

Can't Knock the Hustle : Understanding the uses and motivations between independent distribution channels for Hip-Hop artists in Rotterdam.

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Student Name: Luke Mendonca

Student Number: 530361

Supervisor: dr. Alexandre Diallo

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Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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Hopefully, this work can help to underline the issues facing artists and some potential solutions for the next generation of music creators, as well as highlight the amazing talent in the city of Rotterdam coming out from the region.

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the explosion of digital music technologies, independent artists from all genres of music have begun to adopt new distribution platforms, with their goal of changing the methods/means by which artists receive value both monetary and non-monetary. Hip-hop musicians in particular have leveraged these platforms to their advantage, with multiple sub-genres and new styles of music coming into popularity through the growth of these platforms. These platforms have also helped to battle the increasingly more monopolized and tightly controlled industry. Unfair contracts and revenue accumulation given by labels are some of the core issues attracting artists to the platforms. However, research on this specific topic is limited in academia, and albeit frequent discussion amongst music circles, the general public still lacks general knowledge of IDPs as services. Thus, the impact of these services on artists in the Rotterdam area about how they see their value is the source of the analysis. The labor value theory by Marx was applied to the topics of the analysis, with the UTAUT2 theory regarding the technological nature of IDPs being used. The monopolization of the industry was also explored in the literature used in the analysis. To explore this, ten in-depth interviews were conducted to receive answers about the overall state of the music industry, artists' usages of IDPs, and how artists received and perceived their acquired value. After a thematic analysis, a few key concepts on the views of artists on the impact of IDPs on the field of music. Artist solidarity on the part of artists was a key insight generated from the analysis. Artists have endured a creative class consciousness. Alongside this, material conditions have changed in the current age in the industry, shifting to where artists must unite when facing the issues of equal exchange within the system. In a similar vein, artists depicted a clear need for IDPs. This was based on the current paradigm of hip-hop, which tends to not favor artists but labels in its industrial and production practices. A move towards independent services, through artists creating music at home or through a small network, has led to the services' increase in usage and acceptance by music makers. Suggestions for future research include mapping the industry out to better understand the connections within the industry as a whole to better see the chains of value and ownership in the field.

Keywords : Hip-Hop/Rap, Music Industries, Independent Artists, Creative Labor, Media Technologies

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1. Introduction

1.1 Hard Knocks Life

Music from early the recording era till the present streaming-dominated period we see today, has always been impacted by the technology and the conditions of artists to create music (Hess, 2005). Unlike film, fine arts, theater, to modern mediums such as gaming and television, music's ease of replication and distribution to the masses in various formats, makes it unique in the overall media world. Before music could be recorded and stored, means to share their music were often either through public settings or spaces. The invention of vinyl and phonograph music entered its popular stage, in which songs could be saved onto different types of tracks and then be moved on to records (Sutton, 2022).

While media can often be impacted by societal/technological changes, Hip-hop/rap is a premier example of how music is often both impacted by its material conditions. Material conditions in this sense refer to the elements in which artists create their music and the situation in which they produce music, the actual resources and tools available to artists (Hess, 2005). Hip-hop artists and producers have always learned to not only make do but innovate regardless of the resources at hand (Schumacher, 2018). As this element of the genre has remained in the modern era, Hip-hop since its inception in the early 1980s collective ownership and open/ease of access to content. Rappers sampled old records, used each other's beats, and used their music to display their social position/issues, as well as the neighborhoods and areas they represented (Oware, 2010). Musicians from this era most of the time operated in groups or collectively to spread their messages and music to the urban areas they lived within. De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, the Roots, RUN DMC, and many many more saw the collective benefits of being in a group to release and grow their music careers (Izadi, 2016).

With these collective values in mind, Hip-hop by extension has also seen its many artists struggle to see the complete value of their work from both a cultural and a commercial perspective. The music industry has developed similarly to other media industries in recent years, with a slow process of monopolization taking place worldwide (Götting, 2023). Now, a combination of three major labels, all under larger media conglomerates, has control over the majority of the industry with 68% of the industry run by Sony, Warner, and Universal as of 2020 (Stone, 2020). These entities can dictate the rules of the industry to their liking and also

employ dozens of different subsidiaries in the form of smaller imprints. These are lower-level labels that delegate the day-to-day operations/management of a label and artists, from releasing/promoting music to the collection of royalties and tour planning (Vise, 2021).

With this brief understanding of the nature of the music industry and hip-hop in general outlined, one particular track from the mid-1990s comes to mind. “Can’t Knock the Hustle” is the opening track to Brooklyn rapper/Hip-hop icon JAY-Z’s debut album, *Reasonable Doubt*. In the song, Hov as he is often referred to, alongside singer Mary J. Blige pays homage to an underlying theme throughout hip-hop, the idea of wealth and ownership, achieved through one’s hard work and dedication to their craft (Oware, 2010). The landscape of rap and music in general from when JAY-Z recorded and released his *Reasonable Doubt* in 1996, to today are different worlds in their own right. It was an era where labels dominated, where rappers were dependent on their (labels) various resources, their fellow artists, and connections central to a rapper’s success (Darius, 2017). To go even further into this example, JAY-Z would sign now acclaimed artist Kanye West to Def Jam as a producer, before going on to become a major force within the industry. So much so that Kanye himself would form his imprint on Def Jam, known to the public as GOOD MUSIC (Krol, 2021). This example goes to show how artists, while many times aware of the unequal exchange within the organized industry, can get embedded into the “machine” itself. Either through means for their preservation or as means to climb the metaphorical ladder within the label system entirely.

While the traditional model of record labels, contracts, and multi-studio album deals still exists and is successful in many genres, the exploitative nature of this model has been questioned and brought to light in recent years (Robinson and Harrison, 2020). Artists, regardless of their level of success, genre, or notoriety, face common issues such as unequal distribution of royalties, loss of publishing rights, and excessive advances given as loans for music creation (Laybourn 2018). 360 deals have become a notorious term in the current hip-hop landscape. These are contracts that take royalty and master splits from the artists signed, but are often heavily in favor of the label at hand (Marshall, 2013). Labels will also take cuts from tour and merchandising (overall image rights) to secure an even larger percentage of the total revenue an artist may generate in a calendar year (Blair, 2021). One other method by which labels put artists in unfavorable positions is through the usage of advances. These are essentially micro-loans that labels hand out for an artist to make an album. However, while the artists typically see this as revenue for themselves, this money is not only expected to be paid back but also be turned into a profit from the sales of an album

(Kjus, 2021). This practice has many times left artists in precarious cycles of debt to major labels, in which they must send the majority of their revenues back to the label.

1.2 Independent Distribution Platforms - Autonomy for artists

While the trend and changes to the industry have happened over time, a new dilemma has been how hip-hop artists have lacked autonomy in releasing music to the various major DSPs. Before, the solution was for artists to manually or completely independently put out songs on other content platforms such as Myspace or the early content sharing sites i.e. Youtube/Myspace, or release music in physical formats such as CD or tape, which were still seen as viable options in a pre-streaming environment for music (Ruthmann 2007). As is the case with all forms of media, newer challenges require updated and renewed technological solutions. The reaction to these unfavorable circumstances has been a move to new platforms/services which allow artists to distribute their music independently on Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal, and every main DSP (Cihak, 2022). These independent distribution platforms (IDPs as they will be referred to throughout this thesis) allow for the collection of royalties for artists, as well as displaying statistics for artists. The main names of these new services are Distrokid, Ditto Music, TuneCore, CD Baby, and Untitled Masters (Cihak, 2022). The goal of these platforms is to aid artists and music creators, in general, to fully or better acquire the value of their music. This is either monetarily such as through streams and royalties, as well as being a tool for promotion, exposure, and non-monetary value (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2021). Thus, this new form of ownership and control represents a shift in how music is distributed and disseminated online.

The overall success of IDPs can be measured through multiple statistics and elements, the first of which is how artists have become successful using IDPs to share their music online. Ditto, a UK-based service that costs only \$20 per year (Ditto, 2023), has seen a few major rappers and R&Bs use their services. Dave and Chance the Rapper are two notable signees, the first achieving worldwide acclaim through his two projects “Psychodrama” and “We’re all in this together”(Brown, 2021). Dave’s biggest song came with “Location” in 2019 featuring Burna Boy, which topped charts both in the UK and on global streaming services. To add to this, he also won the 2022 BRIT for Best Rap/Grime Act, certifying his place among the best artists in the UK (Dodd, 2023). Chance the Rapper won the 2016 Grammy for Best Rap Album for his project “Coloring Book”, a project which he released and distributed

independently, alongside his other mixtape ACID RAP which was voted as one of the best rap projects of 2013 (Willets, 2023). Both these artists are not only critically and commercially acclaimed, but are socially conscious in the content of their music, with both discussing issues of race, inequality, mental health, and other social issues. The success of these two rappers gives an example of how IDPs can be used to sustain a successful career in modern music. Ditto is not the only main IDP, a few other players maintain strong positions in the market.

In the beginning, Tunecore was one of the original IDPs, already offering distribution on the iTunes store back in the 2000s. (Proquest, 2012) Soundcloud is another platform that should be mentioned in the discussion of independent music platforms. Alongside Tunecore's trailblazing impact in the industry, CD Baby was an American-based platform that operated for over 20 years in the market. The platform had over 1 million artists sign up, and aggregated nearly 1 billion in revenue (Herstand, 2023). The company made headway as they were one of the first to partner with a music distribution service via the iTunes store. Sadly, by 2020 the company shut down all retail sales after being acquired multiple times over the 2010s (Stassen, 2019). However, CD Baby would continue to operate in the realm of digital distribution, and the success of its model saw new competitors emerge, and the IDP market grew into its modern rendition (Eggertsen, 2021).

In terms of users, the key player within this new unique market is Distrokid. The platform was founded in 2013 and has since grown to become the second most popular music distribution service among independent artists in 2020, with a market share of 22%. DistroKid has experienced significant growth over the past year, with an over 40 % increase in the number of users (Leighton, 2023). A key factor for DistroKid's popularity among independent artists is its affordable pricing, in which they charge a flat yearly fee rather than taking a percentage of an artist's royalties. This makes it a more cost-effective option for artists attempting to break out onto the scene worldwide. One other element to DistroKid's rise is its user-friendly interface and streamlined distribution process. The platform allows artists to easily upload their music and provides real-time updates on their distribution status. DistroKid also offers additional features such as music monetization on YouTube, support for pre-orders, and customizable release dates (McCabe, 2019). Overall, the service is a popular choice among independent artists due to its affordability, user-friendly interface, and streamlined distribution process (Herstand, 2023).

Soundcloud is also a streaming service, with major label and neighborhood artists sharing their music through the platform, however, the service offers the ability to release

music completely for free to all users. The only catch is that the free membership has limited functionality, and mainstream artists have access to SoundCloud Pro, which offers unlimited releases, stats, and music access (SoundCloud, 2023). Soundcloud was crucial in bringing about the rise of a handful of new subgenres within hip-hop. These were namely cloud-rap, named after its atmospheric and ethereal sounds. Punk-rap/Emo-rap was another subgenre that gained notoriety over this time, namely artists such as the late Juice Wlrd, Lil Peep and Lil Tracy, XXXtentacion, and many others. These artists combined the drum sounds and production techniques of hip-hop but delivered their vocals in the same way as emo-rock and punk artists (Holt, 2022). These new subgenres both represent the shift in both the stylistic changes and the practical changes presented by IDPs and services at large. Thus, the influence of IDPs on the genre at large has led to developments in the industry itself and began to translate to international networks of artists and music makers (Reitsamer and Prokop 2018).

1.3 The relevance of Hip-hop and Rotterdam as a scene

With an idea of both modern hip-hop, the music industry, and IDPs laid out in the previous sections, a picture of the overall state of the genre as an artist can be conceived. Artists lack autonomy due to the structure of the industry which has been established (Meier and Manzerolle, 2019). IDPs provide artists with the ability to usurp the system in place by uploading their music to the major DSPs, while also collecting the revenue from streaming services and putting them into the pockets of artists (Sun, 2018). The coming together of these two occurrences is what has led to the increase in the popularity of IDPs in the modern music industry (Kreps and Thornton, 2019). While this explanation could be concluded at a macro-level, the impact of IDPs on local music scenes has been sparsely explored regarding the Dutch or European markets. Examining the local scene, and the artists who use such platforms like Distrokid or Ditto could better detail the viability of IDPs towards its users at acquiring value. Thus the question to be answered on the topics facing artists and value can be outlined as: *How do Rap/R&B artists in Rotterdam perceive the value they receive from their music, both monetary and non-monetary via new online independent distribution services?* To answer this, examining the benefits these new platforms offer to artists can be explored within a local context. Interviewing artists in the city of Rotterdam on their opinions and perceptions of independent platforms can provide qualitative responses on the topic

which can be further interpreted and analyzed. The focus on Rap/R&B was due to the mass popularity of these genres throughout the world, and the Netherlands in terms of streaming and popularity (De Roest, 2021).

Rotterdam in particular has experienced growth in both its English and Dutch-speaking music scene (Beočanin, 2021). The city is an important space for Dutch hip-hop, while Dutch hip-hop and R&B acts have attained claim from outside the country. 8 of the most streamed artists on Spotify NL were Dutch in a 2018 statistics report from the Spotify numbers of the nation (The International Angle, 2019). The high level of popularity should be attributed to the success of the Dutch industry as a whole, which has mostly been through the entirety of electronic music (Pascoe, 2023). Hip-hop/R&B artists such as Lil Kleine and Mr. Probz have seen their music reach international success, by using this combination of dance with a rap-based delivery to make hit songs (Shownieuws, 2023). However, the latter has even gone into legal trouble. Mr. Probz filed a 10 million euro lawsuit against Sony Music for fraudulently withholding his Royalties from his hit song “Waves”, which accumulated over 800 million streams on Spotify (Reuters, 2022). This unfortunate example highlights the exploitative nature of the industry, which remains the same throughout different countries.

The city of Rotterdam in itself has provided talents within the Dutch rap realm. Artists such as Ronnie Flex and Broederliefde have reached top-charting positions (Errday, 2020). Lyrical talents in terms of songwriting are also present. For example, rappers such as Kevin have added to the scene, bringing new school-conscious rap from cities in the US into the sound profile of the city, winning awards in the process (OPEN Rotterdam, 2021b).

The importance and relevance of Rotterdam and its hip-hop landscape should also be made clear as to why it was chosen. Rotterdam is known for its vibrant urban culture, with a rich history of modern architecture, street art, and multiculturalism (OPEN Rotterdam, 2021a) This can be linked to a rising scene of both artists as well as music as a whole, who mix and apply a variety of musically to create a unique soundscape for the region. Rotterdam has a unique demographical position, with large communities of Caribbean, Arabic, Afro, Asian, and South American peoples living within the city (Van Der Heijden, 2023). Using Rotterdam as the place to sample independent hip-hop artists, also improves the understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the communities and individuals of the city. Artists in Rotterdam often draw on their experiences as members of these communities, addressing issues such as racism, discrimination, and social inequality in their music (Van Der Heijden, 2023). Studying the impact of IDPs on independent hip-hop artists within

Rotterdam can take all these local factors into account, to best examine how the sampled artists leverage these platforms in their overall careers.

New creative collectives themed around Hip-hop and urban culture have been firmly established within the city. The Notes community is an urban collective focused on music, clothing, and nightlife with the group hosting multiple events and parties throughout the year, making use of the unique cultural spaces in Rotterdam such as Massilo, or the Wereld Museum (Jeroen, 2022). Hip-hop huis and Quardin are two other collectives that are creating creative outlets for artists to express themselves. Hip-hop Huis gives out dance classes and a collaborative space for artists to discuss issues in the industry and within the city, emphasizing the communal aspects hip-hop represents (OPEN Rotterdam, 2021a). Quardin also focuses on education for the creative sector and, with a large part of their courses for music production and creation. They also own their own studio space in the center of Rotterdam, called Louvri Studios. Artists signed to the collective also saw mainstream success with Vins receiving millions of streams on Spotify (Quardin, 2023).

With Rotterdam's unique social and musical position established, there are also multiple academic incentives to study the genre of Hip-Hop/Rap and IDPs in general. The first is its cultural significance. Hip-hop has become a global cultural phenomenon, and their study allows us to understand the cultural and social conditions that led to their creation, as well as their impact on popular culture and society (Neal, 2013). Rap was the most listened-to genre of music in 2021, with 30% of all streams on Spotify accounting for the genre. While its popularity has slowed somewhat in terms of growth over the past year (Ahmed, 2022), rap continues to grow with new scenes in international markets expanding all across the globe (Piano, 2022). In conjunction with the popularity of hip-hop, the lyrical content of Rap/R&B often addresses political and social issues, such as poverty, race, and crime, making it an important tool for understanding the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities (Oware, 2010). With the notion of societal issues in mind, the control of media in countries around the world is becoming both more privatized and corporatized (Arditi, 2017). Questioning the need for modern labels and their presumably exploitative methods will be explored first to underline the need for independent distribution services. Scholars are also seeing the academic implications of studying hip-hop/rap mentioned and understanding these different perspectives and opinions from a global standpoint (Brooks and Conroy, 2011).

Societal relevance to the more specific topic of IDPs such as Distrokid or Tunecore should also be examined. The first element is how it has disrupted the music industry. These

platforms have disrupted traditional music industry distribution models and changed the way that artists distribute and monetize their music, as opposed to the major label system (Eiriz and Leite, 2017). Studying their impact on the industry can provide insights into the future of music distribution and revenue streams for artists. Another element is how these services work to empower independent artists. New distribution channels have made it easier for independent artists to distribute their music, bypassing the need for a record label through the collection of royalties (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2021). This empowerment within the music industry and the artists themselves can better map out the changing landscape of the music industry. A final relevant point to mention is how these IDPs represent a change in the overall state of the music industry. Distrokid, Tunecore, and United Masters have changed the way that consumers find and listen to music (Sun, 2018). Playlists and personal exploration are the sources for music discovery. Studying these changes provides info on the evolving music industry and the future of music production and dissemination at large and at a local level.

1.4 Project outline

To investigate the market for IDPs and how they are used by artists in Rotterdam to acquire value, this thesis is split into five sections with their respective sub-sections. After this introduction to the concepts and topic, the theoretical framework will be presented. The key theoretical points of this thesis will be around Marx's Labor Value theory and its application to music, the increase in the monopolization of the music industry, and how the UTAUT2 theory for accepting technologies relates to artists using IDPs in 2023.

After these concepts were established and given context to the topic, the research and sampling methods of the analysis were underlined. This was done to ensure the transparency of the research, by highlighting key elements of the qualitative research design. The next section will be the results, which will outline the set of key findings that will be underlined based on the responses of the artists from the Rotterdam area. These findings will be organized based on the overall themes they fit into based on the coding system mentioned in the methodology section. Lastly, conclusions about the findings will be highlighted, with the limitations and future implications for the study underlined as well.

2. Theoretical Framework

Before interviews can be conducted on the artists within Rotterdam, a theoretical background will be established on the concepts related to the rise of independent distribution platforms (IDPs). In response to the practices of the industry, musicians and producers have started taking an independent route to distribute their content as a means for greater ownership and autonomy. Due to the corporatization of the music industry, the unfair deals that are often offered to young musicians who have little legal knowledge (Kjus, 2021), or their joint monopolies over artists and their ownership of publishing/distribution rights (Gotting, 2023). These sentiments may be the driving force behind artists taking the distribution power into their own hands.

2.1 Understanding Labor in the Music Industry

While the creative industries employ all different types of specialists and experts in their respective fields, music also features a handful of skilled labor to create the albums we consume online. Each genre of hip-hop has different choices both artistic and in imagery, and these are achieved through a variety of techniques/methods (Pointer, 2021). Typically for hip-hop in particular, the music-making process evolves a combination of the artist, producer, and engineer through multiple elements and steps. The music-making process itself starts with the creation of an instrumental, typically just a beat created on a DAW (a digital audio workstation) for the artist to perform over. Artists will sometimes add elements such as live instrumentals to their music depending on the style/subgenre, but each beat takes on its unique styles and traits depending on this subgenre (Pointer, 2021).

For example, the subgenre of Drill has beats known for their distinct 808 (bass) sounds and sampling of song lyrics within their songs (Fatsis, 2019). Trap on the other hand has its unique production style, with hard-hitting hi-hats, synths, and drums on beats, alongside artists combining autotune with new vocal styles (Stickland et al., 2022). Each of these different styles also requires certain producers and engineers trained after years of practice in the specific sound. With this in mind, the most important part of rap is the actual delivery of the artists themselves. Some artists chose to perform their music on the spot,

which is commonly referred to as freestyling, while other artists come with written lyrics based on a theme or topic for a potential track (Schumacher, 2018).

Regardless of which direction artists choose to go in their performance, rappers and singers as well are generally known to put out a steady stream of music for their artists to enjoy, as rap benefits from having few people working on a track. One of the most important and often unrecognized elements of labor for artists is the engineers who mix and master the majority of popular and independent artists' tracks (Stickland et al., 2022). While artists may complete this aspect of the process and even the production on their own, there are often specialists in the field of audio engineering, whose focuses are solely on the audio quality and listenability of the tracks artists create. These workers are often important to the creative process itself, adding new layers of sound and minute effects which can differentiate a song from a catchy demo into a full-fledged track (McCabe, 2019). Altogether the combination of labor from these three actors/stakeholders is the basis for most labor in the world of Rap/R&B.

Even after being created, there is still a substantial amount of work that needs to be done to see whether the artists themselves can have a sustained career in the realms of R&B/Rap. An artist's popularity is not always linked to the inherent quality or critical respect of the music, as found. With streaming platforms now the norm for listening practices of users as established by the rise of IDPs, non-musical related elements of work are also required to compete in the modern music space. Maintaining a social media presence and the marketing strategy of artists all play a role in how modern artists succeed on streaming platforms. In addition, digital technology has made it easier for amateur artists to produce and distribute their music, which can impact the overall value of rap music as a commodity (Kiresci, 2021). Artists are also asked to also release music on all types of online platforms, such as Instagram or Twitter to reach the largest audience possible, alongside people interested in many niches of rap (Haynes and Marshall, 2017).

The versatility of hip-hop as a genre for a wide amount of creativity for artists in the work process of each artist depending on their influences and preferences (Jones, 2023). Rappers have used styles such as hard rock and industrial in JPEGMAFIA and Danny Brown (Nast, 2023) while others may incorporate house and dance music into their beats such as Canadian DJ KAYTRANADA (Hahn, 2017). Thus, questioning the artists on their creative process will examine the similarities or differences in the labor process of each artist. Some artists may outsource or move their labor to other spaces to compensate for their various skills or lack thereof depending on the artist (Stickland et al., 2022). Rap artists are still

unique to other workers in their autonomy and responsibilities, being able to complete all elements of labor both individually and collaboratively depending on the type of work required by a producer. In a different sense, the labor for hip-hop artists in central Europe who were examined made other sorts of changes to their working practices. They create local networks for sharing skills, knowledge, and other resources through a changing industry (Reitsamer and Prokop, 2018)

Understanding these concepts from a labor perspective shows that while artists may receive the full value of their work independently, they also are required to inject a significant amount of time around the non-musical elements of being an artist. For example, artists are many times forced to complete the promotional and marketing side of their work individually, with social media being the main outlet for this creation (Hayes, 2017). Therefore the effects of music creation and IDP usage for artists in Rotterdam will be examined in order to conceive a general awareness of how users leverage their labor in creative spaces.

2.2 Labor Value in the music industry

Hip-hop's unique workflow and working practices have allowed DIY artists to become mainstream names in the space. A person who wrote and shared concepts to dismantle systems of oppression in various contexts was Karl Marx, and his frequent collaborator Frederick Engels. Throughout their various works, the two would form the foundation for the economic and political models we know as both Socialism and Marxism. One of Marx's key arguments was the unfair transfer of wealth which occurred through labor under newly industrialized countries in Europe (Nickerson, 2023). Marx and Engels began to promote the idea that perhaps those creating value, the workers, should establish. While his movement would take time to catch on, his work would slowly be disseminated globally, and Socialism and Marxism would take on new forms and adopters in its acceptance from communities worldwide. The ideology became synonymous with liberation efforts all over the world, including the United States (Belgrade, 2005). Black-American liberation and civil rights movements such as the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, and even Martin Luther King Jr., all of whom employed leftist or outright socialist stances against imperialism, while being in support of racial equality and democratic means to work and ownership for Black Americans (Cushman-Wood, 1993). These elements and individuals would go on to deeply influence the themes, lyrics, and views of artists in hip-hop. Artists such as Public Enemy made frequent

references to these movements in the lyrical and artistic content of their music (Belgrade, 2005). Through this brief historical understanding in mind, there exists an intersection between the work of Marx and Hip-Hop/Black Empowerment as a movement.

The Labor Value Theory developed by Marx presents a theoretical starting point to support this argument. It states that anything in an economy be it a good or service is determined by the total amount of "socially necessary labor" required to produce it. The theory mainly exists to criticize how those with capital can extract surplus value from both the employees and the consumer (Roberts, 2015). Similarly, the current mainstream music industry is built with this purpose in mind (Sun, 2018). Record labels attempt to extract as much value from artists as possible, even though most of the value and work itself is created by rappers/singers (Kiresci, 2021). Thus this exploitative nature of this exchange lends itself to Marx's theory, as an escape from this exploration seems to be an allure for artists/producers migrating to IDPs.

In regards to literature linking this theory to the media/music industry, Roberts (2015) takes an alternative Marxist perspective. He outlines some of these limitations and then argues that co-creative labor can be the solution to creative labor issues. He discusses how through their free labor, prosumers thus have the potential to cut costs for new media companies in the unproductive sphere of the economy. Similarly, Caraway (2011) examines the concept of "audience labor" in the new media environment. In the digital age, audiences are increasingly being asked to contribute to the production and distribution of media content through their engagement with social media. Audience labor means that the new media environment highlights the exploitation through its capture by the owners rather than by the audiences who contribute to the platforms. (Caraway, 2011). Both these sources use Marx to understand how user-generated media is essentially taken from its creators without proper compensation.

James and MacDowall (2018) examine the impact of the digital age on the production and distribution of rap music and argue that the labor value theory can still be applied despite these changes. Labor is different depending on the song, and the artist engaging in the creation process. (James and MacDowall, 2018). Similarly, Robinson and Harrison (2020) examined the intersection of labor, race, and class in the rap music industry. A key element in relation to this research is how rap music creation is a site of struggle for the exploitation of labor, particularly for black artists who face barriers to achieving success and receiving fair (monetary) compensation for their music. By considering the various types of labor involved

in the production process, artists and listeners can gain a better understanding of the value of rap music as a commodity.

Arditi (2017) explores the digital music industry and the challenges it faces in creating a sustainable business model. The author argues that the industry has fallen into a "digital music trap," caught between declining physical sales and an inability to generate sufficient revenue from digital sales and streaming. This has resulted in a highly concentrated and monopolistic industry, dominated by a few large companies (Arditi, 2017). The aspects of music creation/dissemination (labor) have changed for artists, but the article by Arora and Muhlbach (2020) examines how subscription services have initiated a decrease in revenue for musicians. The growing evidence of the exploitation of creative workers in the subscription economy, as labor changed for artists in the music industry through the rise of streaming platforms (Arora and Muhlbach, 2020). The findings show that artists perceive their music as less of an artistic product and more as a marketing tool for their brand (Ibid).

All these insights into the current exploitation of the industry give meaning to how IDPs have grown in usage and popularity in recent years. Overall, the labor value theory is still very much applicable to the music industry at large. Both through how artists make music themselves, and how labor in the creative industries is seen as valuable in the current art market.

2.3 Music consolidation within the Media Industries

With the understanding of labor within the music industry, as well as the value and explanation for this labor brought up, perhaps it is best for the industry's current state to be examined. A key trend and issue seen in the media landscape is the slow creeping in of major conglomerates running major sectors of various media markets (Stöhr et al., 2019). Disney, Apple, Universal, Warner and Sony to name a few of these major media empires. Along with their dominance over film TV and in general, the "Big Three" represent the takeover of hip-hop away from its fans and creators, to corporate driven influence in the music process (Götting, 2023). This explains the lack of overall leverage that artists receive, as artists are forced to deal with the industry on the collective terms of the labels themselves. Calvente (2017) described Neoliberalism as a core tenet of the modern music industry. This economic and social way of thinking is based around individualism, and letting those who are most "deserving" from a personal labor standpoint. Thus, it has led to a more capital based system

of ownership within the media industries. Individualism in music as Calvente (2017) explains creates challenges that artists may face in how they make music, own their product . In this case the rights to their music, which in the Netherlands meant that independent/early career musicians suffered from economic insecurity due to the lack of aid in their work practices (Everts et al., 2021).

Ownership is a key term which is often used, but not always promised in the realm of music creation and being an artist. Artists have to typically sign with a record label in order to ensure mainstream success, as the platforms and spaces were interconnected by the record companies themselves (radio, distribution, promotion) (Meier and Manzerolle, 2019). IDPs hope to overreach the power of major labels by putting the tools to release music in the form of artists. These notions in mind, and the combination of Marxist theory with music ownership, the concept of media consolidation comes into play. Progressively fewer companies across the globe are maintaining or creating a handful of mass media conglomerates which by extension, control, manage, create, and distribute all the info in the world of media (Laybourn, 2018).

This occurrence has also happened in the music industry, with the issue of label monopolies taking up most of the music industry. In 2022, there were three which made up over 68.6% percent of the music industry, Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group (McCain, 2022). Each of the top 10 most successful record labels is owned by these Big 3 (Götting, 2023). To further this, McCourt and Rothenbuhler (1997) analyzed the impact of SoundScan, a system for tracking music sales, on the popular music industry. SoundScan facilitated the consolidation of control in the industry by large corporations, leading to homogenization in the music produced and limiting the opportunities for independent and alternative artists. McCourt and Rothenbuhler (1997) were calling for ways to prevent further consolidation and to ensure new ideas and artists. Based on previous literature, IDPs through their autonomy and value benefits for artists are a hedge against the centralized consolidation of the current music and media industries (Kiresci, 2021).

To give some more perspective on the issues of media consolidation, Ball (2015) argues that such consolidation, particularly in the hands of large media corporations and wealthy individuals, has led to the suppression of Black Americans by limiting their access to and representation in the media. More specifically towards rap music, Laybourn (2018) discussed colorism and its relation to the Billboard rankings. Their relationship between black authenticity, colorism, how these demographic elements impact the lack of representation of black artists on the Rap Chart rankings. Calls for greater diversity and

representation in the music industry. She mentions the reasons for media consolidation in the music industry, as well as its implications on racial issues in media. Both Ball (2015) and Laybourn (2018) give insight into the negatives of media consolidation and its effects on both Hip-Hop artists and people of color. Understanding the structural inequality created by the music industry is necessary context to the continued usage of IDPs. Artists have felt alienated by their labor, as they feel as if they cannot move up the class structure in both the creative world and artist world which has impacted through the slow consolidation of the media industries (Everts et al., 2021).

Overall, this inequality may be a key driver in artists choosing the independent path, as opposed to trying to sign a deal with a major label (Soundcharts, 2022). Structure of this massive industry, while clear, also does not account for how the majority of artists within music are essentially freelancers, with little economical control over their respective situations (Dobson, 2010). Thus there is an economic reason for artists to seek out a major label deal, in order to experience more stable working situations. Thus, the consolidation within the music industry influences the decision making for artists in regards to their career path, and decision making over their musical work.

2.4 Applying the UTAUT2 framework to independent distribution services

With the consolidation of the media industries a newer trend emerging in the realms of music and content, understanding the technology behind music can better ground the acceptance of IDPs in the modern music market. Music has been linked to its material conditions, with new technologies changing the medium's ability to be performed, saved, transcribed, and distributed over time (Sutton, 2022). In the current world of music production, digital technologies mainly DAW (digital audio workspaces) allow for the full replication of music creation tools on a personal device. DAWs such as Ableton Live or FL Studio have been used frequently by artists to create new types of instrumentals and subgenres through unique production styles. These were namely trap and the SoundCloud-era subgenres well known for using the full range of features from these programs, which can replicate the sounds of pianos, violins, guitars, drum sets, and other instruments digitally (Stickland et al., 2022). Recording can either be done at home, through DAW-friendly microphones, or in recording studios that are sound-proofed for audio mixing (Stickland et al., 2022). Thus, from a Marxist view, music production in hip-hop is often shaped by its

material conditions, such as the tools involved in the process of creating this medium to improve its quality, storage, replication, editing, etc (Roberts, 2016). Understanding this from a broader technological standpoint can explain the rise of various music systems such as IDPs. Technologies often require a learning period before being adopted into society, and many times they require different social factors and external factors to decide their adoption into society or not (Sutton, 2022).

Therefore, after understanding how Marx's understanding of labor value and media consolidation has created the conditions for IDPs to grow in popularity, understanding how these technologies have been accepted by artists should be outlined theoretically. The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2) is a model developed by Venkatesh et al. (2012) which seeks to explain individuals' behavioral intentions to use technology. The model has four key constructs which can predict and understand the adoption of technology: 1) Performance expectancy which is how much one believes that using the system will help him or her to attain gains 2) Effort expectancy is defined as the ease of use associated with the system 3) Social Influence which is how much an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system. 4) Facilitating conditions are how an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support the use of the system (Venkatesh et al., 2012). The moderation effects of age, gender, experience, and voluntariness of use define the strength of predictors on intention (Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023).

Several new constructs have been incorporated into the new model including hedonic motivation, and price value (Venkatesh et al., 2012). The UTAUT2 model has been used to study the acceptance of technology in various contexts, which in this case includes music distribution platforms.

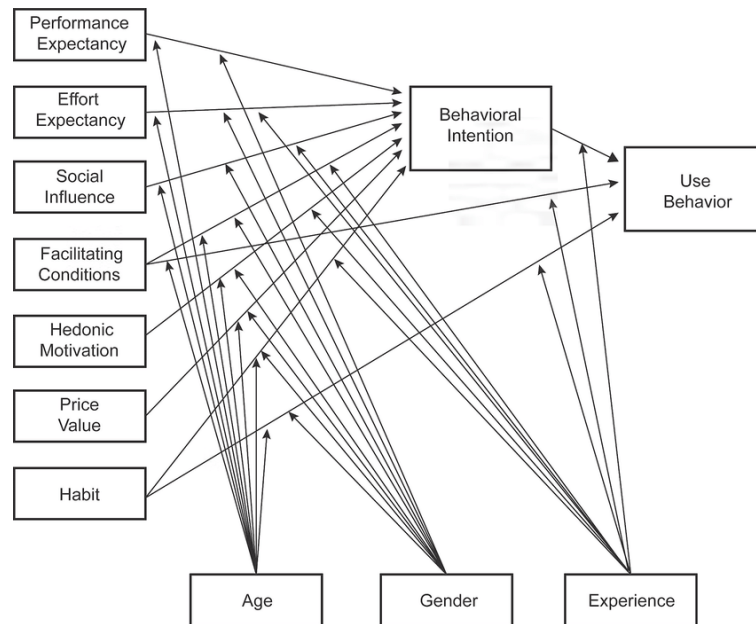


Figure 1. UTAUT2 Model for Technology Acceptance (Martins et al., 2018)

Other studies have applied the UTAUT2 model to understand the factors that influence independent musicians' adoption of IDPs. For example, Hsieh and Lin (2019) used the UTAUT2 model to investigate the factors that affect musicians' intentions to use crowdfunding platforms. They found that performance expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions were significant predictors of musicians' intentions to use crowdfunding platforms (Hsieh and Lin, 2019). Similarly, Zhu et al. (2020) used the UTAUT2 model to examine factors that influence musicians' intentions to use music streaming platforms. They found that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and hedonic motivation were significant predictors of musicians' intentions to use music streaming platforms (Zhu et al., 2020).

Kim et al. (2021) studied a different environment, by applying the model to study users' acceptance of VR concerts during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and social influence were significant predictors of users' behavioral intentions to attend virtual reality music concerts. The UTAUT2 provides a useful framework for studying independent musicians' adoption of music distribution platforms (Hsieh and Lin, 2019). Identifying the key factors that influence musicians' behavioral intentions to use these platforms, improves understanding of how these platforms meet or fail to meet the needs of independent musicians (Ibid).

Lastly, the UTAUT2 theory can be related to music distribution services through the use of standard formats and distribution channels. These services provide a standardized platform for musicians to distribute their music, which can help them conform to industry norms and increase their chances of success (Kreps and Thornton, 2019). At the same time, these services also allow musicians to customize their distribution strategy, ensuring that their music remains unique and stands out from the competition. Another advantage is how these services often provide musicians with tools and resources to promote their music and build their fanbases, such as social media integration, email marketing, and targeted advertising (Noble, 2019). By leveraging these resources, musicians can maintain their sense of uniqueness while still conforming to industry standards and reaching a wider audience. The theoretical starting point of Marx's Labor Value Theory, combined with an understanding of modern music monopolies and how artists could adopt new platforms through the UTAUT2 framework all apply to the relevance and usage of IDPs. These theories will be applied to build an understanding of how musicians leverage the standard formats, distribution channels, and marketing resources provided by IDPs to be unique and find their niche within the music industry.

3. Methodology

To best understand the motivations and reasons behind artists going independent through new platforms, a qualitative approach was taken. Qualitative methods allow for an analysis of understanding, language as well as one's views, and opinions. An in-depth exploration of complex experiences, perspectives, and opinions (Flick, 2014). Qualitative methods can provide rich and detailed information that can help to uncover the artists' subjective experiences and interpretations of the value they receive from their music through new online independent distribution services.

Artists themselves undergo unique experiences as artists from multiple standpoints (Ertas(hitters) et a. 2021). Their labor in the creation, performance, and marketing behind the music is in itself a unique experience curated by the artist, but also through their external networks. Artists can often be influenced by ethnographical elements including their environment, personal backgrounds, and experiences, all of which are unique to one another (Beočanin, 2021). Thus, using qualitative data collection for a subjective topic, such as music, can better enquire about the true nature of the various circumstances artists face from various angles (Boeije, 2010). In-depth interviews were chosen as the preferred method of analysis as this study aims to understand the perceptions of artists themselves (Kalu, 2017).

With this in mind, conducting in-depth interviews with Hip-hop/R&B artists in Rotterdam is a valuable way to research the perception of the value they receive from their music through new online independent distribution services (Johnson, 2011). From these discussions with artists, themes, and concepts surrounding their motivations for choosing such services can be deducted and processed in combination with literature. Complete the research, the first step is the sampling of a diverse group of Rap/R&B artists in Rotterdam will be chosen to be interviewed. The key sample criteria will be that they have/still use new online independent distribution services to distribute their music, as uncovering their usage of such services is the main objective of this research. The selection process will be done through a combination of networks, personal connections, or local music organizations to identify potential participants.

3.1 Operationalization

To collect data a structured set of questions was drafted about the experiences and perceptions of the artists, as in line with in-depth interviews. These questions were open-ended and allow for elaboration and follow-up questions. Each artist will be questioned on their music in terms of its content, style, influences, and reach. This achieved a better idea of the artist's identity in music. In terms of how the topic guide will be linked to the concepts explored in this analysis, the various questions will be linked to the topics of independent artistry, the usage of IDPs, and the impact of these services on the artists and the Rotterdam's Hip-hop and R&B scene in general. The questions on independent artistry will take into account the topics of media consolidation in music and rap in general which has occurred, and the challenges that artists may have to face navigating this digital landscape (Laybourn, 2018). The idea and value that IDPs provide and offer to artists have a link to both concepts of how value and work in the music and creative industries are often exploitative (Carraway, 2011).

After questioning the usage of how artists use new services to distribute their music, Marx's labor value theory provides a background as to how to frame the questions on the value that rappers, singers, and producers feel they are receiving (Roberts, 2015). This theoretical concept can also be linked to how artists perceive the value of the music, and the labor required to make their music. IDPs could impact the development of this perception over work and ownership, due to the perceived exploitation by labels extracting value from artists' music Kiresci (2021). The UTAUT2 theory by Venkatesh et al (2012) can be applied to all the statements relating to how much artists accept the usage of IDPs as a technology, as there are multiple nodes in the model which artists may tend to adopt in the services (Zhu et al., 2020). Thus, these core theories were the foundation for questions about the overall scene of Rap/R&B, in conjunction with an understanding of the scene in Rotterdam. Overall, asking artists about their perceptions, opinions, and personal experiences within the industry and the city can grow the understanding of the usage of IDPs, and compare these findings to previous literature.

3.2 Research Method

After this was completed, the artists were contacted and scheduled a time for an interview. The interviews were done through online conferencing programs, for time and location convenience and their built-in recording features. Google teams were used as it has

functionality for both smartphones and computers, which means that there will be a level of flexibility for the artists to partake in the interviews. In terms of research design, using conference programs also means that the environment will be controlled and the same for all participants, ensuring a constant level of validity in each interview conducted (Silverman, 2011).

When the planning is completed, the interviews can be conducted over a period of 5-6 weeks and will be done using in-depth interviews with questions drawn from the concepts explored in this analysis. The interviews themselves should around 45 mins - 50 mins to fully complete each topic and respective set of questions with the interviewer. The interviewee will be given the set of questions ahead of time so that he/she/they could be fully aware of the content of the questions they will be asked during the interview. The interviewees will also be informed of the contents of the overall study and the topics it covers, but this will also be mentioned when recruiting artists to participate in the research. After this is completed, building rapport will be important by conversationally asking questions, and encouraging the artists to share their experiences on IDPs and the music industry in detail (Johnson, 2011). After the interview process is completed for each artist, the responses will be recorded to be replayed and fully transcribed verbatim. Every interviewee will be given a confidentiality/ethics statement, as well as a consent form in line with the University, to abide by methodological and ethical guidelines of research to ensure that they are willing to participate in the research.

After conducting the interviews, the responses will be transcribed. The data will be coded using Atlas.ti to identify patterns, trends, and themes within the interview texts. Open, axial, and selective coding will be used. Open coding will be conducted by breaking up the in-depth interviews into various quotations. Then various codes should be created and put together to create the meaning of themes related to the research, particularly (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). After the open codes are created, the next step would be to link these key themes and concepts that emerge from the artist's responses to one another. These might include issues related to revenue sharing, ownership and control of the music, the artist's relationship with their fans, and the impact of online distribution services on the artist's career. This is where axial coding can help identify connections between these themes and concepts. For example, a connection between revenue sharing and ownership of the music, or between the artist's relationship with their fans and their use of social media. After identifying these connections, selective coding will be conducted to develop a more refined understanding of the relationships between these themes and concepts (Strauss and Corbin,

1990). This might involve identifying core categories or concepts that help to explain the artist's perceptions of the value they receive from their music. Then these core themes can be deduced, and the coding process can give perspectives on music streaming, IDPs, and how artists see their value in Rotterdam.

3.3 Sampling process

With the methodological process established, the sampling of the research should be outlined fully. The sample used in the research was a homogeneous one, due to qualitative research methods, which require non-probability sampling (Silverman, 2011). The sampling method itself was snowball sampling to find artists who fit the various criteria needed for the interviews. Snowball sampling fits this research as artists in Rotterdam will have the contacts of other musicians in the city, and potentially receive new respondents (Goodman, 1961). The initial interviewees were found through personal contacts, networks, and those in the close vicinity of the interviewer. This made the first sample criterion that artists were all located in the city of Rotterdam. Rotterdam was chosen due to convenience, but also due to the city's rising hip-hop scene and the popularity of the genre at large (Errday, 2020). Moreso, Rotterdam is a city in which the culture and ethos of hip-hop remain strong, through both the institutions for artists and enjoyers of music, but also in the history and international demographic inside the city. (Beočanin, 2021).

The second criterion is the artists need to have released songs in English either in Hip-Hop/R&B. This is important that the content of their music lyrically would be understood, and therefore the meaning behind their work can be discussed in-depth. This can lead to a more thorough discussion with the artists on the reasons for going through the new independent method (Boeijs, 2010). The third criterion would be that the artists have to be independent and use IDPs actively or have experience with the platforms. This is done to ensure that all artists can respond to questions on the platforms, as well as be able to speak on their reasons for going in a different direction from the traditional music industry. Overall, 10 artists were selected for the in-depth interviews for this analysis, while around 14 were contacted to participate, but 4 either failed to appear or did not respond to the interview invitation. The demographics of the artists in terms of their gender identity, nationality, age, etc. will be noted but also not a key point of the research as this analysis is more interested in the artist's usage of IDPs for their Rap/R&B careers in the city of Rotterdam.

3.4 Data collection

The interviews took place between the 20th of April and to 18th of May 2023 with 10 different artists from the Rotterdam area. The Interviews took place in English and followed the topic guide as stated in Appendix I. As per ethical guidelines, all the participants consented to take part in the interview process over the data collection. 2 Interviews were completed in person, while the other 8 were completed remotely using the Google Meets feature to have the transcription feature of the software. After the artists were interviewed, Atlas.ti was used to create a coding framework, using the aforementioned process of open, axial, and selective coding process.

In terms of the interviewees, not only are their demographics varied, but their styles and approaches to music all vary as well. 3 of the artists sang in R&B, while the other 7 artists were all rappers primarily. 3 female artists took part in the interviews, while the rest of the artists were all males. Lastly, the ages of the interviews ranged between 21-25 years old. Beneath is Figure 2, depicting the information about artists who were interviewed to record their responses while keeping their anonymity as required per the ethical guidelines.

Figure 2. Recording log for the Artist’s interviews

Artist	Style	Age	Date recorded	Setting
Male Artist 1	Trap/Emo-Rap	23	25/4/23	In Person
Female Artist 2	Jazz R&B	22	27/4/23	Google Meets
Male Artist 2	Melodic Trap	21	3/5/23	Google Meets
Male Artist 3	Alt-R&B/Guitar R&B	25	4/5/23	Google Meets
Female RnB 2	Bedroom/Trap R&B	22	4/5/23	Google Meets
Male Producer 1	Trap/Pop-Rap	22	15/5/23	In Person
Male Artist 4	Old School/Conscious rap	22	16/5/23	Google Meets
Female Artist 3	Spoken word rap	22	17/5/23	Google Meets
Male Artist 5	Alt-Rap/Viet rap	22	17/ 5/23	Google Meets
Male Artist 6	Old School/Alt rap	21	27/5/23	Google Meets

3.5 Validity and Reliability

In terms of the reliability of the method and that external factors will not impact the research, qualitative methods were chosen. The research method and process were outlined in this section, as well as the sampling process used to identify the participants. The table above was created in order to record the information distinguishing each artist. This transparency aided in the validity of the qualitative research (Boeije, 2010). In terms of validity, the interview questions were focused on the topics of artist labor, media consolidation and change of ownership, IDPs in use and functionality, and the impact and state of the modern industry at large. Ensuring the non-generalization of the data was done through thematic analysis and open, selective, and axial coding, which grouped codes and created larger themes surrounding the usage of IDPs (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3.6 Ethical Concerns

In order to abide by any ethical standards, every artist was given an informed consent form before taking part in the interview. They were also informed of the expected duration of the interviews, and how their data would be kept private and only for the research. These points were made clear to the artists before the interview recording process took place as well, with the participants giving their verbal consent at the start of each interview. Another point that was mentioned was the nature of their responses, with the notion of no right or wrong answers, but providing their honest opinions/experiences on the topics was encouraged. Lastly, the artists interviewed were not forced to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable with and could stop the interview at any time they saw fit if they felt uncomfortable.

4. Results

After conducting interviews with the various artists from the Rotterdam area, some greater insights about IDPs can be drawn to discuss their usage and appeal. These insights can give an idea of the application of IDPS in the local market as well as their pros/cons through an artist's lens.

4.1 Need for IDPs in music creation.

The first main theme established through the coding process is the notion that IDPs are not only accepted, but needed in the modern space of music distribution and artists careers in the city of Rotterdam. These were a conjunction of both the current paradigm of creating music, followed by a move towards independence around the industry, also seen in the analyzed region. Both of these elements are the primary incentives for artists to use IDPs and adopt them into their own music making practices.

4.1.1 Current Paradigm in the industry with labor (a need for IDPs)

After the coding process was completed, it made the most sense to describe the current applications and acceptances of major IDPs on the market. However, these were impacted by the current paradigm or status of the genre and its working practices. The increase in music networking and the status of the local industry and scene in Rotterdam also impacted the ways artists released music. Social media has a key role to play in all of this, with artists required to consistently engage with online platforms (e.g. Instagram or Twitter) to both promote their own work, and examine the current musical space (Haynes and Marshall, 2017): "You do rely on your own network, the right marketing and how you can promote and like become more popular online. I think it's more social media that can make the difference than the distribution or the streaming platforms." (Female Artist 3).

The modern paradigm of rap was also based on the sonic choices taken throughout the industry in Rotterdam for both Rap and R&B, and how they link to the status of the current space. Overall, most artists discussed how Trap and Afro were the two primary genres of music mentioned by the interviewees within the sonic space of Rotterdam. "Shifting more towards Afro music, that type of thing. Obviously, people still like trap and stuff, and also

drill. I feel like I'm kind of dying. So I feel like leaning towards Afro” (Producer 1). “But you can definitely see like ... Afrobeats and Amanpiano are getting big now also here, which is really dope.” (Male Artist 3).”Many mainstream Dutch rappers also have African or Caribbean heritage, such as Frenna, Ronnie Flex, and Broederliefde to name a few (Shabangu, 2022). The interviewed artists had a wide range of sounds in their own right. Melodic Trap, New School Conscious Rap, Jazz R&B, Vietrap, Dutch Trap, Rock-R&B were some of the key genres made by artists. Rotterdam’s diverse ethnographic standpoint translated into the music of rappers/singers as well, as well as Trap’s international appeal through production and rapping style (Pointer, 2021).

With sonic soundscape in mind, the level of connection that each artist had/lacked varied from artist to artist. Some artists claimed that they had connections to artists within NL: “I've worked with like all the, so Universal and all that, they have branches in Vietnam and I've done stuff with them already, but not in a, not in like the deal type of way, you know, it's like an collaborative type of way.” (Male Artist 5). Others had connections to artists and even major labels in their local markets: “I know quite a few top producers, couple managers” (Male Artist 2) while some remained connected to one or two individuals they used to make music, but not always connected to the industry in Rotterdam: “I have this one producer who I work with. He's not Dutch or anything. He's also a student.” (Female artist 2), Thus, a clear need for music networking is always needed within the current landscape.

With notions of how the state of the industry is for current rappers, IDPs were successful in accommodating to the needs and trends of modern day artists. In terms of the user experience, the first step is uploading an album cover, with a track in a mixed and mastered state to release. Users then decide their artist name, then decide which streaming services (most typically apply all of them) to send their tracks out to through the distribution services. After the brief waiting period, artists would be able to track their releases, their listeners, streams and other data. Access to Spotify for artists was also another feature used by IDPs which was well received by the respondents too: “Yeah, and also through Spotify for artists, you can apply for playlists, which is always for an independent artist, super important.” (Male Artist 4)

The most used services were Distrokid, with 8 of the 10 participants saying that it was their platform of choice within which to a certain extent was understood in the aforementioned research on the topic of IDPs. “DistroKid is your best bet. It's just like a one fee per year. Right. So that's convenient” (Female artist 1). The popularity of this service in particular can be attributed to a variety of factors. “So like, what got me to using DistroKid

was the fact that everybody was using it” (Male Artist 6). Using the UTAUT2 concepts from Venkatesh et al. (2012) Distrokid was seen as socially acceptable through its usage by artists, and its price element.

Therefore, social influence node of the UTAUT2 model as an important factor in the behavioral intention of adopting a new technology such as distribution platforms (Zhu et al., 2020). Artists seeing fellow musicians using such a tool would likely lead them to adopt the same service or similar service in terms of utility to stay in line with the general social norm. In this case, the norm for artists of varying genres was the usage of Distrokid as the primary service: “I think it's amazing that, you know, through and with the help of DistroKid, I was able to see my music on Spotify the way that I see Jorja Smith's music.” (Female artist 2)

These positive comments meant that the ease of usage of IDPs meant that the services themselves were successful in being able to create a streamlined platform for artists to release their work onto music fans worldwide (Eiriz and Leite, 2017). Many of the respondents understood technology as musicians in the current age of music are also required to have a technical knowledge of various programs, such as DAWs namely Logic Pro X, FL Studio, and Ableton Live (Stickland et al., 2022). The price value node of UTAUT2 represents a key factor in why artists continue to use IDPS despite their limited amount of relevance in terms of how much revenue it brought in for artists: “The biggest takeaway is that it just makes music releasable, you know like very like and like an easy rate, you know, you can pay 20 euros per year. You get all your stuff done for you.” (Male Artist 2)

The ease of use that artists faced when using IDPs was a consistent point reiterated when asked how services such as Distrokid streamline the processes to upload music: “Oh, I think it's positive. It's quite clear. And I do think it's very much directed towards those young artists that are uploading their music, you know, it's very artist-focused overall, the whole kind of process.” (Female Artist 3).

Alongside the utilitarian nature of streaming services, one issue reported from a handful of artists, was the issue revolving with lyrics in songs being uploaded incorrectly through platforms mainly Distrokid. “So I use DistroKid. And sometimes, I mean, in my experience, for all the songs that I have put out so far, they've done a terrible job at distributing the lyrics in particular.” (Female artist 1) Aside from this instance, the overall acceptance for IDPs amongst artists is noticeably high, as all artists interviewed used IDPs as their main method to put out any songs on streaming services. IDPs allow for artist control over their work, as well as their process was seen frequently by the interviewees.

4.1.2 Movement towards independent ownership

With the focus of the analysis being on the rise of IDPs, artists were questioned whether music was becoming increasingly independent or not. The responses show that artists understood that the media industries are run by conglomeration, and how the organized music industry itself is dominated by the traditional Big Three in terms of labels (Götting, 2023). The size of and reach of these major conglomerates was noted by a few of the artists who examined and understood the realities of an industry: “Because in terms of a business structure, if we're really going to speak on it, what's happening with the major labels is technically illegal. Because they have a monopoly on the game. They have a complete monopoly.” (Male Artist 2)

With this notion in mind, the importance of networking, and “being in the same room” as other figures within the industry was also consistently highlighted by Male Producer 1: “It’s a little bit of politics, but like... But that's true to like a very... That's kind of proven in the music industry that like having certain things will get you into certain rooms and doors and like give you access to certain shit.” Throughout the analysis, networking either within the industry, outside the in Male artist 3 also worked in one of the big three himself, and gave examples of how artists releases can be hindered: “They don’t want to cannibalize their own sales, so they gatekeep all their releases or releases of artists to ensure that doesn’t happen.” (Male Artist 4)

This overall could be described as both a lack of ownership that artists faced. In spite of this throughout the interview process it was clear that many of the artists while independent were aware of the scale and power the mainstream music machine offers to upcoming artists in growing their fanbase and outreach. While IDPs were valued in different ways, the interviews depicted how the overall goal for many artists is to use the services as a platform for greater recognition within the music industry (Eiriz and Leite, 2017). The main element to support this viewpoint was the overall infrastructure that artists have within a label. Promotional services were a key element mentioned: “If there's a perfect record label who comes to me with the perfect plan to distribute and promote every day, they show me, you know, step by step in six months, this is where you're going to be. And it's going to be amazing, but we want all of your master recordings.” (Female Artist 2)

While services such as distrokid and Ditto do content for digital promotion marketing campaigns for artists can be complex multi-media affairs which require entire teams to also

complete. An example of this in hip-hop would be the rollout for the new album from St Louis native Metro Boomin titled “Heroes in Villains”. Metro’s release for the project involved the creation of a 6 minute short film featuring actors Morgan Freeman and Lakeith Stanfield (Ortiz, 2022), submitted on youtube. He also hired artists to create comic book style renditions of all the artists featured on his project, which were sold as collectables to his fans (Ortiz, 2022).

The view of labels was not completely uniform in regards to how the participants viewed their operations and practices within the music industry. While labels were seen as generally exploitative in their nature and setup, many others seemed to think that their existence in modern music is still validated. Another aspect to the overall benefit of labels was the networking opportunities they provided artists. Being the same room as larger artists, producers and figures within the industry is a major incentive. The independent industry does not have the networks or infrastructure, both digital and nondigital, to make up the advantage of the major labels in many categories (de-Miguel-Molina, et al. 2021).

Artists also understood the importance of making full use of the services offered by IDPs which can still be limited to a certain extent. Through this, artists have become more independent through an increase of self-perception and work. Artists as brands in the modern era of streaming, while they are not completely limited to the technologies at hand, the time to manage an entire independent career is not sustainable for artists to achieve a certain level of acclaim and commercial success (Schroeder, 2005). With the amount of work needed to make any sort of element of the music making process possible, labor for an artist working independently also means that they must extend their image as a brand “And then since he’s at a certain level, he can tie things like his collaborations, like Cactus Jack and leverage, all that type of stuff. Make them bigger. That’s where your value really is, the brand image.” (Male Artist 2) The concept of rappers, or artists in general in 2023 being a brand was shared by a variety of the interviewed artists. This is done alongside the marketing elements needed to become a successful artist in the modern era (Caraway, 2011). Engaging with fans, listeners and other users on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter are simply the status quo in the modern environment when compared to previous times in music: “You can be part of the real streaming platforms and start really also creating a brand for yourself through Spotify and the other companies.” (Female artist 3) Her example of this improved literacy was answered by a female rapper, who expressed how artists do have a greater understanding of this concept:

“I do feel like it's becoming more independent because there's a lot more literacy around labels and contracts and the benefits and how you as an artist can really benefit from having a label, necessarily the dream if that's not what works for you. Maybe earlier the idea was if you found a label then you've made it.”

(Female Artist 3)

This move to greater understanding of the overall trends and pitfalls of the industry could be attributed to the overall increase in class consciousness by the artists themselves. Thus, artists in Rotterdam have worked towards similar goals, as the aforementioned collaboration undertaken by artists is clear in this instance.

Artists and the producer all were literate to a certain extent on the terms and the ideas presented in the industry. Advances, 360 deals, A&Rs and other music related terms generally sparked conversation from the artists interviewed (Marshall, 2013). While some artists were either naturally or through greater experience better versed on these ideas, the overall pool of artists showed a keen awareness to the topic of ownership. This understanding has created the context for artists maintaining greater leverage on both individually and collectively, namely in the form of personal literacy when entering a contract or approaching getting signed by any major label (Kjus, 2021). It may be important to understand the types of labor enacted by artists. All artists completed elements of the music making process alone, every artist also relied on external partners and collaborators to finish their music: “That are a bit more in the traditional music industry in Germany that work with producers and labels. And they have an engineer and stuff as well for everything.” (Female Artist 2)

The overall usage of collaborators related in Arora and Muhlbach (2020) in their description of how the music making process from a labor perspective requires multiple people artists to complete. Even with collaboration assumed, the potential for exploitation does not decrease with these advances. Artists are still subject to the similar conditions that the industry previously had, albeit with improved information on the nature of truly being independent (Kjus, 2021).

4.1.3 IDPs - Being Independent and Artist Control

The general consensus by some was that while music was heading in a more independent direction in general, the label system was seen as the most accepted option for

long term success in the music industry. Artists also agreed that there was still a more general trend toward artists having greater power over their music, in terms of both the commercial and legal elements of posting music online. In total this could be defined as a new form of creative control. Artists have seen an increase in the understanding of worth for themselves, and this was reflected in their responses to the prospect of signing with a major label: “I think ideally I would want to sign with like kind of a label under like a big label, like a smaller imprint of something. Yeah, for sure. Because I like like a more closer knit team.” (MaleArtist 4) Another artist previously also tried to receive deals or seek them out, while some were more content remaining independent and building a fanbase:

“I’m assuming that in this scenario I would already have like a bit of a buzz going on. I think I know how to build off that buzz. I think I know what investments I would need to make. But if the deal was good enough I would definitely be down to sign to a label and depending also on what label approaches me I would sign to a Dreamville maybe or a TDE. But I wouldn’t necessarily sign to Atlantic Records as fast.” (Male Artist 6)

While a need for IDPs has been established by artists in the city of Rotterdam, through the current paradigm of the industry/scene, alongside a better understanding of control, worth, and accepting the relatively new technologies which IDPs are, the industry is still mostly in control by the major 3 three labels (Gotting 2023). However, being independent was the most viable option for most artists. Instead of signing with a label for a poorly agreed deal, artists are at the very least aware of being independent and its consequences, instead of blindly choosing the major label route.

4.2 Artist Solidarity

The second primary theme which was discovered through the collection of responses from artists was a clear level of artists' solidarity between all the interviewees. A creative class consciousness through new improved labor practices, collective action amongst artists, and the improved understanding of collecting value were all reasons for this change in perspective (De Felipe-Redondo, 2015). In concurrence with an improved class consciousness are the current material conditions for artists which have made artist cooperation more accepted, while also giving an incentive and information in the usage of IDPs.

4.2.1 New creative class consciousness

New creative class consciousness which artists have taken on to understand their inferior position as artists. Class consciousness is the awareness that the members of an economic class have of their 'objective' class interests and aspirations (Redondo, 2015). Creative industry workers have oftentimes struggled to understand their position in the class structure of media-based work (Peck, 2005). Improved Labor Practices in terms of artist education on social media platforms and content sites have taught new methods to create music and work at home (Sun, 2018). In combination, artists also seem to be working collaboratively on changing the practices of the industry, by using new and old services alongside IDPs to promote their music and industry practices. Collective Action was something that all artists took part in, from working together to solve issues and better understanding each other's situations as an artist. Collecting Value is another piece of work that artists attain from IDPs.

4.2.2 Changed Notions of value collection

Worth and value also had different notions based on the types of success artists sought out from all of their work. Value through just a financial sense was given based on the payment elements that artists received through the various services and their careers (Eiriz and Leite, 2017). However, non-commercial value was also achieved via every distribution platform, as the platforms exist to promote the overall image or brand which artists

established, with music as a conduit for this impact. “I just think it sets the playing field like it evens out the playing field I think that's the biggest thing the biggest takeaway is that it just makes music” (Male Artist 5)

In spite of the low amounts of financial value that artists both received and perceived from Independent Distribution platforms, visibility and recognition was another area of concern for the artists involved. Besides being a place to upload songs, track and trace revenues, the sites can also include promotion packages depending on the payment an artist chooses. For example, Ditto Music has a full built in publishing element of its business which can be accessed for an additional 40 euros a per year (Ditto, 2023). These elements helped to outside the labor of artists in the musical promotion phase of being an artist (Haynes, 2017).

When asked about the non-monetary value of their music, artists claimed that the existence of these services in themselves is already a plus, but that IDPs were generally useful in this manner. Male Artist 5 viewed IDPs as a way to generate interactivity amongst its fan base: “Yeah, definitely. Like you have the link, you know, you can post that link so fans can know, can like Just directly have access to your songs. Yeah, save links and all that.” This trend was found throughout the popular IDPs, is the auto generation of a hyperlink which streamlines the process of artists sharing their music to their fans. These links themselves contain short-cuts to songs, on all of the various primary streaming services used by listeners (Sun, 2018). They were able to generate interest towards the artist's work, adding to their social media presence and reach, while also bringing more listeners to their DSPs pages.

Fan interaction and engagement came from the theme of non-monetary value from music. This can be in the way of a consistent and well known social media presence, societal and regional fame, the building/nurturing of a meaningful/interactive fan base (Caraway, 2011). This ties into the notion that artists today are a brand, with the external stakeholders, in this case fans and the audience, playing an active role in the perceptions and viewership an artist has (Roberts, 2015). The usage of friends and close associates resonated with artists too, as they understood the importance of having people in your circle support the music:

“That's how you get your shit popping. 100%. You know, like just getting people listen to your music through social media, get telling your friends, tell a friend to tell another friend to tell the third friend, you know, it's right.” (Male Artist 4)

While this aspect of work and working may not always see monetary benefits initially, the creation of a real fandom around an artist's music can eventually lead to purchases in the form of merchandise, tour tickets, or other products and brands that an artist may associate with (Schroeder, 2005). Non-musical incomes are some of the main ways in which artists made music. An example of this was the payouts from major artists such as Rihanna, who through her ownership of makeup company fenty reached Billionaire Status (Berg, 2021) This shows the neoliberal and new class consciousness that artists face, as those at the top of this class pyramid engage in completely different value exchanges, and leverages for artists in the sampled artists from Rotterdam.

4.2.3 Unequal Exchange of Labor for Artists - Material conditions for artists.

With the change in work practices taking being one example of artist solidarity, the other key element would be the material conditions artists are currently faced with (Hess, 2017). Musical resources can be the studios, the platforms and systems such as DSPs, which artists release their music onto, and the tools such as DAWs and instruments to create tracks themselves. (Stickland et al., 2022). This is also the labor of musicians themselves, both personal and material which artists conduct on a regular basis. Aside from the opportunities given by IDPs, it was clear how artists are often in freelance positions, meaning a lack of job security, and a lack of little ownership of their means to create/sell music as a product (Dobson 2010):

The Unequal Value Exchange between artist and label, as well as artist and DSP was one driver of this new class consciousness. “Why on Distrokid, you only have this one percentage that is supposed to represent everything because it's just one percentage that you split.” - (Female artist 2) Alongside, the added pressure of Major Labels Leverage was a big impact on the decision making by the artists to remain independent, and pursue their career by themselves through using IDPs. The unequal value exchange through labels was a point of contention which made the adoption and move to platforms like Distrokid a clear choice for many.

A sort of financial pyramid or class of artists has come into the fold with the creation of new distribution platforms in the form of a Distrokid or Tunecore. Examining the finds through a labor based framework depicts how labor value and music production/distribution are interwoven into each other in various key aspects (Mühlbach and Arora, 2020). In this

analysis in particular, the findings found that IDPs and the ease of music creation/dissemination in the modern era has led to a class structure for artists too (Peck, 2005). Some artists are able to break through into the mainstream industry while others have to put in significant personal effort, along with collaborations and help from other artists in order to create a career from their music. “But I think you need to be wary of how much reach this gives you because it's almost next to no-one even though companies would probably tell you otherwise.” (Male Artist 1)

Financially, most of the artists claimed that there was little to no revenue which they received from their songs via the distribution platforms they used. Artists regularly explained how many of them did not pay attention to the payouts provided on services such as Distrokid or United Masters. Saturation within the market has become an issue as to why payments and artists fail to acquire financial value from their music. “I've seen on Spotify that they have around 100,000 submissions per day. Just imagine, 100,000 per day. That's crazy. I can believe it though. We have 7 billion people, there's a lot of musicians out there.” (Male Artist 4)

Instead, some artists claimed that they did not make music for the sake of making money, or used IDPs in order to see a financial return on their music. Rather, the main idea behind using any of the various distribution platforms was to have their music released, and visible on all the same platforms with the ease of use mentioned. “It streamlines the whole process. I think it makes it so much so much easier for someone who is a creative you know who doesn't have that business kind of background and doesn't quite know how to promote themselves.” (Male Artist 4)

This explanation can be attributed to the uneven payout system established by the major streaming platforms not limited to Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal etc. though figures often change and vary depending on the country, service, and size of the artist, the interviews helped to highlight how the pay-per-stream system employed by these services makes a sustainable independent career extremely difficult for artists to achieve in 2023 . For reference, an estimated payout price for Spotify sits around \$0.004 per stream. This means an artist would have to earn 100,000 streams to make about \$400 (Houghton, 2023). This is an unsustainable amount to earn a living off of, considering the number of people engaging with the music in total. A statistic depicts how a small minority of *25% of artists earn \$10K off their music* artists, meaning that not all could live off their work (Houghton, 2023). Artists made mention of the minimal payments they received throughout their releases: “Yeah, it's like cents, man. Like especially from Spotify, if you're not reaching, you're not reaching over

a hundred thousand or something” (Male Artist 4). “... next thing I know it's on Spotify, they even did royalties. I didn't earn a lot. Maybe I earned like \$70 in my first year.” (Male Artist 1)

Overall, it seems that IDPs are able to make up for the unequal exchange in value for labor within the industry. Due to the industry's monopolistic nature, it makes sense as to why artists from the city of Rotterdam would seek autonomy in their value collection process, such as royalties and streams. However, the control of capital owned by labels means that artists in general are not yet fully able to achieve individual success without signing to a major deal (Everts et al., 2021). It did however also change the working practices between artists and their networks, to an increase in creative class solidarity, and better knowledge of how to collect value from their creative location.

4.2.3.1 Collecting Revenue

From a labor perspective, being an independent artist is a unique social position. Artists are self employed, meaning they see the full rights to the IP of their music, but also are completely dependent on their own labor. This has led to artists being able to work music alone in most of the production process (Strickland et al., 2022). Thus, when it came to the monetary value, many of the artists chosen were not at the point either in their careers or in notoriety where making money as an independent artist is an added bonus, not the status quo. In spite of the low payouts that artists saw at a personal level, from a utility and availability standpoint the various IDPs succeed in providing the tools to view and manage such revenues.

While revenue tracking and collection was still a primary feature of IDPs, the responses via the various artists gives an idea as to how few of the actual users on such sites are making livable incomes through only their music. Therefore, it is clear that while incomes and revenue are an important element to both the success of IDPs and artists alike, younger and less established artists do not use the platforms solely based on the monetary features they provide. The oversaturation of modern music means that the payouts that services are willing to give out to artists will also naturally go down (Noble, 2019). companies such as Spotify, Tidal, Apple, Deezer are all more concerned about their short term profits than the success of every small artist: “Streaming saved the labels, it allowed them to make money off music again after the whole torrent and downloading scene took over, they lost so much money. They made sure that was never gonna happen again.” (Producer 1)

The standpoint also expressed the workings of a label and sometimes artists are also at fault for not reading the terms or having leverage in negotiations for contracts:

“And the artists are at their full mercy when it shouldn't really be like that. They're the ones generating the label's value at the end of the day. You have to be aware of what you're signing and what you're getting yourself into. Cause these are all clauses you can add into a contract. Now the problem is when you know me, when you come to a major label, if you're not already established in the game, you don't have too much negotiation power.”

Thus, artists are still not able to fully bargain for the full value, and are required to use the major label system in order to be successful in the industry. This has implications on the elements of labor and collective action to achieve this.

4.2.4 Collective action for artists worldwide - Improving the labor practices

Throughout this analysis, the concept of labor, as well as labor in the creative industries and some of the modern hindrances which creators have faced, has been seen through the music industries. IDPs have highlighted some of the improved ways in which artists want to work with each other and collectively change the ways in which they support each other through new forms of unified action.

More importantly, artists face hurdles in the industry of working and receiving the proper value for their work in respect to the amount of time required to make music (Stickland et al, 2022). The lower payouts provided by various DSPs, in conjunction with poor working practices, inspired more collective action and unity amongst artists in Rotterdam. Many times, Male Artist 2 expressed their understanding of a general struggle of fellow independent artists and musical workers within the space and similar class. “So that's also why artists are also in this perpetual cycle of being broke, because they force them to overspend. Exactly, and if the advance isn't paid back.” (Male Artist 2) Thus, the common solution provided by artists is a shift and emphasis towards building a larger sustained sense of community amongst the rap industry:

“Having communities of people who really mess with your music and then once you have that then like labels have less and less power and you have more powers and therefore um you know like you can distribute your own stuff and whatever and you don't need labels to come in and say oh we'll give you this amount of money for this and then we'll take this amount of percentage from yourself” - (Male Artist 5)

To take this idea one step further, a sense of collective action was suggested as a solution to the issue of unequal treatment amongst the industries. Organization within labor, especially within the creative industries, is not as commonplace as in other fields of work (Peck, 2005). Achieving any sort of collective bargaining for artists could be the solution to acquiring more value, both monetary and non-monetary from the industry at large. The system of advances, 360 contracts, and unfavorable publishing splits have become commonplace elements of the mainstream music establishment (Kjus, 2021).” I think really the only thing that makes sense is some kind of unionization innit. Because that's the only way you get work is right. You know, make sure the benefits are fair.” (Male artist 2) made further comparisons to the NBA and their collective bargaining agreement or CBA in which all the players in the league make use of their leverage for betting working rights (Quinn, 2023):

“You have the NBA, they have the CBA. Every couple years. I work. I come and agree on new works. Most people who work for the union. Different contracts and like rights for all the workers. They're there for workers' rights. So I think that's just the main thing. It's the representation really.” (Male Artist 2)

Alongside the notion of creating some sort of artist union, personal relations between artists is another element of collective action which artists recommended to solve the unequal value exchange. The competitive nature of the industry, particularly rap, could be the explanation for the lack of high level labor organization within the industry amongst its laborers and artists who create value in the industry (Reitsamer and Prokop, 2018). “And in general, it's also like one of those things where you have, where you're still in a sense competing with each other. At least that mind, like their mind tricks them into having to compete with each other when that's not necessarily necessary.” (Male Artist 6) Female Artist 2 also mentioned how this mindset can generally progress and keep artists from working with one another in order to grow their own careers simultaneously: “But I don't think people

understand that like most artists can be successful like together, you know, but it really just depends on like how it, how people work and stuff. I also think the larger industry needs to change 100%.” (Female Artist 2)

Throughout the interviews with artists, it is clear that there is real motivation for artists to work together to face the challenges of the modern industry. The sharing of information, the creation of new networks, and communal solidarity between artists were all discovered between artists in Rotterdam. The Neoliberal nature of hip-hop has promoted competition between artists (Calvente, 2017). Artists have begun to realize that collective power in work, argued from Marxist standpoints, has led to greater autonomy towards artists, with greater control over the future of their careers, via the use of IDPs.

5. Discussion

5.1 Conclusions

Throughout its many iterations and subcultures, hip-hop with its fandoms and most importantly artists has thrived and adapted to the times to evolve and stay relevant. The inclusion of new technologies can often be an opportunity to experience meaningful change in an industry, or at the very least make others rethink the landscape and practices in a field such as media creation.

Therefore, to best answer how Rap/R&B artists in Rotterdam perceive the value they receive from their music, both monetary and non-monetary via new online independent distribution services, two primary themes can be discussed after using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Due to both the newer class understanding from a labor perspective of artists, alongside the current material conditions of artists, and the conditions placed by major labels, the overall base of artists has created a culture of greater understanding and solidarity between artists, in part attributed to IDPs. In congruence with this theme is the clear need for IDPs, which has been underlined by artists and by the current paradigm of the modern Rap/R&B industry. The rise of IDPs represents the next stage in the development of the genre as a whole, as individuals or groups can release music for next to nothing in terms of cost, with the prospect of creating a sustained or long-term career within the music industry (Kiresci, 2021).

From a general usage and acceptance standpoint via the interviewed rappers/singers, IDPs were useful in bringing artists to the same spaces as the major label artists, by placing them into traditional streaming services within the industry. Aside from getting signed with a major label, these services opened the “gates” that artists have to break through to put themselves out to the public. These services were seen as a method to get artists into the door, with those they both know through local connections and larger artists with international audiences as potential viewers of their work. IDPs were also key in bringing the understanding of the music release and distribution process to the masses in a clear and obvious fashion (Eiriz and Leite, 2017). While inconveniences such as the lyric syncing and adjustment may have been a hurdle certain artists had to face when using IDPs, artists had very few negative comments on the functionality and usability of the platforms in general.

This speaks to the overall design and workflow of IDPs, which regardless of the particular features and functions they achieve for the artists, achieves their needs effectively.

A general byproduct of artists understanding the release/distribution process, in general, is that they can better understand the terms and conditions which exist between signing and being involved with a label. Understanding one's worth was a development in a positive direction for artists. In previous years and still, to this day, the music industry purposefully installs long legal contracts for artists in the hopes that they do not read the fine print on the terms of their publishing, ownership, royalties, album deals, etc. many times to their detriment (Marshall, 2013). IDPs have highlighted this and then some, with artist autonomy being one of the key positives of the services.

With this in mind, the overall monetary value which artists received from their work was very minimal relative to the amount of labor required in the production process of a song (Everts et al., 2021). IDPs were useful in providing artists with the tools and information to access and view their financial earnings from the various streaming platforms. However, the amounts of revenue made by artists were in the realm of a few euros to even a few cents in total. This was not the fault of IDPs in particular, however, as it is indicative of the streaming platforms as to how much artists get paid per stream of their songs, and artists understood this notion for the most part.

Both the group of interviewees and external insights into artists' feelings towards streaming platforms' payouts lined up. They found that artists disagreed with the cents they were often offered based on the costs of labor for producing, recording, and then engineering a song. Aside from that, promotion and distribution also cost fees, when done in the traditional method. Thus, it is not so much the fault of these individual platforms as to how much artists make of their work. If anything, IDPs offer far greater value for a price of around €20 per year. This affordable fee has allowed virtually anyone, regardless of their music experience, to sign up and use any IDP they see fit for their career. This was seen in the overall experience of the artists interviewed, as some had just begun their music-making journey, while others were starting to gain major traction in their recording careers. While this may have made the understanding of certain artists greater than their peers, it depicts the widespread adoption of a platform such as Distrokid to music makers everywhere (Sun, 2018).

With understanding the new usage of this platform at hand, the UTAUT2 framework helped to explain the acceptance of usage universally amongst artists from all genres, but Hip-hop and R&B in particular. The ease of usage for artists was a large benefactor in IDPs

implementation amongst the masses (Zhu et al, 2020). Artists consistently explained how the services themselves made the overall process of uploading and releasing music streamlined and simplified. Social influence from this perceived ease of usage of the platforms was found as another key factor in the overall adoption of specific platforms, in this case, mostly Distrokid. This service in particular may have benefited from its early positioning ahead of other platforms, which snowballed into industry-wide adoption by the many artists who use such platforms in general.

Given the modern nature and recency of IDPs, artists were generally unsure of what the future held for these platforms. An overall move to greater independent ownership of music is a clear trend and motion which is currently taking place in the industry. Labels are being challenged by these new distribution services as they take on many of the processes completed by labels into streamlined platforms easily accessible online (Eiriz and Leite, 2017). The uploading, distributing, and collection of revenue can now all be achieved completely independently. Irrespective of this trend, artists generally expressed that major labels are not leaving anytime soon. The Western monopoly of popular music throughout the world via the big 3 of Sony, Warner, and Universal still dominates the current markets (Götting, 2023). These goliaths of the industry notwithstanding, the overall auxiliary tools and connections which are mostly in their control remain essential for an artist to achieve mainstream appeal and success (Meier and Manzerolle, 2019). The various artists interviewed all acknowledged that while these labels were not moral or just entities, their ability to get artists onto festival lineups, soundtracks, create brand deals, etc. still give them viability in the modern music industry.

To compete with the various labels and monopolies that exist within the music space, new solutions to find better ways at receiving monetary and non-monetary value through collective action. Artists presented multiple angles as to how to change the collective value that they receive regularly. Creating a community, or creating communities was one such notion presented, but this in turn is more linked to having collective organization as artists. This could be in the form of a union, while also installing a sense of non-competition.

Since not every artist's music can make it into the limelight, a class structure of artists is maintained and created through the overall understanding of one's worth, as well as the role that other artists have over the autonomy and viability of their work. Artists having autonomy in this work and how they created their music was a major factor in signing a label or not as well, with creative control being a key factor in this discovery. Understanding of worth is certainly strong if not crucial to how artists see their future careers and the value of

their labor and music. Hopefully, the freedom and democratization IDPs provide for music creators can perhaps manifest themselves in some meaningful form, i.e. an artists union or international network for rappers, singers, producers, and engineers, who can better control their means of production in the realm of music.

5.2 Limitations

After completing the interview process and understanding the different ways in which artists use the value of IDPs, some of the limitations of this analysis should be examined. The first limitation of the analysis was that all the artists were not at the same level of understanding of the various elements of the music industry. While this is not the fault of the artists, it meant that the depth of responses on the topic items on consolidation within the music industry, the contractual and legal elements which are also factors in an artist's experience, could not be fully achieved for every interviewee. The issues of value in conjunction with the ideas of collective action taken by artists were not always fully understood by a few of the participants. This also led to a few interviews with certain artists taking more time than others, making some elements of their interview limited in understanding. A solution to this may have been the choice for a mixed method of analysis, in which a larger homogeneous sample of independent artists from Rotterdam. Creating a survey on the topics of advances/360 deals, consolidation within the music and media industries, and the many different independent services. This would then be given to the artists to establish a base understanding of all the concepts, ensuring that the responses could be more uniform in their length and depth. Feasibility in the form of time constraints made it unreasonable to sort through a large number of artists and create a survey to attract responses, while also completing a reliable and valid interview process per the requirements.

The new nature of independent distribution platforms meant that some of the figures and information about services were limited to a certain extent. Sites such as Ditto, Distrokid, Record Union, United Masters, and many others do not always have in-site analytics/information displayed to the public. Despite many of the provided statistics surrounding the services being provided via first-party posts and blogs about the content itself, while these may be reliable, it makes the overall pool of reliable sources on the topic of users, payouts, and streaming numbers limited. Compared to other topics in the same field, information and academic literature about streaming services, independent artistry, and music

ownership had a concrete set of academic sources related to the topic. Thus, literature was taken from these aforementioned topics to make up for the lack of information on independent distribution platforms.

5.3 Suggestions for future research

Due to the variety of issues and topics surrounding hip-hop music, independent distribution services, and new music-related technologies, there are multiple avenues for further research on the topic of IDPs. Better understanding the overall industry and its functions can be one such direction for research, from both an enterprise as well as ethnographic standpoint. Therefore, one such future topic could be mapping out the overall music industry. Creating a web of connections between the various labels and companies, as well as the regulators which have created the modern music monopoly that exists within Western/Globalized media (Meier and Manzerolle, 2019). Examining and exploring these connections could better understand how the deconstruction of the traditional industry could take place, for a more artist-friendly one. The incorporation of Marxist theory into this project should provide a foundation for understanding the unequal exchange of both labor and value provided by artists to the labels they are signed under. Government projects have been taken to start understanding the patterns of workers within music, with one such study starting in the EU (Antal, 2020). However, the freelancing nature of most musicians means that these details can be hard to fully decipher and understand (Dobson, 2010).

Another point for future research would be the expansion of further Marxist framing of IDPs and the music industries. Throughout this analysis, literature on the equal exchange of labor, the exploitation in the industry, and the material and working conditions for artists were underlined. Perhaps adopting this framework to more fully understand IDPs could take place. IDPs, as platforms are used internationally to create music, so expanding the framework used by this research, could take place in other genres aside from Hip-hop and R&B, and cities/locations different from the Netherlands. Each artist's material conditions, in terms of the local industry, connections, and ways to work on music are most of the time unique to one another (de-Miguel-Molina et al., 2021). IDPs also have multiple elements which could be explored standalone in combination with these from a Marxist/Labor perspective. Perhaps a comparison between the incomes of successful indie artists and signed

artists, to see the impacts of major label signees on value and labor in the music industries (Mühlbach and Arora, 2020).

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Appendix I. - Topic Guide

THEME 1 : GENERAL MUSIC INFO

1. In this interview, we will be discussing the ideas of rap music, independent distribution platforms, and the rotterdam scene. Do you consent to this interview ?
2. How would you describe your music
 - a. (its style, your influences)?
3. Who would you say you make music for?
 - a. Types of people in lifestyle
 - b. The type of listener
4. How would you describe the current sound of Hip-Hop in Rotterdam?
 - a. What would you say (to what extent of your knowledge)
5. How connected are you to the music industry whatever or whoever that may be to you?
 - a. Includes: Independent Artists, Local Networks, etc.

THEME 2 : USING IDPS (UTAUT2)

6. What brought you to using an IDP (Independent Distribution Platform)?
7. Which independent distribution service(s) do you use to distribute your music?
8. How would you describe the process of uploading/distributing music through these services?
 - a. Was it easy/hard?
 - b. How did it work for you?
9. Are there any issues or hindrances you've faced from these services?
 - a. If yes, what did they entail

THEME 3 : MEDIA CONSOLIDATION

10. Do you think music ownership is becoming more or less independent?
 - a. Ownership of records and music
11. Have you tried to go the non-independent route, and sign a deal with an existing label?
12. Would you sign with a major label if given the choice, compared to being independent?
 - a. If yes, why would you
 - b. If no, what would make you want to stay with a label

THEME 4 : VALUE THEORY

13. How do you view your experiences with these services in terms of the overall value they bring for artists?
 - a. What do they bring to you personally?
14. How do you assess the revenue from streams or downloads you received from these services?
 - a. Not a figure, but a general assessment whether its positive or negative
15. How has the visibility and recognition for your music changed through IDPs?
 - a. From social media
 - b. Other people listening to your music
16. Has your fan engagement and interaction changed since using these services?

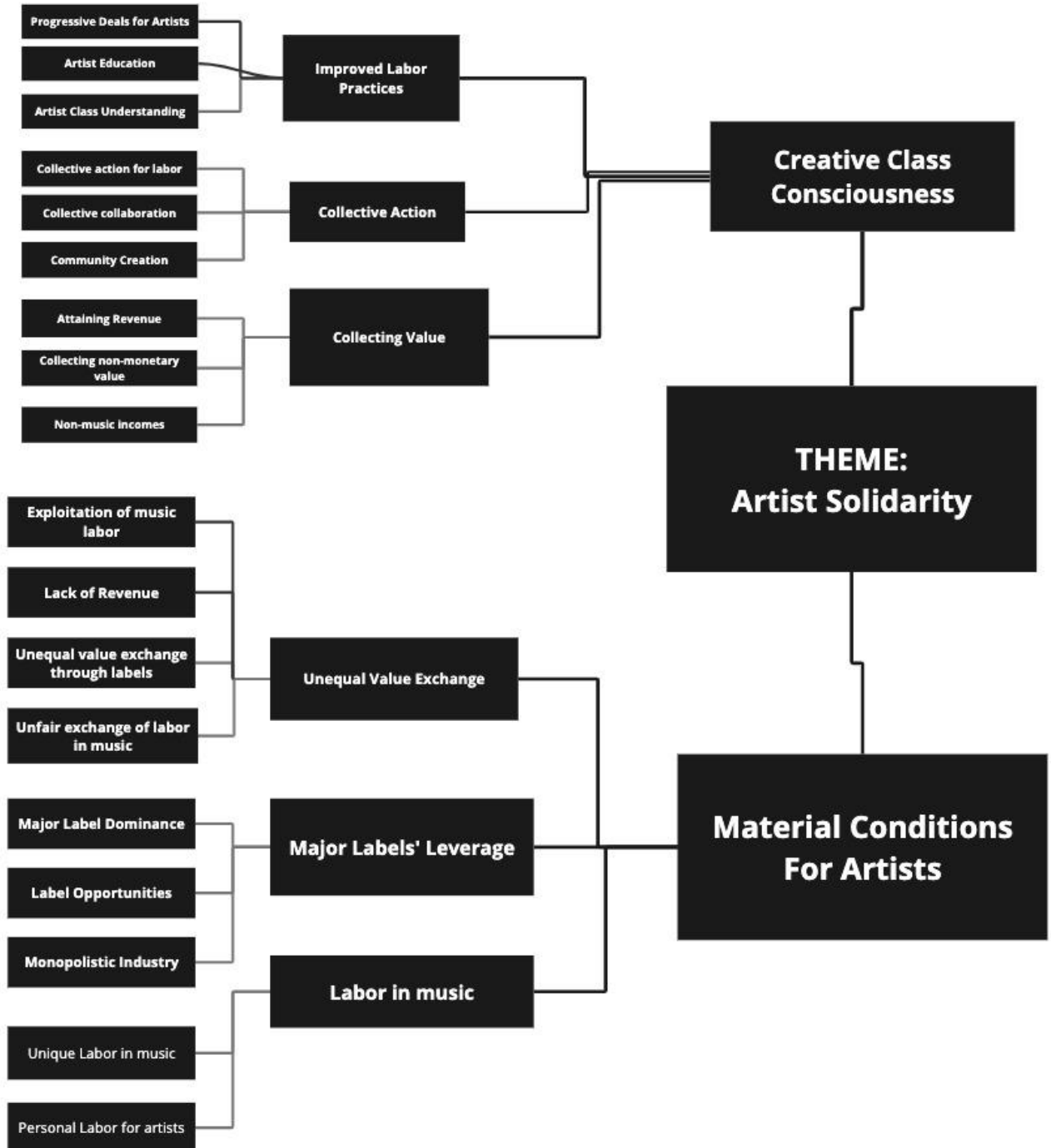
CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

17. How do you view the impact of these services for artists based in Rotterdam?
 - a. Positive/negative
18. How do you see the future of independent music distribution platforms in the upcoming years?
19. What do you think musicians need to do collectively to change some of the issues regarding value?
 - a. Musicians rappers/singers/producers
 - b. The ownership over music that artist have

Open Codes

Axial Codes

Selective Codes



Can't Knock the Hustle - Interview Agreement

Introduction

I am Luke Mendonca and I am a MA media student doing research for Erasmus University Rotterdam. I am conducting research on music streaming and hip-hop in the city of Rotterdam. We are conducting this research independently: the financial contribution has no influence on the outcomes of this study.

I will explain the study below. If you have any questions, please ask me. While reading, you can mark parts of the text that are unclear to you.

If you want to participate in the study, you can indicate this at the end of this form.

This research will be about the usage of Independent Distribution Platforms (IDPs) for releasing music on streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, YT Music etc. by artists particular in Rap/R&B artists in Rotterdam. Interviewing artists in the city of Rotterdam and getting their opinions/views on how these new services impact the success and value as artists is the main aim of the study. The study hopes to challenge the old notion of the music industry, and establish how a new modern industry is being led not through labels but from artists.

I ask you to participate because your experiences as an artist and using IDPs (presumably) will give a better understanding of these new platforms, how they work, and how such artists perceive the value of these services overall. Interviewing artists from Rotterdam can also help me personally see the current trends of independent artists in a local context, while also understanding their artistic choices and style of music.

The data collection will take place over a month, If you participate in this study, you will take part in an in-depth interview:

Each interview will last around 40 minutes to 1 hour. If you do not want to answer a question during the interview, you are not required to do so. I will make an audio recording of the conversation.

At the end of the interview/discussion, you will have the opportunity to comment on your answers. If you disagree with my notes or if I misunderstood you, you can ask to have parts of them amended or deleted.

What data will I ask you to provide?

I will store your data so that I can be in contact with you. For the study, I will also need other data from you.

During the interview, the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender, audio or visual recordings, cultural background, ethnic background, sentiments about / feelings about / opinions about the music industry, music, streaming platforms, and being an artist in the city of Rotterdam.

I also need your email address, to send the results of the study to you by email.

Who can see your data?

- I will store all your data securely.
- Only persons involved in the research can see (some of) the data. [Only the principal investigator has access to your data].
- Recordings are transcribed. Your name is replaced with a number/made-up name.
- Data such as your (name and recordings) will be stored/deleted separately from your answers/the transcription.

- We will write an article about the results of the study which will be published (publicly share the results) in (academic) journals and/or books. The results will be accessible by anyone.
- We may use your specific answers in the article. If your answer can be traced to you or we would like to mention your name, we will ask your permission first.

How long will your personal data be stored?

Your data will be retained for a minimum of 10 years. We retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

Using your data for new research

The data we collect may be useful in anonymized form, for example for educational purposes and future research, including in very different research areas. We will make the data publicly available after proper anonymization. We ensure that the data cannot be traced back to you/we do not disclose anything that identifies you.

In addition, in the consent form we ask you to give us permission to use your personal data [excluding name, mail address, interview recordings] for follow-up or other scientific research. The data shared is potentially traceable to you.

What happens with the results of the study?

Each participant will receive a summary of the results by email.

Do you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions about the study or your privacy rights, such as accessing, changing, deleting, or updating your data, please contact me.

Name: Luke Mendonca
 Phone number: +49 152 3737 2674
 Email: 530361lm@student.eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the Data Protection Officer (fg@eur.nl) or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

Do you regret your participation?

You may regret your participation. Even after participating, you can still stop. Please indicate this by contacting [me/us]. [I/We] will delete your data. Sometimes we need to keep your data so that, for example, the integrity of the study can be checked.

Ethics approval

This research has been reviewed and approved by an internal review committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This committee ensures that research participants are protected. If you would like to know more about this RERC/IRB, please contact [add contact information or website]

Declaration of Consent

I have read the information letter. I understand what the study is about and what data will be collected from me. I was able to ask questions as well. My questions were adequately answered. I know that I am allowed to stop at any time.

By signing this form, I

1. consent to participate in this research.
2. consent to the use of personal data;
3. confirm that I am at least 18 years old¹.
4. understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary and that I can stop at any time;
5. understand that my data will be anonymised for publication, educational purposes and further research.

Check the boxes below if you consent to this.

Required for research participation,

Data on the artist

I consent to the researcher's collection, use and retention of the following data: Opinions on music/streaming, the music industry, political inclinations, artist information and cultural background.

Audio recording

I consent to the interview being audio recorded.

Visual recording

I consent to the interview being filmed.

Sharing of data outside the EEA

I consent to the sharing of my data with Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

My answers in the article

I give permission for my answers to be used in papers, such as an article in a journal or book. My name will not be included.

My answers in the article with my name

I give permission for my name to be used with my answers in an article.

Use for educational purposes and further research

I hereby consent to having my personal data, namely your viewpoints stored and used for educational purposes and for future research, also in other areas of research than this research.

New research

I give permission to be contacted again for new research.

¹ GDPR permits 16 years old in the EEA to consent. From an ethics perspective, holding on to the age people become an adult may be preferable. Different countries may handle a different age for becoming an adult.

Name of participant (artist name is acceptable):

Participant's signature:

Date:

You will receive a copy of the complete information and consent form.