industry Association of America declares the music industry is in a better state today than it was before thanks to the streaming services. Besides, streaming revenues balance the losses of both physical sales and digital downloads. (RIAA) Indeed, Spotify revitalizes the music industry from a long sink in revenues but it catches unaware of the digital tide and acts late upon the changes.

### **The Influence of Major Record Labels and Their Resistance to Innovation**

The advent of popular music begins with the coming of electricity, sound recording, and radio. The sound recording started in 1877 with the advent of the phonograph cylinder enabling music production for masses giving a lofty rise to the commercialization of music and setting the tone of the industry's first business model. (Braun 2002; Frith 1986)

With the rise of digital media, music dissemination channels widen. The physical production of music halted throwing the music companies into turmoil. The most devastating effect of digitalization was that the scarcity of records and the commodity status fall. While rapid changes occurred the big three which were the dominant labels in the industry resist some of the digital innovations of their time called Napster. The online free music-sharing service founded in 1999

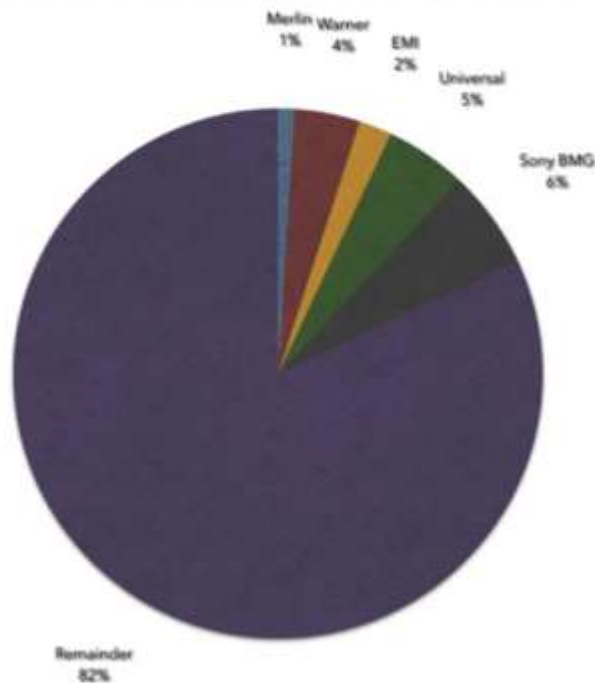
introduces the idea of peer to peer file sharing. The music industry shakes to its core and labels successfully resist the technological change by taking legal actions against Napster which reflects the power of stakeholders and corporations in this industry overweighs to the technological changes. Until 2001 Napster reached 2.4 million consumers. Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) also brought action against Napster developers to establish the idea of how the traditional music industry holds back innovation and exercises full control over the direction of music configuration. The traditional music industry successfully withstood the digital revolution back in 1999 whereas it couldn't withstand the ascendance of streaming services and record labels lost their absolute power.

### **Spotify & Music Industry Are Interdependent**

The music Industry shutting down Napster is a great example that shows the technological changes couldn't immediately alter the cultural narrative of the industry. However, the radical change finally took place when big labels start to be more adaptive to Spotify after a decade of loss to piracy and poor album sales.

In effort to be more integrated in the new model of music dissemination, major labels and Merlin (regards as a major label by Spotify is a collection of powerful indie labels and distributors) received Spotify's equity in 2008 via licensing negotiations. (Ingham, 2018) Music business blogs widely speak and record the Label's ownership of equity in Spotify. Their partnership means less equality in terms of artist's royalty rates & playlist placements. ([Pelly, 2020](#))

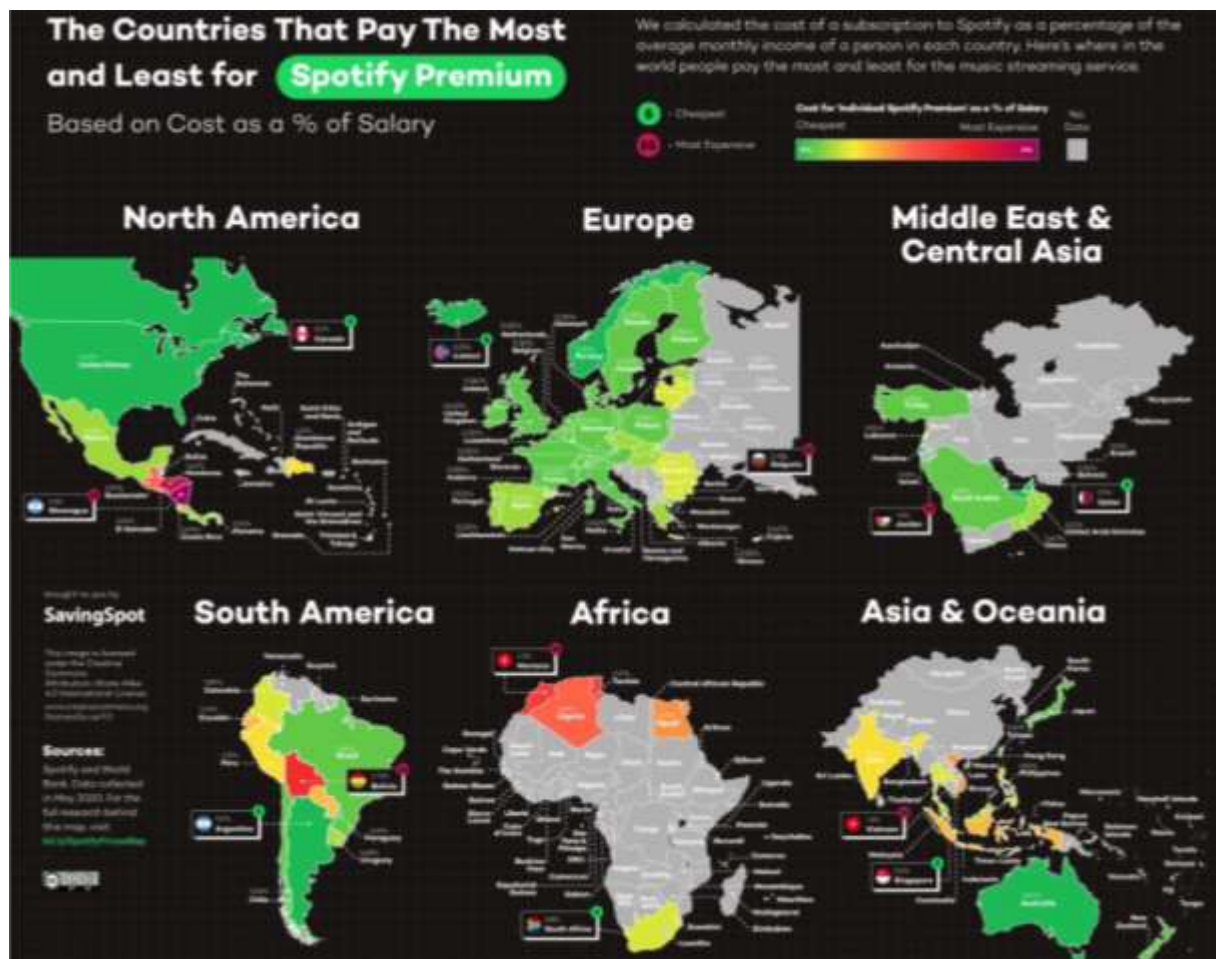
### 2008: Official shares of each major label and Merlin in Spotify



As music journalists constantly criticize Spotify of neglecting the indie artists in 2018 Spotify direct licensing deals come as an opportunity that prove the contrary. While the direct licensing deals stir the labels and pose a threat to them. On the other hand, it comes very appealing to indie labels. Sadly, Spotify removed the feature in 2019 due to the interdependent nature of its relationship with the labels as a worthy stakeholder in the company. (Ingham, 2018) Spotify needs content and labels are the biggest right holders of music securing massive catalogs for the platform. Labels' withdrawal would negatively impact Spotify's library. This situation serves as proof that the cultural narrative forces out direct licensing deals since it reduces the profit for the main stakeholders. These facts are sometimes undermined by the music critics. What is also overlooked by the artists in the age of streaming is that one million streams barely would make a song a hit and consequently does not generate big revenue. (Owsinski, 2017) In today's perspective blockbusters come with more than one billion streams which stretches the boundaries of success for indie artists.

## What Affects Spotify's Payment System

Meanwhile, no official rate per stream has been released by Spotify, artists right blog “*The Trichordis*” makes yearly calculation of indie labels to disclose how much they receive from Spotify. ([The Trichordis, 2017](#)) The data presented shows a sixteen percent drop in royalty rates from 2014 being \$0.00521 to 2016 falling to \$0.00437. The latest per-stream payout update which is assessed again on a mid-sized indie label reveals an average rate of \$0.00348 per Spotify stream in 2019 which shows another decline. ([The Trichordis, 2020](#)) Considering that the rates are presented in average, the streamers' location plays a huge factor in generating higher or lower rates for artists because the subscription fee differs from one country to another. For example, in Indonesia premium subscription fees are as low as \$3.74 per month, and in Denmark \$14.39. The figures may disappoint the artists but without a doubt, Spotify enlarges the scale of creators' reach to audiences globally. In today's fashion CD sales of a local band could never



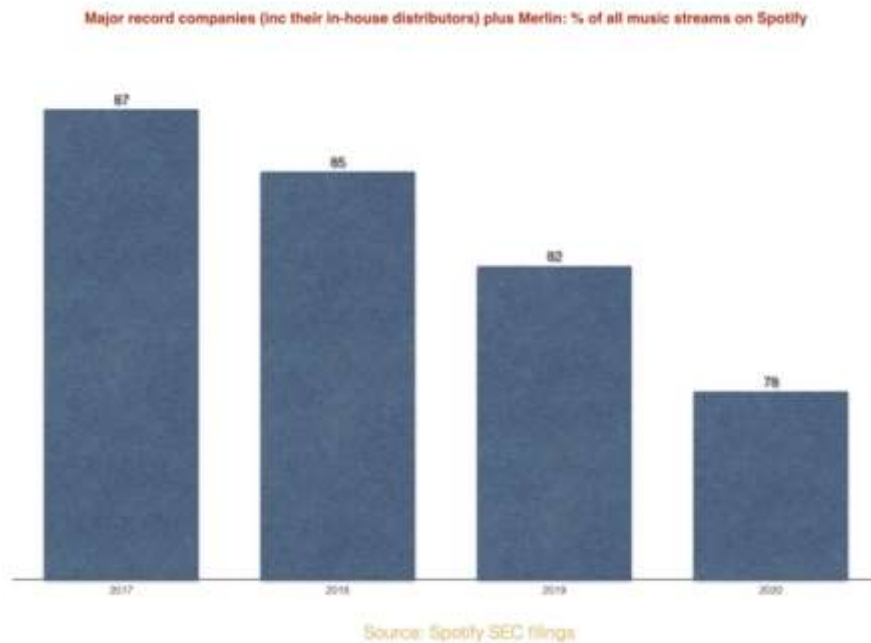
reach the market of over 170 countries. Several artist's rights spokesmen such as David Lowery are of opinion that artists receive a small fraction of the generated revenue of their songs. In the widely circulated speech at the 2012 San Francisco Music Summit "*Meet The New Boss, Worse Than the Old Boss?*" he rather favors the "bad old gatekeepers" as he believes artists gain higher percentage of revenue under previous system.

What is also missed is that with the digital revolution the system through which artists are getting paid is not evolved. (Mejia, 2019) In addition to this how much artists receive it depends on the terms of contract they signed with the major or independent labels. Spotify announces that generally it gives two third of every dollar from its revenue to the rights holders. After labels and other services take their respective share the remainder goes to the artists. With this said the lack of compensation may be from the label's side. But beyond the label's contractual terms and split system, Spotify's "pro-rata" billing system proves to tilt profit towards big name artists signed under big labels. (Mejia, 2019) In the "pro rata" model, the compensation received by right holders is calculated on a monthly basis by dividing the listenership of an individual song by the listener ships of all users of the service. This figure is multiplied by the monthly fees collected. (Finnish Musicians Association, 2018) Under "pro-rata model" right holders of the most listened-to tracks make the most money. "The 'pro rata' model is perceived as being inherently objective and fair, however, it doesn't take into account different user behaviors," says Will Page, Spotify's Chief Economist. The alternative to "pro-rata" is "user centric" model based on individual consumer listening volumes. The compensation received by an individual right holder is calculated by dividing the number of plays of an individual song by an individual user by the number of total listings of that user. This figure is multiplied by the monthly fee paid by the user. (Finnish Musicians Association, 2018)

### **What Spotify's Financial Report Reveals**

Spotify's 2020 financial report shows 78% of the global volume of streams is recorded by Sony Music Entertainment UMG, WBG, and Merlin. This figure is lower than last year's 82% meaning that major labels lost 4% of their market share. Music Business WorldWide claims if

this decline continues over the next decade major labels plus Merlin will have a market share of less than 50% making more space for non-Merlin independent labels.



On the contrary before complete conversion to digital media only the big three were in control of the western music industry. According to Statista in 2015 just a year prior to the coming of streaming services the independent labels held only 34.4 % of market share and the rest 64.8% is accounted by Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group and Universal Music Group; These statistics implies that large numbers of downloads and sales are generated from the big players giving them privilege to enjoy high market concentration. Big labels wield influence to keep unwelcomed artists away from breaking into the mainstream media as a way of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping assures they are in full charge of filtering music, and in the process some of the artistic expression, originality and creativity diminished. Which resulted in music becoming increasingly formulated in terms of instrumentation on commercial or mainstream set (Percino G, Klimek P, ThurnerS, 2014.)

Many well-known music blogs back up Spotify's infrastructure as a layout bringing forth enormous opportunities for immediate exposure for artists who would otherwise be at disadvantage. According to the finding presented in the 2019 "*Buzz angle Music*" annual report of U.S music consumption, "On-demand audio stream consumption in 2019 set a record high with 705 billion streams, up 32% over 2018's 534.6 billion audio streams" ([Buzzangle Music, 2019](#)) The lengthy report's findings can be summed up in one sentence. As a result of streaming services the rotation and amount of music played is much greater. Upholding that streaming drives higher demand and consequently level up the playing field for artists. In this way there are no barriers as it used to be for the independent musicians to put out their music on the same stage as big name artists do. But even with tens of millions of listeners they cannot get a fair share due to the "pro-rata" billing system which favors only the top artists.

In 2020 Spotify's new licensing and marketing campaign deal with UMG raised concerns as it facilitates music companies to pay for marketing data and analytics. ([Steele, 2020](#)) Under this deal, Spotify offers a boost for artists and labels in exchange for a reduction in promotional recording royalty rate. The new feature gives exposure to artists who are seeking more visibility. At the same time, UMG secures the availability of vast catalogs and products for multiple years on the platform thus reinforces its influence on the platform. The Wall Street Journal accredits the R&B singer Weeknd's new album success to the newly developed promotional tool. Spotify doesn't deny its role to actuate "*After Hours*" on top ([Steele, 2020](#)) which gives a good testimony of its leveraging system. In response to the blog *Musically* Spotify's marketing lead Charleton Lamb elaborates their plans with the new tool saying "What was really important was that we wanted to be accessible to artists at any stage of their career. It won't require any budget upfront. The model is accessible, democratic, it's more fair. You don't have to pony up cash," ([Musically, 2020](#)) Whereas in the past artists used to rely on labels for distributions and marketing promotions now, both artists and labels lean on Spotify's new marketing tools and data to reach to stardom. Besides the new feature, playlist placement is another promotional tool that can lead a song from obscurity to mass appeal. With this said, record labels necessity fades away gradually, yet their control over the revenues increases.



There are challenges for independent artists as regards landing on the editorial playlist with tens of millions of followers thus diversification in top charts is still low. Just by glancing at some of the famous editorial playlist one can see most songs come from big label artists. To many artists' algorithms and human curators spark as a form of new gatekeeping in the platform previously controlled by radio programmers and human intermediators. The power of Spotify's gatekeepers are more than the traditional ones since they have advanced digital tools to collect huge data and assess accordingly. landing on an official playlist gives musicians massive global exposure and put them on spotlight. Therefore, Platform gatekeepers are in full charge of selecting what to expose to the public and what cultural item to direct their attention since they have more data and tools. ([Bonini & Gandini, 2019](#))

**Below are the most streamed tracks of 2019-2021 indicating high amount of content from three major labels**

**In 2019 all is from the major labels**

1. "Señorita" – Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes .....June 21, 2019
2. "bad guy" – Billie Eilish .....March 29, 2019
3. "Sunflower" – Post Malone, Swae Lee October.....October 18, 2018
4. "7 Rings" – Ariana Grande.....Jan 18, 2019
5. ...3, 2018 (original) April 5, 2019 Billy Ray Cyrus remix
6. Beautiful people — Ed Sheeran..... October 18, 2018
7. Without me — Halsey..... October 4, 2018
8. Don't start now — Dua Lipa..... October 31,2019
9. Shallow — Lady Gaga..... September 27, 2018
10. Sucker — Jonas Brother..... March 1, 2019
11. Someone you loved — Lewis Capaldi ..... Nov 8, 2018
12. I'm so tired — Lauv Troye Sivan ..... Jan 24, 2019
13. If I can't have you — Shawn Mendez ..... May 3, 2019
14. I don't care ft Justin Bieber — I don't care ..... May 10, 2019

**In 2020 we see more independent artists top the chart after going viral online. Among the list Tones And I, Powfu, Saint Jhn and Arizona Zerves popularity are online stories.**

1. Blinding Lights -The Weeknd.
2. Dance Monkey - Tones And I.
3. The Box - Roddy Ricch.
4. Roses - Imanbek Remix SAINt JHN, Imanbek.
5. Don't Start Now - Dua Lipa.
6. ROCKSTAR (feat. Roddy Ricch) - DaBaby, Roddy Ricch.
7. Watermelon Sugar - Harry Styles.
8. death bed (coffee for your head) - Powfu, beabadoobee.
9. Falling – Trevor Daniel
10. Someone You Loved – Lewis Capaldi
11. Tusa – KAROL G, Nickie Minaj
12. ROXANNE – Arizona Zervas
13. Circles- Post Malone
14. Blueberry Faygo – Lil Mosey

**2021 shows three songs from independent labels that are DJ Riton and Nightcrawlers, DJ Alan Walker and Zara Larasson. From which the latter is partially cooperated with Sony Music.**

1. Montero-Lil Nas X
2. Were good-Dua Lipa
3. Peaches-Justin Bieber
4. Friday-Riton and Nightcrawlers
5. Hold on-Justin Bieber
6. Calling my phone-6lack
7. Good without-Mimi webb
8. Rapstar-Polo G
9. What other people say-Demi Lovato
10. Up-CardiB
11. Break my heart- Dua Lipa
12. Talk about love-Zara Larasson
13. Follow you-Imagine Dragons
14. Fake a smile-Alan Walker

As regards high content placement from major labels, Jeremy Erlich, Spotify's new Co-Head of Music Strategy states "I don't believe on the editorial side that we're gatekeepers. We're connectors. We're the ones who should know what song goes in the right place so that they can have a path to the top." ([Ross, 2020](#)) This well thought placement comes natural as Spotify is very effective in getting a song heard by the masses by growing the song's familiarity across its platform. In social psychology the practice of growing a thing's familiarity is called the mere exposure effect, a preference to familiar things. ([Zajonc, 2011](#)) However, people also exhibit tendencies to hear new music. The new has always been better in popular culture and is what drives more music creation (Anderson,1) but the biggest challenge is how Spotify algorithms and auto recommendations shape the circulation of music which can redefine different music genres and reshape music identity. (Maugula)

To understand to what extent a curated playlist has the power to turn a song into a hit, Spotify conducts a case study on Robin Schulz's bouncy remix of Dutch singer Mr. Probz's "Waves". The findings reveal Spotify indeed grew the popularity of tropical house, a less anticipated mini-genre. In 2015 tropical house and pop genres meet one another and form a new combination of sounds in pop music that is characterized with EDM's bass bombs and melodic sounds. Justin Bieber's "Where Are You Now" is a great example explaining the genre. The song spreads a mood of hopelessness, lovesickness and easiness. Electronic sounds and based drops with murmuring vocal around a melody that comes with vocal samples ([Pelly, 2018](#)) set another layout for songs that are branded specifically for the platform.

Turning music into data "datification of music listening" (Prey2016) as generally described (Gitelman and Jackson, 2013) algorithmic data are never neutral because it is organized within the company's logic and represents the aggregation of actual behaviors and strategic choices by firms and advertising activities (Bonini and Gandini 2019). Jeremy Wade Morris sees these advertising activities and choices as data that the infrastructure monitors and collects and represents the information as a cultural good. (Morris 2015, 452). These activities also resonate with the notion of frictionless platforms presented by Andras Ronai as a dominant way of spreading the way of thinking in the music industry. Friction in this context means "interactions that inhibit people from intuitively and painlessly achieving their goals within a digital interface"

(Young 2015). Despite its definition, Andras Roni states that frictionless platforms are not aiming to broaden the users' wants and desires rather reducing the burden on the users of having a definite one. Frictionless platforms functions are close to the concept of the paradox of choice which also confirms when the multitude of choices grows liberation in choice becomes debilitation. In the next section examples of how musicians are becoming slaves to these algorithms are presented in brief.

Mark Mulligan one of the leading media and technology analyst in the industry, gives us insight on new emerging formats that may constraint music creation but also bring a creative framework. In his blog called “*Music Industry*” Mulligan finds producers being locked in a process of tailoring pop songs in purpose of dominating Spotify’s streams and gaining more views. He sees this process as an “industrialization in songwriting” (Mulligan, 2019) Song writers and producers unstoppable effort reveals a new trend and genre in popular music under the effect of streaming service called “*Spotify Core*” which brings new ideas about sounds of hit songs. Besides him many producers and song-writers of hit songs such as Emily Warren also notices creating songs in the interest of the medium and see it as enslavement to what algorithms promote the most. Through “*Spotify Core*” writers combine the best hooks of multiple songs together to come up with a new song branded for Spotify. This style is close to Post Malone’s sad, lovelorn and chill songs with a voice that is described by the “*The New York Times*” as a “sounds like its running away” but still the echoes are persistence.(Caramanica, 2019) *The New York Times* calls Malone the savviest adopter to the last decade’s pop evolution. (Caramanica, 2019) Mid or slower tempos, melancholy and lush sounds with no distinctive ups and down are new features gaining popularity on Spotify. This type of music easily fit on mood- and affect-oriented playlists like “Chill Hits” (Pelly, 2018) The concept of genre is gradually taking away from music due to the playlist consumptions and music is defined by the mood or type of activities once wants to pursue. (Ugwu, 2016) For instance, Billie Eilish’s songs are great example of soft and seamlessly mixable sounds serving as one variation of “Spotify’s core”. Her songs are generally categorized under the pop genre however, by comparing the structure of traditional pop music with today’s chill and monotonous sounds of pop I notice a big transformation in what is regarded as pop music. The chorus of traditional pop structure is designed to generate anticipation and is where music often builds towards. (Wildridge, 2019)

Structurally choruses come after the verse yet nowadays the chorus hits first and does not cause any feelings of excitement.

Hosts of Switched on Pop Nate Sloan and Charlie unwrap how technology alters music. Songwriter Charlie Harding notices how songs are getting shorter in reverse to the '90s. He reasons a few factors that cause this change. Firstly, nowadays artists are getting paid based on stream count rather than the physical sales consequently this payment system affects how the lyricist composes the songs. Another factor is Spotify's count stream duration. Considering that Spotify only counts songs that are played at least 30 seconds, artists are eliminating long intros and shortening the average song length in order to pay off financially. Adopting this fashion also changes the average album length. For artists, it makes sense to add more short tracks on their album so that the aggregation of all tracks could generate more streams. ([Mack, 2019](#))

The digital service that was launched 15 years ago with the aim of establishing itself in the industry to make millions of songs accessible to people worldwide now turns out to be the intention behind songs. ([Sisario & Mercede, 2019](#)) Spotify's effect on the process of music production capitalizes the famous phrase by McLuhan "*The Medium is the Message*" (McLuhan, 1964)

In this way main drivers of articulation of certain type of music is the algorithmic data which boost the circulation of songs based on new logics of aggregation of sounds, identities, and taste are now emerging from the infrastructure itself, giving rise to a distinctive "datification of music listening" (Prey 2016). Thus, the nature of popular music is commercial and formulaic but very durable and in continual evolution. (Prey, Robert, 2016)

### **Music as a mirror of time reflection and modernity**

Any shifts in the music of each decade mirror changes in society. For example, rock music rise against conformity and in Queen's case changes the image of AIDS forever. Anderson observation shows for decades hit songs arouses feelings of obsession in mass cultures and their place becomes permanent in nation's collective conscious "we define our age by our celebrities

and mass-market products” (Anderson). In the same fashion songs pinpoint the general happenings of a certain year for example, the year 2012 can be associated with the time when we embraced the South Korean K-pop star PSY with his hit “*Gangnam style*” and mimicked his dance moves. The songs gained popularity mostly through its viral dance moves. The unforgettable K-pop dance became a cultural icon stirring the attention of world’s leaders such as British PM Boris Johnson and president Obama and its impression continue to exist in our collective memory. This is the unique relationship that music has with its given time defining the modernity and particularity of an era. As Baudelaire describes “the pleasure which we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present”. (Baudelaire,1863)

In each era, a set of genres become mainstream. Disco songs gained popularity in 1970 setting apart the decade from 2000’s hip-hop songs that took off the mainstream. Thus, pop music always represents the cultural artifacts of the time in which music is produced. However, today’s popular songs render a formulaic type of music mostly having reference to the songs of the past.

Taylor Swift’s “Look What You Made Me Do” chorus that is borrowed from Said Fred “I’m Too Sexy” underscored base is barely distinguished by the fans because of decades of gap in between the two songs. Yet shows a great degree of similarity. Selena Gomez’s "Same Old Love" (2015) and Camila Ceballos’s "Havana" (2017) has the same slinky undertone show heavily reliance on computer sound libraries and banks. “Evidence points towards an important degree of conventionalism, in the sense of blockage or no-evolution in the creation and production of contemporary western popular music” (Serrà, J., Corral, Á., Bogañá, M., 2012)

### **Where we stand as regards modernity**

All these similarities and repetition reflects today’s popular music atmosphere. Contemporary music failed to deliver the self-definition of current time. This statement can be associated with German literary critic Walter Benjamin’s revolutionized thoughts on how we perceive modernity. To participate in modernity was to conceive of one’s society as engaging in organizational and knowledge advances that make one’s immediate predecessors appear antiquated or, at least, surpassed (Snyder, S. L. 2016) In this respect artists fall short in participating in modernity of their society. Recreation of music has never been easier thanks to

programmed beats and new technology yet to the labels it is less impressive to create new patterns in popular music that is why many hit sounds evoke a sense of Déjà vu and familiarity owing to the banal standards. Perhaps deliberate incorporation of old music shapes the nature of today's music. Recreation of the past and putting end to the progress are two characteristics of postmodernism (Duignan) and we see many examples of music with elective mixing of past time styles. The 2012 Bruno mars "*Locked Out of Heaven*" hit is a recognition of "*Roxanne*" 1978 from The Police band pointing to prior decade artistic expression that is getting mimicked and recreated by new. This is a safe method of contemporizing previous popular track to record a new version of an existing piece with current means, but without altering the main semantics of the discourse (Serra, J., Corral, Á., Bogañá, M., 2012) This shows that today's music still follows the postmodernism values. Yet many authors and critics such as Linda Hutcheon, in the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002) and Alan Kirby in his book called *Digimodernism* (2009) explain that the postmodernism era has come to an end. This depicts that the music industry falls behind its historical timeline. Despite the fact that popular music and technology has always been hand in hand the cultural centered narrative takes over the technological advancements. This pattern also prevails on Spotify. (Tofalvy)

### **Repetition in Popular Music**

One example of how originality gives away to repetition is the 4<sup>th</sup> most streamed track on Spotify "7 rings" by Ariana Grande which was accused of plagiarism by Josh Stone. The rapper accused Grande of taking away parts from his 2017 song "[You need it I got it](#)" both lyrically and note wisely in her hook as "I want it, I got it, I want it, I got it"

"7 rings" melody is also not original. It is derived from "[My favorite things](#)" performed by Jack Jones written and produced by [Rodgers and Hammerstein](#). Ariana Grande adjusted the original lyrics however she kept the original melody in exactly the same way.

Original lyrics: "Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens/Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens /Brown paper packages tied up with strings/These are a few of my favorite things"

Grande's version: "Yeah, breakfast at Tiffany's and bottles of bubbles/Girls with tattoos who like getting in trouble/Lashes and diamonds, ATM machines/Buy myself all of my favorite things (yeah)"

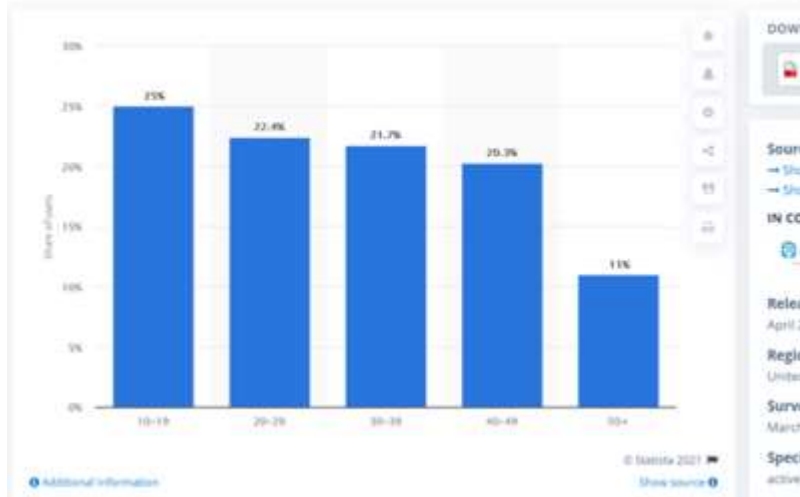
These two songs are indeed very much alike on the hook and melody shows originality of hits are given away to repetition, no creativity and homogeneity. The most popular playlists on Spotify are curated from songs of major labels. This playlist then is played by the top 40 commercial radio programmers instead of breaking new songs themselves (Shah, 2017).

### **Tiktok's Potential in Promoting Diversity**

In contrast, Tiktok the user-generated platform with monthly 800 million active users became the potential promoter of diversity in music. Tiktok was initially launched as Douyin in September 2016, in China. A year later ByteDance launched the app for markets outside China. Its mission is to inspire creativity and expression direct from mobile. The creativity and expression of unpaid contributors is what Tiktok drives its value from. The app is very inclusive which goes against the Spotify's top to down hegemonic nature. And because the interactive nature of the app promotes content from bottom to up it gives rise to many niche markets. Thus, the formula for gaining popularity in Tiktok is to choose the right target audience rather than aiming to the general public. (creator kit) Some widely known Tiktok niches are dance communities, comedies, lip-syncing, fashion, fitness, couples goal, cooking and arts and crafts. Among these niches choreographers are the most popular. They are the one's dancing to the famous songs and them viral. For this reason, artist also come up with their choreography which is usually easy to follow to increase the engagement of their fans. Drake in "*Toosie Slide*" music video introduces the track's name sake dance routine in his lobby that later make waves in Tiktok. (Taylor,2020) "*Toosie slide*" illustrates Drake's writing music specially for Tiktok as the lyrics also explains the dance move in the chorus "*It goes right foot up, left foot slide / Left foot up, right foot slide*" is great for becoming a Tiktok dance challenge. Yet Drake's basic dance moves hardly can regard as a challenge. It is more of a sign that the rapper wants to stay relative to the new trends happening on a platform dominated by Gen Z.



Distribution of TikTok users in the United States as of March 2021,



Big artists trying to recycle contents on Tiktok comes disruptive to the app’s general atmosphere which draws attention to “the new”. Thomas Hobbs, writer for Pitchfork also raises concerns on Drake rigging Tiktok and warns well established artist’s to be less blatant about their commercial incentive and add something vibrant to the new trends. (Taylor, 2020) Unlike Spotify’s passive streamers Tiktok creators are actively reacting with the new music. All Tiktokers seek to engage with songs either by dancing or lip-syncing. As a result, they form a unique layout which priorities content discovery over subscriber clout. (Taylor, 2020)

There is no doubt that Tiktok just like Spotify has its legacy in reshaping how music is made but evidence shows that Tiktok gives more room to new artists due to the platform’s creative approach. Tiktok establishes itself as a way for unknown artists to score a breakout hit because its algorithm rewards retention rather than pushing what’s popular. (Taylor, 2020) While it is not that easy to gain recognition for both independent and mid-sized artists on Spotify, the video sharing app brings fame to many young independent artists overnight. “Old Town Road” by American rapper Lil Nas X became the first hit on Spotify in 2019 yet he associated his Spotify’s success to Tiktok. Lil Nas X released his song independently on Dec 3, 2018. The song ranked the second most popular song on Tiktok by which users made videos as they transformed

themselves into cowboy channeled streamers on Spotify. Being on Spotify's editorial list is a giant marketing tool which is mostly loaded with big name artists. Tiktok funnels attention to Lil Nas X as a result topping him on charts of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Later Lil Nas X got signed under Columbia Records on Dec 21. In this way Tiktok masters in giving privilege to the unknown and the labels masters in signing the artist behind the viral song.

The below chart illustrates 2019 Tiktok viral songs to examine how much the platform supports democratic circulation of contents and originality. From seventeen songs listed eleven are produced by dominant music companies and six by independent labels.

Streaming service's algorithms push artists that are already famous. On the contrary, it is hard to make a prediction about which video would go viral on Tiktok. More than its unpredictability what also disrupts the labels is that Tiktok does not have adequate licensing deals. As a result, Tiktok allows its users to undermine copyright laws. (Moore, 2020) However, unlike streaming services that are engineered for music sharing, Tiktok is a video-sharing app whose main purpose was to challenge people to be creative. Tiktok authentic content that came with any kind of music eventually made the users search music on the platform and cause controversies in the music industry.

Song	Artist	Label	Company	Number of tiktok videos
Panini	Lil Nas X	Columbia	Sony Music	Over 218 K
Old Town Road	Lil Nas X	Initially released independently Re-released by Columbia Records after his fame	Sony Music	
Lalala	Y2K	Columbia Records	Sony Music	Over 1 million
Dance Monkey	Tones and I	Bad Batch	Sony Music	Over 247 K
The Git Up	Blanco Brown		Bertelsmann Music Group	Over 3 million
Pull Up	Luh Kel		Cinematic Music Group	Over 277 K
The Truth	Lizzo	Atlantic	Warner Brothers	Over 2 million
Bad Guy	Billie Eilish			Over 1 million
Obsessed	Mariah Carey	Island	Universal Music Group	Over 4 million
Boys	Lizzo	Atlantic	Warner Brothers	Over 2 million
Lose You To Love Me	Selena Gomez	Inter scope	Universal Music Group	Over 127 K
Shake Dat	Loui (feat. Lil Jay)	Run it up	Run it up Record	Over 10 K
Candy	Doja Cat	Kemosabe	Sony Music	Over 4.6 million
All time low	John Bellion	Capitol records	Visionary music group and universal music group	
'Birthday Suit'	Cosmo Sheldrake	Transgressive Records	Unsigned	
'Roxanne'	Arizona Zervas	Initially released independently after the fame signed under Colombia records	Sony Music	
The TikToking Song	Kyle Exum			over 313k videos

Among these eleven songs “Panini” and “Roxanne” were initially released independently are examples of independent artists going mainstream and eventually get signed under the big labels after gaining fame on Tiktok specifically. The successful singles spark a famous recording

company's attention to release a new version of the original song featuring a rapper. This is to say that tiktok as a user generated application has the potential to promote independent artist's career and push their reach with no specific rules.

Not all the songs on Spotify's official playlists go viral like the way it reaches out to million users on tiktok. This is to say there are many signed artists on Spotify's official list that never had a breakthrough on Tiktok. For example, Shawn Mendez "*señorita*" ranked third on Spotify but in relation to the viral tiktok songs with millions of videos it achieved less attention by tiktokers. (tradable bits, 2019)

From above chart Mariah Carey's "*obsessed*" goes viral eleven years after its first release on June 16, 2009 proving tiktok can revive songs and re-introduce them to the new generation. This situation may be challenging for labels because the old rhythmic music competes with the new songs.

### **Are Labels Trying to Gain the System?**

Signing the unknown artists behind Tiktok's viral songs can eventually disrupt the user-generated content. The story behind the seventeen years old beat creator name Josh Nanai, who comes of Samoan descent highlights the bottom-up content promotion on Tiktok. Nanai creates a beat as a tribute to his heritage while participating in the Tiktok's cultural challenge. His beats called Laxed (Siren Beat) sparked dance moves specifically for the song. More than 55 million video uploads followed the moves. Jason Derulo later posted his new song "*Savage Love*" using Nanai's beat without giving the creators credit. Consequently, Nanai who lives far from the main music capital located in Los Angeles took legal actions. Eventually, the issue was resolved and the details remain unclear when Columbia Records announced that Nanai and Derulo had "put aside their differences and come together". (Aualiitia, 2020) Nanai got signed and officially released "*Savage Love (Laxed-Siren Beat)*". "*Savage Love*" is a good illustration of major labels adding creators of viral songs to their catalog. But what is concerning is that often big labels make a new release of the unknown artists featuring a big artist that has more authority and radio presence. As a result, the unknown artists are being suffocated by the signature style of the big artists and in this way oppress the new. (Caramanica 4:33) Caramanica concludes the reason is "Their (Label's) substitute for their inability to engineer the virality that Tiktok is premised

upon” (Caramanica 6:16) and as a result, the viral trends would purely become engineered in some point it on Tiktok. Beyoncé joining Megan Thee Stallion on ‘Savage’ remix also shows If these recording deals continue with every viral song, the labels could successfully game the system.

Before coming of the web, it made sense for artists to sign under labels. However, after the digitalization of music, the CD sales stopped and platformization gave more power and tools to the dominant labels. Because of Spotify and labels' interdependent relationship now signed artists use the label's influence and connections to be on top. Meanwhile, Spotify also tried to bring a direct licensing deal to artists to own their recordings. But Spotify’s action was put on a hold by labels. It is important to understand how Spotify employs its algorithm gives meaning to the platform’s functionality. This proves despite the platform capitalization effect on music, it is the cultural artifacts that eventually shape the narrative of the music industry. On the other hand, Tiktok showed that there is more to the music industry than the labels and Spotify combined. And once again the music industry lags behind Tiktok’s user-generated model just as fall behind Napster. How long would we have the labels around depends on new digital laws that eliminate the middleman in the music industry. To conclude, the main obstacle that hinders democracy and originality firstly are the major labels influencing Spotify’s platform with their cultural narratives. Despite the digitalization of music, the system of paying the artists, at last, hasn’t changed. This method causes artists to create music that is approved by the playlist’s legacy. Yet labels couldn’t make an impact on Tiktok since it is not a music-sharing platform in its essence. Tiktok adheres to the concept of niche markets where the cookie-cutter formula does not satisfy all. In this sense, Tiktok presents a model of platforms that is more relevant to the need of the million niches overviewed in Anderson’s book. Thus, Tiktok can capture the trend of the current time and supports modernity.

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