Music Making Under Platformization
independent cultural production in the new music economy

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of streaming platforms, increasing algorithmic governance and novel forms of data-driven distribution, the music industry's' economical and organizational structure is profoundly disrupted. While academia has focused on the macro-level effects of platformization, fewer studies have explored how these transformations are experienced at the micro-level, by independent artists, specifically in less popular music scenes. This thesis aims to address this gab by asking *How does the platformization of the music industry impact the cultural production process of independent artists?* To answer this, we followed qualitative methods grounded in media and cultural studies, based on semi-structured interviews. Twelve independent artists from Lille were interviewed, and their narratives thematically analysed. The theoretical framework draws on scholarship on platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and cultural labour, offering a critical lens in order to examine the tensions between autonomy, creativity, and economic precarity in the digital music economy. Five key themes were uncovered from the data: 1. independence as a double-edged condition; 2. algorithmic logics and strategic navigation; 3. varied creative practices shaped by both solitude and collaboration; 4. affective and psychological pressures; and 5. the continuing importance of locality and regional infrastructures. The findings highlight that platformization not only democratizes access to cultural production, but also reconfigures artistic and creative labour, embedding them in systems of visibility, datafication, entrepreneurship and exploitation. While artists develop creative and strategic tactics to cope and survive, their agency and autonomy remains limited or constrained by broader logics of platform capitalism. This study underscores the need for better structural support, more inclusive policies, increased dialogues between creative workers and industry stakeholders, as well as future research into underexplored aspects such as the mental health impacts of independent music-making under a platformized music industry.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global music industry has been profoundly disrupted, by a transformation largely driven by the rise of digital streaming platforms (DSPs) such as Spotify, Apple Music, Deezer, Tidal, SoundCloud and YouTube (YouTubeMusic included), amongst many others (Uli, 2018, p.306). Combined, audio and video streaming account for 63% of music listening, making digital streaming platforms the dominant form of music consumption (IFPI, 2023, p.6), supplanting physical media sales and downloads, and therefore radically altering the multiple relationships between artists, audiences, and industry intermediaries. The convergence of streaming services with digital distribution platforms (or aggregators) in the likes of Distrokid and TuneCore, along with social media ecosystems such as TikTok and Instagram, has reshaped how music is produced, promoted, circulated, and monetized (Nwagwu & Akintoye, 2023, pp. 673-686). In this new environment, independent artists are increasingly expected to function as self-sufficient entrepreneurs, creative labourers, which navigate a platformized and fragmented music economy that demands not only artistic talent, but digital literacy, branding, and sometimes even data-oriented strategy.

Within this context, platformization, the process by which digital platforms become infrastructural intermediaries in cultural and economic activities, (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p.4-9) has emerged as a central dynamic in the reorganization of the music industry. Platforms (DSPs, distributors, and social media) do not only facilitate access to music but actively structure the terms under which cultural content is made visible, valued, and monetized. Algorithmic monetization models, have profound influence on what music is heard, by whom and under what conditions. Consequently, the figure of the independent artist is increasingly shaped by these algorithmic logics, blurring the boundaries between creative autonomy, talent-based success, and platform governance.

While there is increasing academic interest in the implications of streaming for the music industry, a good amount of this literature remains focused on macro-level transformations such as market shifts, platform business models, user behaviour and the economic restructuring of the record industry (Morris, 2015; Baym, 2020). However, what remains underexplored at the micro-level are strategies employed by independent artists to navigate this evolving landscape, especially within localized and genre-specific contexts. Current existing research often overlooks how artists, which are the 'raw material' of musical cultural products themselves, perceive and respond to both structural constraints and

opportunities, imposed by platformization. As such, this research aims to address this gap by centring the voices of independent artists as grassroots cultural workers operating in between online platforms and local music scenes, and enriching our understanding of the intersections between algorithmic governance, economic precarity, and cultural work. By empirically demonstrating how power asymmetries manifest in artists lived realities, how artists actively negotiate, resist, or adapt to algorithmic infrastructures of digital streaming platforms and adjacent platforms, the research contributes to ongoing debates in media and cultural studies, around platforms, creative labour, and digital cultural production. The central research question is *How does the platformization of the music industry shape the strategies and cultural production processes of independent artists?*

In order to answer the research question, we will draw on qualitative data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with independent hip-hop artists based in Lille. This methodological choice was considered the more suitable since we want to capture the everyday realities, perceptions and motivation of cultural workers based in specific social and geographic contexts. By doing so, the research enlightens the debate on precarious work within platform labour, specifically in the context of digital cultural production, where independent music careers are often launched. I will focus this research specifically on Lille's independent hip-hop and RnB scene, a regional community characterized by a history of grassroots cultural production, (Paris and Baert, 2011, p.42) diverse social identities and artistic networks localized at the crossroads of bigger European cities such as Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Brussels. By doing so, the study adopts a bottom-up approach based on the voices of independent artists investigating how they balance platform imperatives with personal, artistic and community dynamics. We particularly seek to understand how artists' strategies are shaped not only by the digital constraints of platforms but also by social factors such as local networks, peer collaboration, regional identity, and the politics of representation.

Drawing on theories of platformization, algorithmic culture, and the political economy of media will develop a nuanced understanding of the power asymmetries that shape the platformized music economy today. It also aims to explore the struggles that independent artists may experience as cultural labourers operating within increasingly opaque, data-driven infrastructures. Additionally, the research is built on critical perspectives in cultural industries scholarship, which interrogate how capitalist imperatives shape the production, consumption and valuation of cultural products. (Hesmondhalgh**,**

2017; Meier & Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Adorno & Horkheimer). As both a researcher and artist, we several suppositions can be stated. Firstly, it is assumed that independent artists are not passive recipients of platform logics but remain adaptive agents that develop shifting strategic behaviours in response to platform logics. Secondly, it supposes that the platformization of the music industry leads to newforms of labour precarity, especially in the context of low per-stream revenue models, the pressure to maintain constant visibility, and reaching virality. Thirdly it suggests that social and regional factors mediate how artists experience and respond to platformization, offering both constraints and opportunities for creative autonomy and community resilience.

Ultimately, this research sheds light on emerging creative communities and the different challenges they may face in todays' digital economy. As music consumption and production is increasingly platform-dependent, artists must navigate unstable incomes, opaque algorithms, as well as relentless demands for visibility, often without any institutional support. By examining how independent artists cope and adapt their behaviours, this research may inform public policy, cultural funding bodies and grassroots initiatives aimed at supporting sustainable artistic careers. Additionally, it also reveals how peer solidarity, local networks, and notably off-platform cultural infrastructures play a critical role in maintaining artistic autonomy and cohesive community in the face of digital precarity. In that sense, this study does not only contribute to scholarly knowledge and academia but also to broader societal conversations about creative labour rights, cultural equity, and the future of independence in platformized economies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Algorithmic Governance in a Platformized Ecosystem

Platformization refers to the penetration of digital platforms into the organization and infrastructural sectors of society. With the advent of platformization, the cultural sector and especially the music industry went through profound transformations. As articulated by Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4287), platformization is not only about the technological hosting of content, but about a broader restructuring of the production, the distribution, and the monetization around platform logics. In this sensen when it comes to online streaming services, they have become central intermediaries in the circulation of music, particularly for independent artists seeking visibility and reach in an increasingly saturated digital landscape. In the context of the music industry, this has led to a reorganization of the entire value chain,

where independent artists are compelled to engage with digital streaming platforms (DSPs) such as Spotify, Apple Music, and Deezer, as well as other distributors and social media(Distrokid, TikTok), not only to reach audiences but also to be visible within algorithmically curated environments. This transformation created a significant shift in the way culture is consumed, controlled, circulated but also produced. Major labels, curators, distributors, what used to be traditional industry gatekeepers, seem to now be computational infrastructures embedded within platform architecture.

In their seminal work *The Platform Society* Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018, p.134) emphasize that platformization ensues the reconfiguration of public and cultural life through private, data-driven infrastructures that prioritize scalability, engagement, and marketization. In the music industry, this means that digital streaming platforms not only mediate access to musical content but actively shape in which terms this content is rendered visible, how it is discovered and how it gets remunerated. By relying on complex algorithms that recommend music through personalized playlists and automated suggestions, these platforms curate user experiences. Therefore, they are not neutral nor just technical; these algorithms operate as instruments of governance, a sort of algorithmic power (Kitchin, 2017, p.16) structuring cultural participation and visibility and that privilege certain content types and artist behaviours or trends.

One of the most significant mechanisms of control and governance in this ecosystem is algorithmic curation which determines what music appears on users' homepages, autoplay queues, and personalized playlists. In Poell et al. (2017, p.4276) it is argued that algorithmic recommendation systems are designed to maximize user engagement by leveraging past behaviour, demographic profiling and listening patterns. In consequence, artists are put in an environment where discoverability is increasingly dependent on the successful navigation of opaque recommendation systems. Artists are therefore facing multiple pressures to adapt both their content and strategies to align with these algorithmic preferences. To increase their chances of being playlisted and showcased by the algorithm, many artists may think to adjust their creative strategies, modifying song length, timing releases and brand identity, according to the algorithms' liking. This editorial playlist system, present on platforms like Spotify, adds another layer of gatekeeping, as curated lists like "Rap Caviar" or "Fresh Finds" are highly valuable to to artists, enabling them to step up their exposure, status, and number of streams (Prey, 2020, p.3). These playlists serve as algorithmically informed but human-mediated filters that blend computational prediction with branding and genre curation, often shaping what becomes culturally relevant, palatable, consumable and

commercially successful.

Artists are placed in this grey zone, where they need to couple their own craft and creative expression with external algorithmic rules imposed by platforms. These conditions contribute to what Alacovska et al. (2024, p.12) conceptualizes as a sort of "algorithmic paranoia", a certain state of uncertainty and speculative labour in which platform users (in this case artists and musicians) attempt to understand, predict, counter, or reverse-engineer algorithmic behaviours, without any certainty of success. Independent artists, without the institutional backing or insider knowledge available to major labels, are particularly vulnerable to such uncertainty. They often rely on informal networks, peer advice, or trial-and-error experimentation to navigate these platform algorithms (Toscher, 2021, p.10). Such dynamics does not only reflect listener behaviour but can actively influence how some artists plan releases, target audiences, or choose performance locations. In other words, platform metrics and analytics, such as streams, number of listeners, playlist inclusions, social media shares, are increasingly becoming tools through which, creative and strategic decisions are made.

All these factors fit into algorithmic governance, a system where computational programmes are automatically making decisions, or limiting the range of actions and interactions, by processing specific sets of (user-)data, without or limited human oversight. (Issar & Aneesh, 2021, p.3) The term is often coined to social media platforms, where social media creators are platform-dependent creative labourers subject to algorithmic governance, through content monitoring and censorship, trendiness, and metrics (Duffy & Meisner, 2022, p. 296-297). The visibility and invisibility of social media creators, their content, as much as the content shown to users, are governed by algorithms, riddled with opacity and unpredictability. As artists, especially independent ones rely on social media platforms to promote their music, build a following and sometimes a brand identity, they can also be considered as social media creators that face similar pressures. The difference between these types of creative labourers is that artists are dependent on multiple platforms, and especially diverse types of platforms that each have their specific functions but remain highly integrated within each other. When it comes to digital streaming platforms, data such as the listening and viewing history, preferences, and interactions are used with pre-defined coded instructions to curate and deliver a personalized, filtered, ranked and prioritized content feed which is algorithmically determined based on user patterns and predictions. Having this type of controlled user experience not only enables digital streaming platforms to streamline

content discovery and platform management but also to influence which platform artists gain visibility, which are highlighted on a homepage, or recommended to users, which songs enter trending playlists, ultimately shaping both user and artist digital media landscape.

This algorithmic governance creates a core tension between artistic autonomy and platform logics and optimization. While streaming platforms seemed promise global accessibility and democratized exposure, they do so on the condition that artists conform to the behavioural and aesthetic expectations of the platform's logic, its design. Prey (2020, p.7) underscores this dynamic by showing how Spotify incentivizes stream-friendly production norms that prioritize continuity, mood, and passive listening. In turn, these norms shape not only the sound but also the structure and pace of musical output, potentially narrowing the space for experimentation, socio-political expression and contributing to a homogenised and commodified music industry.

This paradox, between being afforded global reach and having to face algorithmic standardization is crucial to capture the different pressures faced by independent artists today. By examining how Lille's hip-hop and R&B artists respond to such platform dynamics this research seeks to put light on broader transformations in cultural labour, artistic strategy, and the political economy of music under the era of platform capitalism.

Ultimately, while platforms offer access to global audiences, they impose constraints on artistic autonomy. As Prey (2020, p.4) notes, the promise of reach is contingent on being able to conform to algorithmic standards, thus reinforcing a tension between creative freedom and platform optimization.

Independent artists today face a constellation of interlocking pressures shaped by the dynamics of platform capitalism. Algorithmic governance demands that they optimize their music for visibility, sometimes adapting track lengths, release frequency, and promotional strategies to fit opaque recommendation systems. At the same time, they must constantly engage in entrepreneurial activities across multiple platforms, transforming themselves into cross-platform content producers. These economic and technical pressures are compounded by precarious labour conditions: low streaming payouts, the necessity of diversified income streams, and the absence of formal protections. Simultaneously, they must navigate the tension between maintaining real life and local cultural presence and appealing to a broader, trend-driven digital landscape. Together, these platform-induced pressures reconfigure cultural production as a creative, digitalized yet unpredictable and precarious enterprise. Understanding how independent artists respond, adapt, and overcome these pressures is

essential to grasp the evolving structure of cultural production in the platformed streaming age.

2.2 Strategic Decision-Making in a Platform Economy

With cultural labour being increasingly platformized within cultural industries, and especially the music industry, independent artists practice forms of strategic decision making under the pressure of platform logics and ecosystems. The platformization of music has redefined not only modes of production and distribution but also the strategic decision-making processes artists adopt to sustain their careers. This section focuses on how artists develop strategies to navigate a fragmented ecosystem of platforms, each with its own affordances, audiences, and monetization models.

Decision-making and strategies do not only stand as a matter of artistic preference or expression but a necessity in an ecosystem where visibility, monetization and audience engagement are tightly intertwined with digital platform logics. As argued by Nieborg and Poell (2018, p.4280), since platforms infiltrate their logics into every stage of cultural production, artists are compelled to adjust their practices in line with platform-specific norms, business models and user metrics. For independent artists that have no to limited access to major labels, gatekeepers, and platform staff, this means that each decision, what to release, when, where, and how becomes part of a broader survival strategy in an increasingly precarious digital and cultural labour market.

As the main hosts of musical content digital streaming platforms reside within a tight yet fragmented digital landscape as each type of platform offers distinct affordance and constraints that artists need to navigate through. For instance, Spotify, Apple Music, and other mainstream streaming platforms are prioritized for reach and discoverability through curated and algorithmic playlists, and to allow users to easily have access to the artists' music, anywhere, anytime. Bandcamp on the other hand is known and valued for its transparent revenue model and emphasis on community-based support and direct artist to audience sales and streams. SoundCloud, which has seen is summum of access around 2016, especially within the underground hip-hop community allows artists to experiment and build a more engaged fanbase with music releases that are mostly not monetized but destined to fans that are ready to hear anything their artist tries. When it comes to YouTube, artists can release visuals and clips with their music, creating a different type of experience and sometimes getting YouTube ad-revenue and fan subscriptions. Since YouTube is a video streaming platform, content is pushed differently, and this can allow artists to expand their

audience.

Now when it comes to social media platforms in the likes of TikTok and Instagram, as well as X (formerly Twitter), artists can also promote their music, play in virality, cultivate an audience, direct communication, form a brand identity or show their personal side. Choosing where and how to release content and promotion is a strategic act, that requires artists to evaluate the different trade-offs between visibility and financial return, short-term or long-term engagement and audience building etc., fitting into what Schreiber and Rieple (2018, p.254) describe as 'aggrandizement', the necessity for creative workers to expand their roles and set of skills to exercise in uncertain and unstable work environments. Independent artists do not only make music but tap into marketing, designing, community managing, public relations, and several different types of activities that make them creative entrepreneurs, strategically using their resources to craft their strategies and make their decisions. These are not isolated to platform selection, but include timing and frequency of releases, the use of teasers, remixes, crafting narratives that hook their audience across different media. Independent artists do not only think about what kind of music to make but how to format, market, and circulate it. This is particularly important in light of platform-specific temporalities: frequent releases may increase visibility on Spotify, while engagement with trends can boost discoverability on TikTok for example. The affordances of each platform do not only shape the marketing but potentially the music itself, its length, pacing, and structure. As noted by Morris (2020, p.7), platform infrastructures increasingly inform the shape of creative production, leading to a sort of pre-emptive standardization that artists may internalize in their decision-making processes. This also applies to revenue and monetization models.

The decline of physical and digital sales in favour of streaming has significantly reduced per-unit income, pressuring even established artists to diversify their revenue streams (IFPI, 2024, p.6). It is harder to begin with to make money on streaming platforms as an emerging independent artist. Streaming platforms rarely provide adequate compensation which is why monetization can be considered a central factor in decision making. As highlighted by Baym (2020, p.108), many musicians today must treat music as both a passion and a side-hustle, often subsidizing their creative careers with unrelated or adjacent labour. This economic precarity forces artists to seek alternative forms of income that can be related to the music career: merchandise, live shows, brand partnerships, crowdfunding platforms like Patreon, or sync licensing opportunities for film, TV, and games. Or using more traditional income sources through full time or part-time jobs on the

side. We can presume this is increasingly true when it comes to emerging independent artists. Lots are young, sometimes even still studying, and with limited financial capital. Such diversification of income sources is not merely strategic but almost necessary in order to sustain a livelihood within this platform economy, and more broadly in cultural and creative industries (de Peuter, 2014, p.271). This financial instability is compounded by the increasing expectation that artists manage their careers as entrepreneurs. Ng and Gamble (2024, p.9) emphasize the rise of the artist-entrepreneur, a figure who must simultaneously create, promote, and monetize their work, often without or limited institutional support. This "DIY self-management" entails competencies in branding, marketing, digital analytics, and cross-platform coordination amongst many other skills. As briefly previously mentioned, artists are now cultural entrepreneurs who must cultivate an online persona, build and manage communities, and leverage data insights to maintain relevance in an attention economy (Baym, 2020, p.26-27).

However, it is important to remind that artists' strategy-making is not solely driven by economic rationality, they remain artists at the end of the day, which are mainly driven by passion. With such presets, we can assume artist may also craft strategies in which they preserve creative control and maintain an authentic artistic identity, besides external pressures, rather platform-induced or audience-based. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p.393-394) argue, cultural labour is always shaped by a tension between intrinsic motivations, such as artistic self-expression, and extrinsic demands for commercial success. For independent artists, this means constantly balancing the demands of platform algorithms and audience expectations with their own creative vision. The ability to strategically navigate platforms while retaining artistic coherence is often what defines long-term sustainability. Through the academicization of artistic activity by economical terms it is crucial to keep in mind that artists are driven by more than that and can have developed a very special attachment to their craft and activity, meaning we can assume their agency can also only be driven by their art, and for their art.

Similarly, artists are not only operating in the highly digitalized environment that has been described, but also navigate in society through social connections, events and venues, infrastructure such as collectives and associations, studios etc. The platform economy does not have the same reach across all contexts, which is why socio-local factors such as the infrastructure of the local cultural scene, or existing support networks can influence how artists approach their on and off platform strategies (Kruse, 2010, p.630). For instance, being embedded in strong local communities may allow artis to rely less on algorithmic discovery

and more on mobilizing through events, live performances, and word-of-mouth. Leveraging collaborations with other artists or creative labourers can both boost cross-platform engagement and audience building as well as compensating for a lack of industry connections (Kruse, 2010, p.637). As such, strategic decision-making must also be understood through the lens of off platform activities, that are often localized, an aspect which shapes not only access to resources but also the perceived legitimacy of different platforms and promotional tactics. Strategic decision-making in a platformized economy remains a complex and multifaceted practice that sits at the intersection of algorithmic logics, economic sustainability, and artistic agency. Independent artists are not compelled to merely using platforms but also to use different ones, to diversify their income streams, their set of skills and activities, all whilst trying to maintain a sense of authenticity, artistic authenticity, and perhaps sanity.

The need to balance these decisions reflects a broader reality that derives from tradition in the political economy of music, where cultural labour is increasingly precarious, entrepreneurial, and mediated by opaque digital infrastructures.

2.3 Artists as Cultural Laborers in Platform Capitalism

Because of the algorithmic governance riddles platform ecosystems, we have seen that independent artists need to practice strategic decision making within a complex environment. Now let us focus on their role and position as cultural labourers in platform capitalism. As we have seen, independent artists function as cultural labourers that are embedded in a system that extracts value from their creative, emotional, and relational work/content, while offering little or limited material and financial security or institutional support. (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; de Peuter, 2014), As such, drawing from the political economy of communication and media labour, this section focuses on how platform capitalism has restructured artistic work into fragmented, often unpaid or underpaid micro-labours, driven by the imperatives of visibility, engagement and constant productivity.

At its core, platform capitalism can be considered a model of value creation that monetizes user behaviour and content whilst obscuring the labour on which this whole system is based on. Digital streaming platforms can thrive on an almost infinite flow of cultural content, which is significantly produced by independent creators, yet redistribute only a minimal share of revenue to those same creators (Morris, 2020, p.5). The way royalty splits are structured, often opaque and based on complex per-stream calculations, provide extremely low returns for most artists, especially those without major label backing.

Marshall (2015, p.182) and Morris (2020, p.6) have highlighted how artists receive only fractions of a cent per stream, with payouts dependent not on direct consumption but on their share of the platform's overall streaming volume. This system not only incentivizes scale and volume but also generates intense competition among artists for algorithmic attention. It mirrors the same dynamics as in more traditional capitalist structures where the most precarious class yields the least capital. In response, independent musicians adopt what Duffy (2015, p.446) terms aspirational labour: a form of highly self-invested work that is future-oriented, unpaid, and premised on the hope of eventual recognition or financial reward. This aspirational mode requires artists to engage in multiple forms of labour beyond music-making, industry networking, social media promotion, audience interaction, content creation, visual branding, often without any guarantee of success. Visibility, in this sense, becomes both a prerequisite and a speculative reward. The constant demand for online presence and engagement introduces a logic of overwork, where productivity is measured not in artistic depth but in frequency, responsiveness, and adaptability.

Such conditions closely mirror broader trends of the gig economy in which employment is fragmented, individualized, and stripped of long-term guarantees. Artists, similarly, to Uber drivers or freelance content creators, are pushed into a model of self-enterprise that valorises hustle, flexibility, and resilience. As noted by de Peuter (2014, p.269) this reconfiguration of labour displace responsibility onto the worker, who must internalize the risks of the marketplace while maintaining a certain image of autonomy and creativity. For musicians this can often mean managing a hybrid role and identity as both a self-expressive artist and an entrepreneurial agent tasked with marketing, negotiating, and sustaining their brand or career in a competitive digital environment. Whilst the narrative of creative freedom persists and remains relevant, we could criticize that it may mask the material pressures that may condition artistic output. We generally expect artists to be adaptable, self-disciplined, and constantly producing, but they remain vulnerable to platform volatility, opaque algorithmic changes and shifting audience behaviours. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p.395) stressed the need to further account psychological toll of such precarity, noting how many cultural workers experience anxiety, burnout, and self-doubt amid the push to remain visible and relevant.

However, some policies exist in order to compensate such precarious labour conditions. In the French context, the *statut d'intermittent* du spectacle provides a partial institutional recognition of the discontinuous and project-based nature of cultural labour. This system, established to support workers in the performing arts and audiovisual sectors,

offers unemployment benefits between gigs if artists meet a certain threshold of contracted work within a defined period of time (Grégoire, 2013, p.98). While this system acknowledges the irregularity of artistic labour, it has become increasingly difficult to access for independent musicians, especially those who operate outside traditional industry circuits or rely primarily on digital platforms. Platform-based artists may struggle to meet the contractual requirements of intermittence, as much of their work, releases on Spotify, self-funded videos on YouTube, studio recording session or unpaid promotional activity on social media, remains informal, unrecognized, and outside the scope of eligible labour.

This disjuncture exposes the limits of existing legal or institutional frameworks to accommodate the realities of platform-mediated creative labour rather they be at national or supranational level. While intermittence theoretically offers protection, it fails to account for the full spectrum of digital, immaterial, and affective work artists now perform. Moreover, the bureaucratic demands of the system often clash with the fluid, informal rhythms of digital music careers, leading many to rely on personal savings, family support, or supplementary jobs to sustain their practice. This reinforces the uneven accessibility of artistic careers, privileging those with pre-existing resources and networks. Thus, whilst most artists remain precarious workers, those without the initial capital to develop their activity are even more at risk in the industry. The platformization of music production does not only affect economic structures but also redefines the very meaning of creative work today. Authorship is increasingly distributed across platforms, curators, algorithms, and audiences. Autonomy is circumscribed by the need for platform legibility. Professional identity is shaped less by traditional industry markers (labels, managers, formal releases) and more by metrics, branding, and cross-platform engagement. This research, by centring the lived experiences of independent hip-hop and R&B artists in Lille, aims to illuminate how cultural labour is rearticulated under platform capitalism, not only in terms of material conditions but also through evolving subjectivities, working rhythms, different strategies, and definitions of success.

2.4 Cultural Production as a Commodified Process

Whilst platformization has restructured labour and especially cultural labour, it has also profoundly transformed the conditions under which cultural productions occur, and the way we associate value to cultural products and content. Traditionally regarded as a form of expressive or symbolic culture, music is now increasingly framed through the logic of

performance metrics, virality, and algorithmic relevance, a product optimized for consumption. In this new platform ecosystem, cultural value is often subordinated to commercial metrics in the likes of streams, likes, saves, shares, comments, views, which are now often seen as proxies for artistic worth, discoverability and monetization. Music becomes valued not for its aesthetic merit or cultural resonance, but for its algorithmic performance.

These changing dynamics align with a new type of platform value logic (Toscher, 2021, p.6) a regime in which cultural content is assessed and ranked not through qualitative judgments, but through its algorithmic traction and predictive marketability. One of the most visible consequences of this logic is the reengineering of the musical object itself. In order to be optimized for inclusion in algorithmically curated playlists or to reduce listener skip rates, which are two crucial factors influencing streaming success, artists are incentivized to produce shorter tracks with immediate hooks and front-loaded choruses. The creative process becomes shaped by the affordances and constraints of platform infrastructures, particularly mainstream ones, in the likes of Spotify, which, as Morris and Powers (2015, p.112) point out, has become not just a distribution channel but a de facto gatekeeper of taste and exposure, through its own curated playlists and activities as a media. Traditionally, music was measured through single and album sales, radio, and TV appearances etc. Musical art form is thus increasingly determined by platform metrics, favouring repeatable, consumable formats over experimentation or long-form expression. Thus, the album, once considered a cornerstone of artistic identity and narrative coherence, has been largely eclipsed by a strategy of drip-fed singles, teasers, and algorithmically timed drops. This mode of production fragments the artistic process and reorients it toward a rhythm dictated by engagement analytics rather than creative intuition, reflecting the platform economy's emphasis on immediacy and instant gratification. Streaming interfaces are designed to minimize friction, offering seamless transitions between songs, artists, and moods.

This shift in music consumption contributes to the erosion of music's singularity as a cultural object. Spotify's "only competitor is silence," (Quah, 2025) according to its founder Elk. Rather than being experienced as an intentional, immersive act, listening to music becomes integrated into the background of everyday life, partly because of the sole design of music platforms, while artists compete for attention in an increasingly competitive and saturated industry. In addition to transforming aesthetic and temporal norms, platformization has also dematerialized the production and consumption of music. The decline of physical

formats, vinyl, CDs, even digital downloads, has eroded the material anchoring of music in favour of ephemeral digital streams. Music has become a marketable product deprived of materiality and ownership. The more embedded in platforms music becomes, the more it becomes simultaneously accessible and precarious. In the case of independent artists, this dematerialization reduces opportunities for direct income such as physical sales or merch bundling and further embeds them in platform logics where control over their content, audience data, and remuneration is limited. As Beer (2010, p.479) notes, the shift from ownership to accessibility models means that platforms, not artists, now control the infrastructure through which value is created, tracked, and extracted. Cultural production is commodified by the digitalization and platformization of its core content, the intermediaries through which it flows, and by the transformation of its consumption on monthly fee-based services provide by digital streaming platforms.

This overall commodification of cultural production raises important questions about autonomy, authenticity, and the artist-audience relationship. While platforms offer tools for direct engagement and global reach, they also standardize and instrumentalize these interactions. Artists must continuously present themselves as accessible, responsive, and marketable personas, a demand that reshapes not only how music is made but also how artistic identity is performed. As Baym (2020, p.8) argues, the blurring of production and self-presentation requires musicians to be both creators and brand ambassadors, navigating an attention economy that rewards visibility over substance and regularity over innovation. In the context of independent hip-hop and R&B artists in Lille, these dynamics are not just theoretical, they manifest in everyday creative and strategic decisions. From choosing between platforms with different affordances (e.g., Bandcamp for revenue, Spotify for exposure) to adapting release schedules based on algorithmic windows, artists are embedded in a system that commodifies not just their music, but their time, personality, and relationships. The pressure to perform well in this system shapes not only their artistic output but their understanding of what it means to be an artist today. The commodification of music under platform capitalism thus extends beyond the song itself, encompassing the entire apparatus of cultural production and its entanglement with data-driven platform.

2.5 Cross-Platform Integration and the Platformization of the Artist
A final yet crucial dimension of the platform economy is the co-dependence of various platforms and the demand it places on artists to manage a cross-platform presence. As already mentioned, in the current media ecology, music is not merely produced and

consumed on a single channel, such as Spotify or Apple Music. Instead, it is discovered through TikTok's viral trends, marketed on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), distributed via intermediary services like TuneCore or DistroKid, and monetized through Bandcamp, Patreon, or YouTube. Each platform offers different affordances, monetization opportunities, and audience expectations, yet artists are expected to manage them in a coherent and strategically integrated manner. This fragmentation compels artists to "platformize" not just their content but their identities, performances, and routines. As Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2023, p.18) argue, cross-platform integration is not a neutral technical strategy but a form of infrastructural entanglement: platforms are increasingly interlocked in ways that extract value through data interoperability yet remain algorithmically incompatible. For artists, this means navigating contradictory logics, TikTok rewards spontaneity and virality, while Instagram prioritizes visual coherence and aesthetic branding; Spotify demands high-quality, polished audio productions, while Bandcamp encourages narrative-rich, artist-controlled presentation.

The role of digital distributors like TuneCore, DistroKid, further complicates this terrain. These platforms enable artists to bypass traditional labels and access DSPs directly, thus reinforcing narratives of independence and control. However, these services are not neutral intermediaries; they operate on subscription or commission models that shift the burden of risk and cost onto the artist. As Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 4276) argue, this reflects a broader trend in platform capitalism where workers, whether Uber drivers or indie musicians, must invest in their own tools and infrastructures just to participate. In this context, the artist is not just a content creator but also a paying client, data producer, and self-managed entrepreneur. The promise of autonomy is thus tightly coupled with the realities of precarity and platform dependency.

Cross-platform demands also generate significant emotional labour. The imperative to remain visible, responsive, and strategically engaged across platforms induces what Alacovska et al. (2024, p.12) terms "algorithmic paranoia", a speculative mode of engagement wherein users (artists, in this case) attempt to decode opaque recommendation systems and optimize content accordingly. This not only consumes time and energy but also subjects artists to feelings of inadequacy, burnout, and self-doubt, particularly when performance metrics do not translate into economic returns or recognition.

However, despite these challenges, cross-platform integration also opens up new

possibilities for artists to retain autonomy, challenge industry gatekeeping, and connect with niche audiences. For example, some artists use Bandcamp and Patreon to foster direct fan relationships that bypass the extractive logic of DSPs. Others employ TikTok not as a commercial tool but as a space for creative experimentation or community engagement. These alternative uses reveal the ambivalent nature of cross-platform work: it can be both constraining and empowering, depending on how artists navigate and reconfigure the affordances of each platform.

For artists, and especially independent ones which do not necessarily have a team managing the steps outside of production of the music, managing their presence across these various platforms, both strategically and emotionally, is essential to grasping the full impact of platformization on cultural production. It also illuminates how the artist, once imagined primarily as a musician or performer, has become a distributed entity: part marketer, part influencer, part data analyst, part entrepreneur. In this sense, platformization is not simply a reorganization of music distribution; it is a fundamental transformation of what it means to be an artist in the digital age.

2.6 The Importance of Socio-Local Contexts

Despite the global nature of digital streaming platforms, cultural production remains embedded in local social and spatial contexts. Scholars have emphasized the role of place-based networks, infrastructures, and identities in shaping artistic practices. As Banks and Oakley (2020, p.7) argue, cultural work is not merely shaped by digital infrastructures but also by place-based ecologies of support, identity, and meaning. Independent artists, while operating within transnational digital circuits, continue to rely on local resources, such as rehearsal spaces, studios, performance venues, and informal peer networks, which constitute the immediate material and social infrastructure of creative practice.

Although streaming platforms promise borderless circulation and global reach, cultural production remains deeply situated in local and regional contexts. These socio-local conditions are especially significant in understanding how artists navigate platform capitalism. While digital platforms privilege scalability, universality, and trend responsiveness, locality introduces grounded forms of authenticity, cultural specificity, and mutual recognition. In this sense, local scenes function not only as cultural reservoirs but

also as filters and mediators of platform logics. As Cohen (2012, p.135-136) and Kruse (2010, p.628-629) note in their respective studies of music scenes, local environments shape the identities and strategies of artists through affective ties, shared histories, and symbolic geographies that resist the homogenizing tendencies of global platforms. This is particularly relevant in the case of Lille, a mid-sized urban centre with a vibrant, though less commercially visible, hip-hop scene. Its geographic position, proximate to Paris, Brussels, London and Amsterdam, offers both geographic proximities to major music markets and a distinct cultural hybridity that reflects its trans local character. However, it still lacks the centralized industry infrastructure of Paris, which continues to dominate the French music economy in terms of media exposure, label presence, and professional pathways. This decentralization pushes independent artists in Lille to rely more heavily on local scenes, cross-border collaborations, and regional initiatives.

While it may lack the industry density of major capitals, it benefits from trans local connections and EU-supported cultural infrastructures such as FLOW, the European Centre for Urban Cultures. Institutions like FLOW, play a crucial role in mediating between local artistic production and broader creative economies. FLOW serves as a cultural incubator that provides artists with access to rehearsal studios, residency programs, workshops, and performance spaces. According to Becquet (2022, p.17), FLOW exemplifies the evolving role of municipal and EU-supported institutions in fostering territorialized creative practices that remain locally grounded while being capable of networked expansion. These types of spaces are particularly valuable for independent hip-hop artists, who often operate outside mainstream circuits and require dedicated infrastructures to support their cultural labour. FLOW's emphasis on inclusion, diversity, and urban creativity allows artists to experiment and professionalize without the immediate pressure of platform metrics or commercial viability.

Moreover, local identity plays a fundamental role in how artists present themselves in platform environments. While platforms like Spotify and YouTube tend to reward content that conforms to transnational norms and marketable genres, many independent artists deliberately foreground their regional roots as a way to stand out and build credibility. This can be understood through the notion of "glocalization" (Robertson, 1995), where global distribution is combined with locally situated aesthetics and narratives. In hip-hop, a genre with strong ties to place, community, and socio-political commentary, this tension between local authenticity and platform visibility becomes particularly pronounced. Artists may draw

on dialects, neighbourhood references, or regional histories that resonate with local audiences, even as they attempt to scale their reach through digital strategies.

For artists in Lille, the local scene offers a form of grounding and validation that the abstract metrics of streaming platforms often lack. Performing at neighbourhood festivals, collaborating with other Lille-based rappers, or being featured in local media outlets provides not only symbolic recognition but also practical feedback and peer engagement. This kind of grassroots support becomes a counterbalance to the anonymity and algorithmic opacity of platform economies. In some cases, artists use local momentum as leverage to increase their online presence; in others, they prioritize cultivating loyal local fanbases over chasing national or international virality.

This research explores how these regional dynamics shape the strategies and self-understandings of independent hip-hop artists in Lille. Specifically, it examines how artists negotiate the interplay between local infrastructures and global platforms, how they use place-based networks to sustain themselves materially and symbolically, and how their engagement with streaming technologies is conditioned by regional resources, cultural norms, and institutional supports. Rather than treating the digital as a disembedded sphere, this perspective highlights the ways in which locality remains an active force in structuring artistic trajectories and mediating the pressures of platform capitalism.

Taken together, these six dimensions illustrate how platformization reshapes the structures, strategies, and subjectivities of independent hip-hop artists. From algorithmic governance and strategic decision-making to the commodification of music and the pressures of cross-platform integration, artists are increasingly compelled to balance creative autonomy with the demands of platform capitalism. At the same time, socio-local contexts remain vital in mediating these dynamics, offering both constraints and forms of resistance. By examining these overlapping pressures and possibilities, this research aims to understand how independent artists in Lille navigate a digital ecosystem that is at once enabling and exploitative. The following methods section outlines how this theoretical framework informed the design of the interview guide and the approach to data collection and analysis.

3. Method: in-depth interviews

To investigate how the platformization of the music industry shapes the strategies and

cultural production processes of independent artists, this study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in semi-structured, in-depth interviews with independent hip-hop and RnB artists based in Lille. It is important to note that the mentioned genres are not exclusive since I am aware of the artistic tendencies to bend genre boundaries. However, hip-hop and R&B were selected, as they are genres that are deeply rooted to the status of independence and to a certain DIY mentality. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to their flexibility and depth, allowing for both comparability across participants and the emergence of context-specific insights. This format enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while allowing the interviewer to probe into key themes related to algorithmic culture, creative autonomy, monetization strategies, and local scene dynamics.

This methodological approach is informed by the epistemological stance that the lived experiences and perspectives of creative labourers provide valuable insights into larger structural and socio-economic processes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018). Given the opacity of algorithmic governance and platform infrastructures, qualitative methods such as interviews offer a way to surface the subjective understandings and tacit knowledges that underpin strategic navigation in a platformized environment.

3.1 Research Design: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method for data collection, allowing for both consistency in addressing core thematic areas and flexibility to pursue emerging insights during the conversations (Johnson, 2001). This design enables the researcher to explore key dimensions of strategic decision-making while accommodating the unique trajectories, motivations, and reflections of each participant in their cultural production.

As this study is concerned with micro-level processes, specifically how individual artists adapt, resist, or internalize platform logics, semi-structured interviews are especially appropriate. They facilitate a dialogic space where participants can narrate their experiences, articulate dilemmas, and describe how broader structural pressures manifest in their everyday artistic practices.

Moreover, given the relative scarcity of publicly available data on the internal mechanisms of DSPs, centring the accounts of those directly affected, the artists, provides critical insights into the relational dynamics between cultural producers and platform infrastructures.

3.2 *Interview Design and Thematic Scope*

In designing the interview grid, (see Appendix C) I drew both from existing academic literature on music production, cultural labour and platformization and from my own reflexive positionality as a practitioner embedded in independent music networks. As Ng and Gamble (2024, p.7) note in their study of hip-hop producers navigating digital economies, researcher-participants often inhabit a shifting space between insider and outsider perspectives. This "continuous oscillation" enabled the authors to craft questions that reflected both intimate field knowledge and critical distance. Similarly, my familiarity with the creative processes and economic challenges of independent artists in platformized contexts informed the construction of thematically organized, semi-structured questions. While this insider knowledge facilitated rapport with participants and grounded the interviews in practical realities, I also remained aware that my perspective is situated and partial. The interview grid, therefore, serves not only as a methodological tool but also as a way to manage this reflexive tension, providing cohesion across interviews while leaving space for unexpected insights and experiences to emerge. The interview guide was carefully designed to reflect the theoretical concerns outlined in the previous section, with questions grouped into six thematic areas: engagement with streaming platforms, strategic decision-making, monetization and sustainability, socio-local networks, industry challenges, and cross-platform practices. This structure aimed to capture the multifaceted nature of cultural production under platform capitalism, while also attending to the role of locality and the increasing demands of cross-platform self-management.

By the advice of a researcher I got in contact with, the guide was inspired by principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), and designed to have a balance structure with openness, allowing themes to emerge inductively throughout data collection and analysis, whilst still revolving around our central subject. The questions are formulated in an accessible language to ensure participants feel comfortable and understood, while still aligning with the theoretical concerns of the research. Any misunderstood question during interviews were rephrased and/or simplified. The goal is to facilitate the emergence of rich, textured narratives that reveal both the constraints and agency embedded in cultural labour under platform capitalism, but also the broad experience of independent artists in the era of streaming platforms. Participants were advised to select a location in which they feel the most at ease in order to be able to record and extract valuable and rich data.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants who are best positioned to provide insight into the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample consists of independent hip-hop and RnB artists operating within Lille and surrounding urban areas, defined here as artists who are not signed to major record labels and who actively distribute their work through digital streaming platforms (Spotify, Apple Music, Deezer, YouTube, or SoundCloud). Artists who are part of independent labels, or structures were also included.

The sample was aimed for diversity in terms of artistic experience (emerging, mid-career, and established artists), gender, ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic status. This heterogeneity allows for more nuanced understanding of how different positionalities shape experiences of platform governance and artistic strategy. A target sample size of 10 to 15 participants has been set, which is sufficient to achieve data saturation while remaining feasible within the research timeframe (Guest et al., 2006). The actual sample consisted of 12 independent artists in the end.

The main criteria selected were adult artists that have independent status, meaning they are not signed to a major record label, (they can be signed to an independent one or affiliated with cultural structures). This has been decided because of the different social and professional links artists have with local collectives or associations that can produce events or help them in their career and artistry. As a dynamic cultural scene Lille is riddled with these structures such as RAW, ShareMusic, DimensionOnline and many others, that provide artists for exposure opportunities, showcases, interviews, pop-ups, and open mics.

Participants were contacted through word of mouth and their available social media. Most participants were easily accessible via Instagram. In order to make participants feel at ease they were in charge of deciding where the interview would be conducted, and they were free to have fellow artists, friends and managers present during the interview.

3.4 Operationalizing Core Concepts

To ensure coherence with the central research question, interview analysis was oriented around five conceptual domains. These serve as both analytical categories and interpretive lenses through which the empirical material will be examined:

Platformization: Refers to the integration of platform logics into cultural production processes, particularly how algorithmic recommendation systems, monetization models, and audience analytics shape content creation, promotion, and visibility (Nieborg & Poell, 2018,

p. 4286). Artist responses will be analysed for how they perceive and respond to these dynamics.

Strategic Decision-Making: Encompasses the ways in which artists make creative and professional choices, often under constraints imposed by platform incentives. This includes release timing, branding strategies, engagement with fans, and compromises between artistic integrity and commercial viability (Schreiber & Rieple, 2018, p.248-250).

Cultural and Social Embeddedness: Refers to the influence of local social networks, community ties, and regional identity on artistic practices (Banks & Oakley, 2020, p.8). Attention will be given to how local infrastructures and peer collaborations mediate artists' platform strategies.

Economic Sustainability: Focuses on how artists sustain their careers within the financial conditions of platform economies. This includes exploring diverse income stream, streaming revenue, live performances, merchandise, side jobs, and the emotional labour involved in maintaining precarious creative work.

Creative Labour and Worker Identity: Addresses the socio-political dimensions of being a cultural worker in the platform economy, including how artists understand their position as both creators and labourers, navigating exploitative conditions and negotiating autonomy (Duffy et al., 2019; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017).

These thematic categories will serve as interpretive anchors during the analytical phase and will help bridge empirical data with the theoretical framework.

3.5 Data Collection and Thematic Analysis

Twelve different interviews were conducted with Lille independent artists, which have mainly been contacted through their Instagram accounts. The interviews were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on participant and researcher availability and logistical feasibility. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half and was audio-record with informed consent. As we focus on the Lille artistic community, the interviews were conducted in French, a language to which I am native, facilitating the depth of participants communication and expressiveness, as well as the depth of researcher understanding and analysis. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim to enable systematic analysis. In order to keep the raw meaning and understanding of participant insights, interviews are not translated in English, but the report of the analysis and findings will try its best to translate linguistic nuances.

The data was analysed through a six-phase thematic analysis as outlined by Braun

and Clarke (2006), beginning with immersion in the data through repeated reading. Initial codes were developed to identify recurring patterns related to the conceptual domains we have previously outlined. These codes were then clustered into overarching themes, which were reviewed and refined through reading comparison and theoretical triangulation. Simultaneously, codes deemed interesting but that were not connected to our theoretical framework were also processed. This allows for insights to be brought up by the data itself and avoiding biases that may be theoretically imposed. This processed was assisted by the Atlas.ti software, facilitating navigation through raw data, crafting of codes and themes and double checking with researcher insights and analysis.

The themes were assessed for internal coherence and theoretical relevance before being interpreted in light of the existing literature and the research's analytical frameworks. Member-checking was conducted by sharing the finding with participants to ensure interpretive accuracy and ethical accountability. Additionally, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process in order to track methodological choices, researcher positionality and potential biases (Tracy, 2010).

4. Findings

The participants in this research consist of twelve independent music artists active or connected to Lille's urban music scene, in the north of France. The sample includes both male and female artists working across genres such as rap, RnB, soul, and hybrid styles influenced by Afrobeat, jazz, and experimental styles. Denis StClair is a trans woman who began her musical journey as a percussionist before transitioning into rap, managing her production and branding independently. Nessy is a female RnB and neo-soul artist who practiced her music between Paris and Lille. She once led a student association named Es'pera, a hip-hop, RnB and politics media that also did musical events. G2N is a male rapper based in Lille, previously in Paris that was also a member of Es'Pera. He started rapping on Instagram through rap competitions and decided to release his music more seriousy on streaming platforms after that. Sagitto is a male artist whose work blends alternative rap with electronic influences. He is fully independent and focused on his music. He records, makes his beats, writes, DJs and work on his visuals. Jeunhom, also male, is an emerging artist who explores melodic flows and shares a growing engagement with both the local scene and online platforms. Whilst he started his artistic journey with rap, he now does lots of indie-pop French songs, and is developing his own structure, in which he records and

sounds engineers for other artists. Nakré, a male Morrocan artist, creates music influenced by his bicultural background and insists on maintaining authenticity despite the pressures of visibility. Peter Cheeky is a male rapper from Lille who values community building and speaks openly about the challenges of promotion, visibility, and the need for team support in music production. EmiSounds is a 26-year-old female singer and music student whose influences include Amy Winehouse, and who emphasizes vocal performance and stylistic versatility. Cheeks is a male rapper who that blends rap and electronic influences like DnB. His main drive is being able to perform his music live, whilst balancing with platforms. Cheeks reflects on the strategic dimension of music distribution, using platforms like Spotify and SoundCloud to maintain visibility while remaining independent. Zéphir, a Franco-Gabonese male artist, discusses the contrast between artistic control and the financial burdens of independent production, and reflects on his transition from making music in Gabon to building a career in France. His trap music being considered niche, he pledges to stick to his authenticity and build his following no matter the pressures of platforms. Tensito is a male rapper who discusses the importance of releasing content frequently to remain visible within algorithmic environments, while also drawing from local inspiration and personal evolution. Finally, Cooks is a female rapper/singer/songwriter based in Lille that recently decided to release songs on streaming platforms and is regularly performing live gigs. (see Appendix A)

Altogether, these twelve artists composing our sample represent a diverse image of Lille's emergent independent hip-hop and RnB scenes. The analysis explores the lived experiences, creative strategies, and professional trajectories of these artists within the constraints and opportunities imposed by the platformized music economy, and by Lille's cultural setting. The aim is to offer a bottom-up understanding of how cultural production is shaped by digital infrastructures, while paying close attention to social, local, and affective dynamics. The five themes outlined below emerged inductively from the data and are grounded in rich quotations from the interview transcripts.

1. **Independence as a double-edged condition**: While artists cherish the autonomy to control their artistic output and career paths, this independence also brings significant burdens, including self-management, financial risk, and the pressure to sustain constant visibility.

2. **Algorithmic logics and strategic navigation**: Participants described adapting their practices, such as release timing, content format, and social media activity, to align

with the opaque and shifting requirements of algorithmic platforms like Spotify, Instagram, and YouTube.

3. **Creative practices shaped by solitude and collaboration**: Artists reported working in isolation to maintain control, but also emphasized the importance of collective spaces, peer feedback, and creative alliances, particularly within the local scene.

4. **Affective and psychological pressures**: Many participants voiced feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, exhaustion, and emotional labour associated with sustaining their music careers in a hyper-competitive and visibility-driven digital landscape.

5. **The continuing importance of locality and regional infrastructures**: Despite the global reach of digital platforms, local venues, collectives, friendships, and creative networks remain crucial sources of support, recognition, and creative identity.

4.1 Independence as a Double-Edged Condition

Throughout the interviews, one of the most prominent themes was the ambivalence of the independence status. While artists generally celebrated the creative freedom and ownership that comes with being independent, they also emphasized the emotional, logistical, and financial burdens it entails. In many cases, the discourse around independence oscillated between empowerment and exhaustion, revealing a tension at the heart of contemporary cultural labour.

Zéphir clearly expressed this duality, that he describes as a blessing and a curse:

> "Personnellement moi je le vois comme, c'est une bénédiction et un fardeau à la fois. Une bénédiction dans le sens où, tout ton travail te revient… Mais c'est un fardeau parce que, avant toute cette victoire, il y a des paramètres à prendre en compte... il faut payer le studio, il faut payer les clips, il faut peut-être réfléchir à une stratégie avant de drop…"

Here, independence is framed not only as an absolute liberation or gift, but rather as a mode of operation that entails constant negotiation between autonomy and constraint. These constraints can be platform-imposed but also related to the nature of making it as an artist. The metaphor of a "blessing and a burden" encapsulates a wider paradox (Ng & Gamble, 2024, p.12) in which creative workers prize freedom and self-determination but are

simultaneously weighed down by the pressures of self-management, precarity, and intensified responsibility. Needing to account for all the work outside of just the music duplicates the amount of efforts, resources and time independent artists need to succeed. In this light, independence becomes both a symbolic ideal and a structural trap. The same ambiguity was articulated by G2N, who reflected on the challenges of managing the business side of music without prior training or support:

> "Quand t'as pas une formation d'administratif… que tu dois tout gérer tout seul. Ça rajoute un poids qui peut venir freiner ton développement artistique."

G2N's words signal how administrative labour, contracts, budgeting, grant writing, scheduling, distribution, constitutes a hidden layer of work that remains unacknowledged in public discourse around music artists. It also reflects the rise of the "entrepreneurial artist," where individuals must internalize business logics to survive (Ng & Gamble, 2024, p.9), developing adjacent skills which whilst not fulfilling, are crucial to make a living out of a music career. The romanticized notion of the independent artist conceals the structural dependencies on tools, platforms, and infrastructures that are often inaccessible, particularly in peripheral cultural contexts like Lille. Sagitto's testimony adds another dimension to this conversation by emphasizing economic necessity as a driver of self-reliance. The lack of resources and support can motivate to take matters into your own hands:

> *"J'ai commencé à monter mes clips, à faire mes prods, à faire mes mix, parce que j'avais pas d'argent pour aller au studio… Le mieux c'est de tout faire soi-même, comme ça t'as vraiment ta patte de A à Z."*

This Do-It-Yourself approach echoes what Hesmondhalgh (2011, p.27-28) and Oakley (2013) both described as the burden of multi-skilling in cultural industries: creative workers, here, artists are increasingly constrained, if not expected, to develop a diverse skillset to reduce their production costs and maintain relevance. While this allows for further control over creative outputs, it can also be considered as a shift in risk allocation from institutions to individuals, following basic neoliberal labour dynamics. Sagitto's framing of self-production as the "best" approach illustrates how these logics may become internalized, even valorised, under economic pressure. At the end of the day, the path of independence remains a choice that is both grounded in the artists' agency, their available resources and skillset, as well as the lack of other possibilities.

Together, these testimonies defy romanticized narratives on being and independent

artists by revealing how structural constraints, lack of institutional support, limited access to capital, and systemic precarity, are integral to the experience of being independent. Rather than providing complete freedom, independence often seems implies a heavier burden of self-management and taking risks. This aligns with the critique of platform capitalism, in which autonomy is commodified and sold back to users who are simultaneously exposed to increased forms of insecurity and invisible labour. Artists pay in order to release their music on their own terms, but these terms are rapidly confined within the limits of precarity.

In the context of Lille, this double-edged independence is shaped not only by digital infrastructures but also by the limitations, and opportunities of the local creative scene. Unlike artists in Paris or London, interviewees in this study often had limited access to labels, public funding, or professional studios. As a result, they were compelled to adopt an independent posture that was as much about survival as it was about self-expression. Independence thus emerges not as a clear-cut status but as a contingent, negotiated practice, a way of practicing and creating that is as much about coping with structural pressures, as it is about asserting creative freedom.

It is also worth noting that the theme of independence intersects with emotional and affective dimensions of labour. Several artists described the fatigue and doubt that come with having to "do everything," often without guidance, validation, or support. This supports the idea, explored by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), that emotional labour is central to contemporary cultural production. Artists need to manage their career and account for their aspirations, failures, and artistic identities in a environment that constantly demands visibility, productivity, and reinvention. In sum, the theme of independence highlights the complex interplay between autonomy and constraint in the lives of Lille's independent hip-hop and RnB artists. Far from a purely liberating condition, independence entails a heavy load of economic, logistical, and emotional responsibilities that are hard to bear alone, as a young emerging artist. It represents a form of labour shaped by structural exclusions, platform logics, and local limitations, yet it also serves as a site of creative identity, resilience, pride, and ownership. As the rest of the findings will further illustrate, this double-edged experience of independence is emblematic of broader transformations in the platformized music economy, where the ideals of self-made success coexist with deepening forms of precarity and individualization. Additionally, there is a clear paradox between self-made success and collective labour, in which external agents needed and paid by independent artists such as engineers, beatmakers, instrumentists, graphic designers,

videographers, are not always considered in one's success.

4.2 Algorithmic Logics and Strategic Navigation

A second key theme that emerged from the interviews was the pervasive, yet opaque influence of algorithms embedded in streaming services and social media platforms, namely Spotify, TikTok and Instagram. While none of the artists claimed to fully grasp how these algorithms work, they all were very aware of their impact in shaping visibility, engagement, and perceived success. Artists are fully aware the algorithm needs to be pleased nowadays, lessening the importance of labels and A&Rs. As such there is this consciousness of needing to learn, understand, read, try to predict the algorithm, and get on its good side.This awareness aligns with, yet again, the concept of algorithmic paranoia (Alacovska et al., 2024, p.7), wherein users feel compelled to anticipate or decode opaque computational processes to optimize their performance within platform ecosystems.

Jeunhom's reflection encapsulates this adaptive strategy:

> "Depuis deux ans, j'essaie de sortir un single tous les deux trois mois… parce que Spotify notamment, maintenant qu'on est dans une société algorithmique, il y a ce truc d'essayer de toujours nourrir l'algorithme malgré nous."

His comment here is particularly representative of the shift from traditional timelines and release cycles to a more accelerated release rhythm, pushed by algorithms. The sentence *"nourrir l'algorithme malgré nous"* suggests a reluctant compliance, echoing Duffy and Meisner's (2017, p.299) notions of platform labour, where creators must engage in continuous production and strategic optimization in order to remain visible, even if it is not the most desired practice. The algorithm becomes both a constraint and a target, an invisible force to be pleased, fed, and feared.

The phenomenon in which users employ speculative tactics to optimize their interactions with algorithmic systems, such as adjusting posting times, frequency of releases, metadata, and engagement strategies without fully understanding the underlying mechanisms, is way to cope with the pressures of the "sinister algorithm" (Alacovska et al., 2024, p.7). Whilst the algorithm's intended purpose is promoting content, it is often perceived as unpredictable and constantly evolving. As a result, users have normalized the practice of speculation and blind testing as strategies to navigate algorithmic systems. For Jeunhom and others, maintaining a consistent release schedule is not solely a creative decision but a strategic response to algorithmic structures that prioritize newness, consistency, and virality.

Beyond content timing, artists also discussed how platform infrastructures impact decisions around distribution and monetization. Nessy described her evolving relationship with digital distributors:

> "Aujourd'hui, pour faire de la musique tu dois tout payer, que ce soit ton matos… les plateformes encore une fois… j'utilisais DistroKid, maintenant j'utilise Ditto."

Nessy's quote highlights the direct costs involved in accessing and navigating digital platforms. Unlike major-label artists who may benefit from institutional distribution channels, independent musicians must make strategic decisions about which distributor to use, often based on pricing models, revenue share, playlisting opportunities, or even customer support. These choices are entangled with broader economic strategies, underscoring the entrepreneurial rationality that platform capitalism demands from cultural workers (Duffy & Meisner, 2022, p.300). Choosing the wrong distributor may affect potential playlisting, access to metric and data, and even workflow. Cheeks's testimony illustrates another facet of this logic, the hybrid nature of production processes that mix formal and informal labor:

> "J'envoie à mon ingé son. Après, on décide un peu de la DA… On ouvre le studio, on enregistre ça en cabine propre… Les beatmakers, souvent, je leur achète la prod en exclu."

Cheeks' workflow exemplifies the fragmented and distributed nature of contemporary music production. While his process involves standard industry roles (sound engineer, studio time, beatmakers), he remains flexible, coordinating project-based relationships, that reflect characteristics of a gig economy based on available, (Alacovska et al., 2024, p.13). Additionally, it also showcases the need for artists to have a community network, in order to ease their production process through collaboration and servicing. Artists must assemble ad hoc teams for each release, often relying on peer networks and informal economies. The purchase of beats "en exclu" (in cash, often without contracts) further points to how artists navigate both platformized and extra-platformized economies, simultaneously embedded in formal infrastructures and peripheral, relational systems, as these beats are widely hosted on platforms like YouTube and Beatstar.

Collectively, these different narratives reveal a lot on the way artists exercise and practice their creative agencies in the platform age. Decisions are no longer purely aesthetic, but every step, from when to release a track, to which distributor to use, or which metadata

to attach, is conditioned by the invisible logic of algorithms and platform affordances. Digital infrastructures are actively extracting value from everyday cultural and creativepractices and reconfiguring power relations, where their own platform logics dictate, conform and commodify creative practices. This dynamic shows how digital infrastructures extract value from everyday cultural and creative practices while reconfiguring power relations (Prey, 2020, p.3). Although artists retain control over their music, the underlying systems through which they circulate are governed by extractive logics.

Notably, while artists widely acknowledge algorithmic logics, they also showcase partial resistance or nuanced engagement. For instance, no interviewee expressed fully trusting in algorithmic mechanisms; instead, they operated through trial and error, observation, and collective knowledge-sharing, and would even take the risk sometimes, of following their gut feeling. In this sense, artists are not passive recipients of platform norms but agents navigating a field of uncertainty, where multiple paths can be followed. This strategic engagement is sometimes reluctant, sometimes experimental, but always situated in the broader pressures of visibility, competition, and the scarcity of resources and opportunities. Moreover, the strategic navigation of platform systems is embedded in emotional and psychological labour. The obligation to constantly release content, monitor metrics, and perform digital relevance generates an ambient sense of fatigue and precarity, themes explored in greater detail in the section on affective pressures. This aligns with Duffy's (2015) framing of "aspirational labour" in the digital creative industries, where the pursuit of success is tied to continual output, branding, and hustle, often without guaranteed return.

In summary, the interviews illustrate that platform logics and governance are not experienced as an abstract technical system, but as a lived reality that permeates creative, economic, and relational dimensions of artistic practice both on and off platforms. The artists' testimonies reflect a growing awareness of how platform infrastructures shape their very careers, from the frequency of releases to decisions about distribution and collaboration. While nobody seems to fully understand the inner workings of these algorithms, they have developed adaptive strategies that seek to navigate and sometimes subvert their logics. These strategies are only symptoms of a broader transformation in cultural production under digital capitalism, where the lines between artistic creativity, technical management, and speculative labour are increasingly blurred.

4.3 Creative Practice: Solitude and Collaboration

 The third key theme that was uncovered concerns the different creative practices employed by independent hip-hop and RnB artists in Lille. The interviews revealed that artistic production is shaped according to individual motivations, but also by access to infrastructures, collaborative community networks, and material or financial resources. Lots of artists seemed to favour introspection and being solitary in their creative process whilst others described their work as intrinsically relational and collective. These different modes of practice represent a contrast about digital creativity: even in a platformized context, music-making remains very hybrid. Peter Cheeky offered a particularly vivid image of solitude in his creative process:

> "Je fais ça chez moi. Comme un ermite… Rec, je fais chez moi, solo. J'écoute mes prods solo… Je le fais écouter à mes potes. Ça marche, ça marche pas."

His self-description as a "hermit" captures the introspective and sometimes isolating character of DIY production. Peter Cheeky prefers working from home, without studio access or immediate collaborators, and relies on his own intuition before asking for peer feedback. This practice exemplifies what Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p.394) describe as the individualization of cultural labour, where creators often work alone, managing all aspects of production with limited external input or institutional support, and therefore being at risk of creating a self-exploiting environment. This solitary mode is both a pragmatic response to resource constraints and artistic expression.

At the same time, Peter's method still involves minimal yet critical points of social feedback, *"je le fais écouter à mes potes"*, which highlights how even the solitary practice of producing music remains linked to informal social circuits, rather they be friends or fellow artists. The binary between solitary and collaborative work is therefore less absolute than it appears; rather, it is better understood as a spectrum of engagement mediated by material, affective, and spatial conditions.

In contrast, Jeunhom described a highly collective, improvisational, and spontaneous approach to songwriting:

> "On est à plusieurs dans une pièce et on s'échange des phrases… Le morceau en fait c'est ça. Peu importe qui l'a écrit, peu importe qui la chante."

In Jeunhom's case, creation is relational and co-constructed, with blurred authorship and

shared ownership. Jeunhom's practice follows a creative process in which artistic production emerges from interaction, working on music together and experimenting collectively .The fact that authorship is treated as secondary, *"peu importe qui l'a écrit"* disrupts normative ideas of the lone genius or the individualized brand that are often reinforced by platform cultures.

This collaborative dynamic also contrasts with the competitive individualism typically promoted by streaming platforms, where visibility is algorithmically tied to personal metrics, branding, and audience analytics. In this sense, Jeunhom's process enacts a form of resistance to platform logic, privileging communal engagement and creative fusion over proprietary authorship. A third variation was offered by EmiSounds, who described a sort of "patchwork" composition:

> "Je compose des morceaux de textes, et je me dis que ça va aller bien avec celui-là, ça va bien aller ensemble. C'est comme ça que j'écris."

Her process blend's structure and spontaneity, assembling fragments, influences, and moods into a cohesive artistic expression. Rather than beginning with a fixed narrative or sonic vision, EmiSounds constructs meaning through associative layering and modular assembly. This reflects a growing trend among digital artists who work through different and multiple devices, platforms, and genre boundaries, using whatever tools and resources are available to them.

It is important to note that these three creative practices we just described, solitary, collaborative, and hybrid, are not simply artistic choices but responses to social and material conditions. As many interviewees noted, access to professional studios, time, collaborators, or even community spaces is unevenly distributed. This is why independent artists often improvise with infrastructure, making do with what is accessible while maintaining their artistic identity. Here, questions of creative practice are inseparable from questions of labour, space, precarity, and accessibility. Additionally, the interplay between solitude and collaboration underscores a tension in contemporary cultural labour. On one hand, it seems platforms valorise the entrepreneurial figure that produces, promotes, distributes content alone. Whilst on the other hand, meaningful artistic work seems to rely on a certain sense of relational labour, through collaboration, and feedback that cannot be captured by algorithmic metrics or platform interfaces. The collective writing described by Jeunhom, for instance, exists outside of the platform, and is grounded in creative and cultural moments, human

interactions, which are elements that platforms tend to erase.

At the same time, collaborative environments are not free of any tensions. While some artists have the benefit to work in tight-knit local networks, others have a harder time achieving collaborations because of logistical or interpersonal constraints. This ambivalence reflects a certain inequality in industry and creative connections, a sense of solitude in local music scenes, where community ties are both essential and fragile, often undermined by competition, lack of funding, or uneven access to visibility. Moreover, the spatial and emotional dimensions of creation emerged as crucial across all modalities. For some, solitude enabled deeper introspection; for others, it created feelings of alienation. For those who favoured collaboration, the physical co-presence of others was often described as energizing, playful, and motivating. These affective dynamics remind us that creativity is not only a rational or strategic process but also an emotional and embodied one. In sum, the interviews demonstrate that creative practice among Lille's artistic scene is diverse, situated, and shaped by a complex interplay of individual disposition, local infrastructure and platform incentives. Whether operating as solo producers, collaborative teams, or hybrid experimenters, these artists navigate a constantly shifting terrain where the conditions of production are as important as the outputs themselves. In doing so, they reveal how cultural production under platform capitalism remains deeply human, grounded in emotion, improvisation, and social connection, even as it is shaped by digital infrastructures and algorithmic imperatives.

4.4 Affective and Psychological Pressures

One unexpected recurring theme in the interviews was the emotional and psychological toll of being an independent artist, especially in an increasingly digitalized and platformized society. While much scholarly and popular discourse around digital platforms focuses on structural or economic dynamics, the lived experiences of artists foreground affective labour as a central, if often invisible, dimension of cultural production. Interviewees articulated feelings of doubt, loneliness, exhaustion, and frustration, all of which are exacerbated by the pressures of visibility, self-promotion, and algorithmic optimization. Nakré provided a particularly telling account of emotional strain:

> "Le plus gros problème de l'indépendance... c'était le sentiment d'être seul… Parce que tu réfléchis d'une manière qui est toujours à apporter la chose envers toi et

comment la faire le plus facilement possible et sans argent."

His words encapsulate how the so-called "freedom" of independence can mask a more lonesome reality, where the artist becomes the only one responsible for all aspects of their career without the support of a team, label, or manager. The sense of solitude Nakré describes is not just logistical, but a condition marked by anxiety, over-responsibilization, and a perpetual search for workable solutions under material limitations. We could argue these effects are larger consequences of a certain type of alienation, that whilst present in traditional capitalism, may be exacerbated through platform capitalism.

This resonates with Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011, p.383-384) description of an affective link to our work that can be detrimental, especially in cultural industries, where emotional resilience, self-motivation, and enthusiasm are not only desirable but required. In the absence of institutional stability or long-term security, artists must continually manage their own emotional states while projecting confidence, consistency, and engagement to audiences and collaborators. Emotional labour therefore becomes part of the job, invisible, unpaid, and often unrecognized, as it is based on the self-exploitative nature of working your passion.

Peter Cheeky also reflected on the affective dimensions of creative self-perception:

> "Avant je me voyais juste comme le pote qui rappe… Là récemment, j'ai commencé à capter que j'étais dans une bulle avec des gens, que je fais quelque chose… conscientiser le fait que je sors des trucs et qu'il faut que ça marche."

Here, artistic identity is not static but is developed through one's carrer, but more importantly one's validation from peers. Peter's shift from casual self-understanding (*"le pote qui rappe"*) to a more professional self-awareness (*"faut que ça marche"*) illustrates the psychological work of internalizing external expectations. This transformation is not just about setting goals or developing ambition, it is about negotiating between personal passion and external metrics of success, such as streams, likes, and algorithmic performance.

The phrase *"il faut que ça marche"* ("it has to work") encapsulates the pressure to succeed within a system that offers limited guarantees, reinforcing the paradox at the heart of platform labour: while platforms offer access to visibility and monetization, they also produce new forms of precarious aspiration. As Duffy and Meisner (2022, p.289) argue, digital creators operate under the imperative to be always visible, constantly performing

relevance and productivity, even in the face of burnout or limited reward.

Tensito further articulated the emotional effects of institutional invisibility:

> "Je trouve que c'est dommage… le fait qu'on soit obligé d'être valorisé que par les majors pour être visibles… on devrait pouvoir exister sans eux."

His critique targets a broader structural reality: despite the democratizing promises of streaming platforms, many independent artists remain dependent on traditional gatekeepers, labels, major media, industry curators, to gain significant visibility. Whilst some thought platforms would replace these gatekeepers, it turns out labels are increasingly dependent on platforms, in order to judge one's success through on platform success, virality and metrics. The feeling of marginalization persists, and with it comes frustration, disillusionment, and the sense of being caught in a system that offers exposure but not necessarily propers recognition or sustainable reward.

Tensito faces the gap between the promise of digital cultural participation and the actual constraints imposed by algorithmic governance, opaque monetization schemes, and structural inequities. In this sense, emotional fatigue is not simply a personal issue but a symptom of deeper systemic pressures. Moreover, many of the emotional experiences described by artists cannot be separated from their economic conditions. As Nakré's comment highlights, the absence of financial resources magnifies the emotional burden: *"comment la faire le plus facilement possible et sans argent."* Financial precarity, having to juggle jobs, pay for production costs, or invest in promotion, intersects with emotional labour, reinforcing cycles of stress, overwork, and diminished well-being. Cultural labourers often internalize the risks and responsibilities of their careers, blurring the line between passion and exploitation (2011, p.383-384). Crucially, these affective pressures are also intensified by the metrics-based culture of digital platforms. Visibility is algorithmically mediated, and validation often takes the form of data: stream counts, followers, likes, or playlist placements. With success rendered a numerical performance, it is easy for artists to experience a disconnect between artistic integrity and platform-defined success. As some interviewees hinted, this creates a certain emotional ambivalence, the tension between making music for yourself versus for the algorithm, audience, or industry stakeholders.

At the same time, creative emotional labour is not uniformly negative or exhausting. Peter Cheeky's quote also reveals a sense of pride and growth in his evolving self-perception. While affective pressures can produce anxiety and fatigue, they can also generate

motivation, self-awareness, and resilience. Cultural labour under platform capitalism is affectively ambivalent: it involves both joy and struggle, empowerment and vulnerability, self-expression and discipline. What emerges, then, is a more nuanced understanding of artistic labour, one that foregrounds the psychological and emotional dimensions of independent music-making in an era of digital saturation and economic instability. The loneliness described by Nakré, the shift in self-image experienced by Peter Cheeky, and the frustration articulated by Tensito are not isolated sentiments but shared conditions in a broader ecology of platform labour. Affective, psychological pressures are therefore central, not peripheral to the lived realities of Lille independent artis. Far from the romanticized myth of autonomous creators, artists must evolve in an environment in which success is highly uncertain, labour is intensified, and recognition is limited. Their testimonies point to the need for more critical attention to the emotional costs of platformization, particularly for those working outside traditional industry support structures.

4.5 Locality and the Role of Lille's Music Scene

In contrast to the dominant narrative of a borderless digital economy, in which artists can supposedly bypass geographic constraints and access a global audience through platforms, the interviews revealed that local dynamics still constitute a crucial mediating role in the careers and practices of independent hip-hop and RnB artists in Lille. Rather than being rendered obsolete by digital infrastructures, local scenes, physical spaces, and peer communities remain vital sites of identity formation, collaboration, emotional support, and performance opportunity. G2N captured the ambivalent position of Lille as a mid-sized city:

> "C'est pas une grande ville comme Paris… mais c'est pas une toute petite ville non plus. Donc ouais, t'as une communauté, mais t'as pas tout."

G2N in his statement showcases Lille as what we could describe as an intermediate urbanity, a location that is neither peripheral nor central in the national or international cultural hierarchy. Lille offers some resources, venues, and community support, but it lacks the concentration of industry institutions, media visibility, and networking opportunities that characterize larger cultural capitals like Paris. In that sense, artists in Lille must negotiate their local embeddedness and leverage local opportunities while simultaneously aspiring to extend their reach beyond the city's borders.

G2N's point is echoed by Coehn (2012, p.134) who argues that local music scenes are not simply scaled-down versions of global industries but possess unique rhythms,

infrastructures, and symbolic economies. In cities like Lille, where cultural resources are present but unevenly distributed, artists rely heavily on informal networks and grassroots infrastructures to sustain their practices. These scenes are often shaped by personal relationships, collective memory, and situated knowledge that cannot be easily replicated online. Tensito, for example, described his efforts to cultivate local infrastructures through event organizing:

> "À côté de ça, j'organise des events… pour que tout le monde puisse vraiment kiffer et vivre de son art au moins le temps d'un moment."

His words signal an important form of cultural labour that extends beyond music-making into scene-building. Organizing events is not just a logistical task, but an effective strategy aimed at sustaining and fostering a sense of community, offering opportunities and amassing symbolic capital. By creating spaces for artists to be seen and heard outside of algorithmically mediated platforms, local events offer alternative circuits of recognition and reward. This emphasizes how cultural producers generate social and symbolic value through relational practices and community participation. Tensito's work exemplifies a form of cultural entrepreneurship that resists the individualizing logics of the platform economy, instead foregrounding collective experience and local visibility, fostering value beyond capital, and making a name for himself as an artist, and cultural worker in general.

At the same time, while platforms offer the promise of scale, many artists reported that success on streaming services often requires prior recognition or co-signs from centralized industry actors. As such, the local scene operates as both an incubator and a constraint. It can provide the emotional and creative support necessary to develop a practice, but it may also lack the infrastructure to convert that practice into sustainable income or broader recognition. The friction between local authenticity and digital aspiration is further complicated by the ways in which algorithms tend to obscure geographical origins. As Prey (2020, p.6) notes, music platforms increasingly treat content as placeless, sorted, and recommended based on genre, tempo, or mood rather than regional identity. This abstraction erodes the visibility of locality unless artists explicitly foreground their place of origin, a strategy that is not always viable or desirable in platformized circulation.

Nevertheless, for the artists have interviewed, Lille remains more than just a geographic location, but a space of meaning, community networks, and creative exchange. Jeunhom emphasized how proximity to collaborators, studios, and audiences enabled

informal creative processes and mutual learning, suggesting that even in an era of digital collaboration, face-to-face interaction retains its value. Similarly, EmiSounds, Sagitto and Peter Cheeky, noted that peer feedback and local recognition often provide more meaningful validation than metrics such as likes or streams. Having people pulling up to their performances and showing recognition in real life is more valuable. Most importantly, artist's spoke of Lille not as a market but as a scene, a community, a highly creative environment beyond music, that is marked by shared experiences, regional identity, and situated similar struggles. This resonates with Kruse (2010, p.628-629) argument that music scenes are shaped by cultural economies of place, where affect, memory, and identity are deeply implemented into the practices of production and circulation of art. Moreover, while platforms operate through datafication, metrics, and recommendation systems, the local scene operates through presence, recognition, and relational exchange. As such, it offers not just economic or promotional value but emotional and symbolic capital. For independent artists whose work is precarious, underfunded, and often invisible to national media or major labels, local scenes can serve as crucial sites of resilience, establishment and career builing.

Lille is not simply the backdrop of these artists' careers but an active agent in shaping their practices, identities, and opportunities. The city's intermediate status offers both flexibility and limitation, enough infrastructure to foster experimentation, but not enough to guarantee progression. As a result, artists must continually negotiate the interplay between local embeddedness and digital aspiration, carving out hybrid strategies that draw on both place-based and platform-based logics. In sum, the findings demonstrate that locality remains a central dimension of cultural production in the platform era. While digital infrastructures promise disintermediation and global reach, the lived experiences of Lille's independent artists underscore the enduring importance of place-based communities, scenes, and resources. Locality not only shapes access to infrastructure and visibility but also mediates the affective and symbolic dimensions of creative work. It offers an alternative value system that stands in contrast to, and sometimes in tension with, the algorithmic metrics of platform capitalism.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore how the platformization of the music industry impacts the cultural production processes of independent hip-hop and RnB artists in Lille. Through a qualitative, bottom-up approach, this study provided insights into the lived experiences, creative practices, and professional trajectories of twelve independent artists as they navigate

a music industry increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures and algorithmic governance. By answering the research question "how does the platformization of the music industry shape the cultural production processes and strategies of independent urban music artists in Lille?" this research shows that platformization fundamentally reorganizes not only how artists disseminate their work, but also how they create, relate to audiences, and sustain their careers. Far from being passive recipients of platform logics, these artists display a range of strategic and affective responses, constantly balancing visibility with autonomy, and scalability with authenticity, whilst fighting back against financial pressures, rather it be from their music like Zéphir and Cheeks, or by maintaining a part time job like Peter Cheeky.

From a media studies perspective, this analysis highlights the governing power of platforms in shaping not only distribution and monetization, but also creative decisions, artistic expression, work rhythms, and off platform strategies, not in a direct manner, but through the exploitative process of platform labour. Algorithms within platforms do not merely sort content; they act as invisible curators, subtly directing how artists must perform, share, and even sometimes feel their art. The convergence of music platforms with social media platforms creates a hyper-mediated space where metrics and engagement become inseparable from artistic identity and branding. As such, this study underscores the reality that cultural production in the platformized era is deeply entangled with infrastructure: digital tools offer access and reach, but also delimit what is seen, how value is measured and appointed, and whose voices are elevated, or made invisible. Now let us assess, through a deeper examination of the empirical findings, how algorithmic governance, socio-digital visibility, and platform-dependent labour converge to structure not only how music is made and shared, but also how artists perceive their own autonomy, sustainability, and cultural role in such a platformized music economy.

The findings presented here confirm that platformization reshapes the cultural production process in a complex and multifaceted manner. Firstly, independence is described as dual in nature. Digital platforms in the likes of Spotify, YouTube or Instagram offer artists unprecedented access to audiences, enabling them to bypass traditional industry gatekeepers and exert greater control and autonomy over their production and distribution process. Whilst they benefit from the democratizing potential of digital platforms, independent artists are also burdened by the challenges of managing their own careers in a market-driven, algorithmic system. The so-called autonomy is often celebrated in disclosure

around "DIY" culture and creative entrepreneurship. Artists must not only create music but also market, analyse data, produce content, with little to no institutional support. As clarified in the interviews, there is a recurring and ongoing tension between independence, precarity, emotional strain and self-responsabilization; while autonomy allows for creative freedom, it also imposes significant emotional, logistical, and financial pressures. As such, the model of independence within the platformized music industry is far from utopian and is instead a double-edged sword (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). The "freelancer" ideal is romanticized in creative and cultural industries, masking exploitative working conditions and blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Similarly, as highlighted in Van Dijck et al. (2018) and Poell et al. (2017), platforms do tend to shift the burdens of risk, visibility, and engagement onto individual creators. The interviewed artists confirmed such claims: whilst the offer of visibility is a guarantee, platforms also demand continuous activity and responsiveness, fostering an always working culture that can be emotionally and psychologically draining. This complexity underscores the importance of reconsidering the meaning of "independence" in the context of digital capitalism, where the boundaries between autonomy and exploitation reside often blurred.

A key contribution of this study lies in its focus on algorithmic governance and the strategic adaptations that independent artists employ to survive within platform logics. While many scholars, including Bucher (2018) and Prey (2020), have explored the abstract nature of algorithmic control, the interviews conducted in this research provide a grounded view of how these digital structures are lived and negotiated. Interviewees described how opaque, dynamic algorithms influence their choices around when and how to release content, which formats to use, and even sometimes what types of music to produce. Decisions on which strategies to adopt, such as timing releases for optimal visibility, tailoring songs for playlistability and monitoring audience data, are crucial in creative production. Independent artists are in a constant process of negotiation between artistic self-expression and maximizing success, engaging with platforms, understanding and responding to logics, in a state of "algorithmic insecurity". (Alacovska et al. 2024, p.3)

The artists' efforts to align their creative outputs with algorithmic demands, through frequent releases, platform selection, and data-driven decisions, highlight the ways in which platformization reshapes not only the visibility and circulation of music, but also the creative process itself. This represents a form of speculative labour in which artists constantly optimize and adapt their outputs pre-emptively, in response to opaque algorithmic rules,

revealing how digital platforms impose a hidden but pervasive form of labour on independent creators. Our conducted interviewees provided a grounder empirical illustration of these dynamics, confirming that algorithms actively reshape the creative process itself.

This restructuring has several implications. Lots of artists reported feeling pressure to prioritize quantity over quality, timeliness over experimentation and trend adherence over risk-taking. However, they react and are impacted differently in response to these pressures. Whilst some considered these constraints as creative challenges, others viewed them as limiting. Some actively resisted platform imperatives, refusing to cater to algorithms or alter their artistic vision, whilst others strategically aligned their content with certain platform trend. This variation illustrates a broader ideological and affective orientation toward platform capitalism: some artists view it as a necessary evil, others as a simple opportunity and others still as a system to be subverted or bypassed.

However, while this research contributes to an understanding of the economic and creative challenges of independent artists, it also raises important questions about resilience and locality in cultural production. As much as platforms such as Spotify promise global visibility, the artists in this study emphasize the continued importance of local networks, collaborations, and regional infrastructures in sustaining their creative and professional lives. Lille's music scene, despite being a lot smaller than metropolitan cultural hubs like Paris, offers opportunities for community-building, peer support, and live performances, all of which act as antidotes to the often-alienating effects of the digital economy. In this sense, locality provides not just a counterpoint to platformization but also an essential resource for emotional and professional survival in a precarious digital market. Being locally embedded does not only provide material support but also enables artists to cultivate their identity and audiences in a more organic way, that is not entirely mediated by digital platforms. This reaffirms the importance of socio-local embeddedness in cultural production, showing that digital platforms alone cannot explain the entirety of an artist's trajectory, nor their success. Locality functions both as a resource, and a site of active resistance, a space where artists can build community and be recognized beyond platforms and algorithms.

Importantly, one recurring theme that emerged across interviews but was not explored in depth within the scope of this thesis, nor anticipated in the theoretical framework, was mental health. Many artists expressed feelings of anxiety, fatigue, loneliness, or burn out linked to the pressures of self-management and algorithmic visibility. While emotional

labour and psychological strain were acknowledged as components of platformized cultural work, a more sustained engagement with mental health as a structural concern remains an area for future research. Our findings therefore suggest that the affective consequences of platformization deserve greater scholarly attention, particularly as they intersect with creative labour, questions of motivation, identity, and long-term sustainability. The emotional toll of platform governance on creative workers remains underexplored, meaning future research would benefit from situating mental health as a structural concern, rather than an individual failing.

A further methodological clarification is warranted: while the theoretical framework was structured around pre-established concepts such as algorithmic governance, strategic decision-making, and platform capitalism, the themes that emerged in the findings were inductively derived from participants' own narratives. These methodological choices allowed the research to remain empirically grounded in artists lived realities, rather than imposing a top-down interpretive lens. Consequently, some emergent issues such as mental health or local solidarity, exceeded the conceptual categories initially foregrounded in the literature. This reflects both the richness of qualitative inquiry and the importance of allowing participants' voices to guide thematic development, even beyond the boundaries of existing theory.

While the findings presented here are valuable, there are certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of twelve independent artists from a single city, though offering rich insights, limit the broader applicability of the conclusions drawn. A more diverse sample across genres, regions, and even countries could shed light on how these dynamics play out in different cultural, economic, and social contexts. Similarly, the focus on hip-hop and RnB, while pertinent to this study because of the importance of DIY culture in these genres, may obscure variations within other musical genres. Future research might benefit from examining how platformization affects other forms of independent music production, perhaps with a focus on genres like electronic music, folk, or indie rock, which may face different challenges and opportunities in the platformized ecosystem. Whilst this research was consciously focusing on depth, future research could adopt comparative approach, for instance comparing electronic musicians or DJs in Berlin, and cross-national comparisons that could shed light on how state support systems, cultural policies or platform regulation shape the dynamics of independent music production.

Another limitation arises from the methodology itself. While the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth conversations with artists, the reliance on self-reporting can introduce biases or subjectivity into the findings. Artists may be motivated to present themselves in particular ways, especially in relation to their successes or struggles. Future studies could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative data on streaming metrics, revenue models, and social media engagement, to triangulate findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of how platformization shapes cultural production.

Moreover, while this study focused on the economic and creative aspects of platformization, it did not extensively explore the cultural politics and implications of algorithmic governance. Important questions remain about how visibility mechanisms influence not just which artist succeed, but what kinds of music are produced, circulated, and consumed. Does algorithmic curation reinforce dominant genre or marginalizes alternative or underrepresented voices? How do race, gender and class intersect with platform logics to shape the access to cultural capital? Addressing these questions would provide a fuller picture of the cultural politics of platformization and its potential to reinforce or challenge existing power structures in the music industry.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that the platformization of the music industry has profound implications for the cultural production processes of independent artists. Our research reveals the tensions which are inherent in being an independent artist today: balancing between freedom and precarity, visibility and exhaustion, global reach, and local grounding. While platforms provide new opportunities for exposure and control, they also create new forms of dependency and economic precarity. Artists must navigate a complex terrain of algorithmic governance, digital labour, and emotional investment, often operating within a paradoxical space of both autonomy and constraint. The experience of independence in the platformized music industry is thus not a straightforward narrative of liberation but rather one of constant negotiation, adaptation, and resilience.

As the digital revolution was seen as a liberating force for musicians, breaking down traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and enabling artists to reach audiences from their bedrooms, popular discourse around digital platforms often celebrates a narrative of democratization and increased accessibility. These platforms have been framed as tools that

empower independent artists to bypass labels, retain ownership, and build careers on their own terms. But as shown by this thesis, the reality is darker than that. We are faced here with a striking paradox: the very platforms that promise autonomy, are also imposing new forms of control and authority. Artists today now operate within an ecosystem where visibility is contingent on alignment with algorithmic logics, where the pace of production is metric and data driven and where the burden of self-management has replaced the burden of accessing traditional gatekeepers. The pseudo freedom that DSPs claim to offer to independent artists, also pressures them to multiply their roles and competencies. Artists must be content creators, brand strategists, data analysts and community managers all at one. They must perform productivity, consistency, and emotional engagement not just through music, their craft, but across many channels that platform capitalism demands. In that sense, independence is reframed, drifting away from a form of freedom from the system, but getting closer to a form of survival within it.

This aligns with a broader shift in cultural labour; artists today are not only cultural producers but digital workers, embedded in a system that externalizes risk and internalizes responsibility. As it has already been tackled in academia, cultural and creative industries have masked exploitation that is covered by the lenses of passion, freedom, and authenticity. Platform economy extends these dynamics further by normalizing precarity under the guise of opportunity. Artists are encouraged to hustle harder, post more often, stay visible and relevant. When visibility becomes a form of currency, artists are incentivized to curate not just their work but their very self.

This leads to the most unsettling and unpredicted finding from this study: the emotional and mental toll of platformization. Many of the artists interviewed described a certain sense of fatigue and anxiety, coming from the relentless demands of platform presence. Always needing to be online creates a blurring of personal and professional life, where downtime feels like lost engagement, and silence like invisibility. With the uncertainty of algorithmic logic, and success being determined by these systems, artists are constantly trying to anticipate and appease ever changing algorithms that they do not always understand, hoping that the next release will catch the right wave and open the right doors.

Yet, this research also revealed the resistance, agency, and care that artist showcase. Lots are still refusing to adapt their music to algorithmic trends but rather invest in the local scene, prioritizing their community over a potential virality. This is why the importance of

locality in the context of this research cannot be overlooked. With a digital world catered to global scale, local embeddedness offers grounding, both artistically and professionally. For Lille artists, community events, regional collaborations and in-person interactions serve as drivers against the alienation of the digital platform economy. Local networks provide support systems, creative exchange and recognition that is not algorithmically mediated, but organic, and perhaps more intimate. These spaces, no matter how big or small they may be, serve as sites of active resilience and resistance.

What became clear is that artists are not merely subjects of digital infrastructure, but interpreters, navigators and often critics. With their response ranging from strategic compliance to open refusal, there are diverse set of reactions towards platform capitalism, with some leveraging their opportunities, whilst other see it as a necessary evil. Some try to build alternative pathways outside of it altogether, prioritizing live performances. This diversity of responses breaks the binary of empowerment versus exploitation, by suggesting that artists, as creative workers, can be both empowered and exploited no matter their status, nor the array of strategies they tend to follow.

At the same time, this thesis urges scholars and policymakers to seriously take into account the affective dimensions of platformized work, rather it be creative or not. Mental health cannot be understood as merely a personal issue here, as it seems to be a structural outcome of conditions under which cultural labour takes place. The pressures to remain visible, relevant, trendy and engaged are not just incidental to the platform logic but are core to it. Any discussions on the future of creative, sustainable work must go beyond monetization models and algorithmic transparency. If platforms are to remain viable spaces for independent culture, they must be held accountable for the working conditions they produce, rather it be through internal policy changes, or national and international bodies policymaking.

In addition, our findings question the cultural politics of algorithmic curation. Who gets to be made visible and under what terms? What kinds of music are pushed to the top and which are shadowed? How do race, gender, class and locality intersect with platform logics in shaping artistic success or failure? Whilst these questions remained underexplored in this thesis, they remain crucial. As streaming platforms become dominant for cultural circulation, their curation practices have overreaching effects on what kinds of music become norm and which stories are heard. The risk is, if it is not already happening, that

platforms reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to disrupt.

The myth of independence in the platform era needs to be re-evaluated. As we have seen the tools may have changed, but the dynamics of power, visibility and labour remain deeply uneven, exploitative. What we need is not just more access to platforms, but more critical awareness of how they shape culture and creative life. We need models of support, financial, communal that enable artists to thrive beyond metrics and virality. We do not need platforms that undermined and underpays small artists. This research underscores the importance of a multidimensional understanding of cultural labour in the platform age, one that captures the affective, strategic, and material dimensions of artists' work. It highlights the need for further inquiry into how platformization intersects with creative labour across diverse artistic practices, and how local socio-cultural contexts mediate these dynamics. In an increasingly centralized digital economy shaped by dominant platforms, it is crucial to critically examine how independent artists not only adapt to but also resist and reshape these structures through collective action, community engagement, and cultural resilience. Ultimately, platformization gives rise to a hybrid form of cultural labour, one that merges creative autonomy with algorithmic and economic constraints, redefining what it means to be an independent artist in the contemporary music industry.

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Appendix A

Sample overview

Name	Gender Identity	Genre(s)	Key Characteristics / Themes	Location
Denis StClair	Trans woman	Rap	Former percussionist; independent production and branding	Lille
Nessy	Female	RnB, Neo-Soul	Emotional themes; mental health; led Es'pera (hip-hop/politics/media org)	Lille
G2N	Male	Rap	Ex-Paris; member of Es'Pera; social commentary	Paris → Lille
Sagitto	Male	Alternative Rap, Electronic	Full autonomy: production, DJing, visuals	Lille
Jeunho m	Male	Rap, Indie-Pop	Melodic style; active online and locally	Lille
Nakré	Male	Rap, RnB	Moroccan background; authenticity vs visibility tension	Lille
Peter Cheeky	Male	Rap	Focus on community; team collaboration; visibility challenges	Lille
EmiSou nds	Female	Soul, RnB	Vocal-driven; music student; inspired by Amy Winehouse	Lille
Cheeks	Male	Rap, Electronic (DnB)	Live performance focus; Spotify/SoundCloud strategies	Lille
Zéphir	Male	Rap, Trap	Franco-Gabonese; financial strain vs artistic control; niche music	Gabon → France (Lille-based)
Tensito	Male	Rap, Rnb, Afrobeats	Frequent content release; inspired by local scene	Lille
Cooks	Female	Rap, RnB, variété française	Recently started platform distribution; singer-songwriter	Lille

Appendix B

Coding Framework Thematic Analaysis

Themes	Description	Codes/sub-codes	Quote example
Independence as double-edged condition	While artists cherish the autonomy to control their artistic output and career paths, this independence also brings significant burdens, including self-management, financial risk, and the pressure to sustain constant visibility.	Artist Strategies Marketing Challenges Obstacles to Motivation Structure and Collectives	« je me suis déter de faire un espèce de calendrier de sortie, très très complet, étalé sur plusieurs années, de sortie régulière de singles et de mini-projets »
Algorithmic logics and strategic navigation	Participants described adapting their practices, such as release timing, content format, and social media activity, to align with the opaque and shifting requirements of algorithmic platforms like Spotify, Instagram, and YouTube.	*Algorithmic Pressure* Platformization Effect Artist Strategies Perceived Pressures Social Media Effect	"Plus t'es actif sur les réseaux, plus tu postes, plus l'algorithme va te pousser en avant"
Creative practices shaped by solitude and collaboration	Artists reported working in isolation to maintain control, but also emphasized the importance of collective spaces, peer feedback, and creative alliances, particularly within the local scene.	Creative Processes Structure and Collectives Artist Strategies Obstacles to Motivation	"On est plein d'artistes. On produit, on fait des sons ensemble. On kiffe le moment ensemble. On rigole ensemble."
Affective and psychological pressures	Many participants voiced feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, exhaustion, and emotional labor associated with sustaining their music careers in a hyper-competitive and visibility-driven digital landscape.	**Obstacles to Motivation** Perceived Pressures **Algorithmic Pressure**	" tu puisses recevoir aussi beaucoup de haine, au travers surtout des réseaux sociaux, et t'as beaucoup le regard des gens. Du coup, ta musique, elle peut être influencée par ça, et ta santé mentale aussi »
The continuing importance of locality and regional infrastructures	Despite the global reach of digital platforms, local venues, collectives, friendships, and cultural references remain crucial sources of support, recognition, and creative identity.	Local Scene Effect Structure and Collectives Social Media Effect	« je trouve que c'est plus facile de toucher localement. Les gens, ils viennent te voir sur scène, ils sont intéressés, ils te demandent ce que tu fais et tout."

Appendix C

Semi-structured interview grid

Introductory Section (Building Rapport & Context Setting)

1. Can you start by introducing yourself? What's your artist name, and how would you describe your music?

2. How long have you been making music, and what made you start?

3. What does being an independent artist mean to you?

4. Can you describe your typical process when creating and releasing music?

Section 1: Engagement with Streaming & Digital Platforms (Platformization & Algorithmic Culture)

5. Where do you usually release your music? (e.g., Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, etc.)

6. What are the main reasons you use these platforms? (e.g., reach, visibility, financial gain, community engagement, etc.)

7. How do you feel about how these platforms work in terms of getting your music heard?

8. Have you noticed certain types of songs or strategies work better for getting more streams or exposure? If so, what are they?

9. Have you ever adapted your music, release schedule, or promotional strategies to fit the way these platforms work? Can you give an example?

10. Have you ever tried to understand how the algorithms work? What strategies have you used to increase your visibility?

Section 2: Strategic Decision-Making & Creative Process (Creative Strategy & Algorithmic Pressures)

11. When planning a release, what are the most important factors you consider? (e.g., timing, promotional strategy, featuring artists, etc.)

12. Do you feel like you have creative freedom in your music, or do you feel pressured to adapt to industry trends and platform expectations?

13. Have you ever changed the way you make or release music because of how platforms function?

14. Do you feel that your audience engagement (e.g., streams, likes, comments) affects your artistic decisions?

15. How do you decide which songs to push or promote more?

Section 3: Monetization & Economic Sustainability (Platform Dependency & Financial Realities)

16. Can you describe the different ways you make money from your music? (e.g., streaming revenue, live shows, merch, collaborations, etc.)

17. What role do streaming platforms play in your income? How significant is it compared to other sources?

18. Do you feel like streaming platforms provide fair compensation for your work? Why or why not?

19. Have you ever changed your music strategy to try to make more money from streaming?

20. If streaming payouts were higher, how would that change your career as an artist?

Section 4: Social Networks & Local Scene (Community & Cultural Identity)

21. How connected are you to the hip-hop community in Lille?

22. How does your local scene influence the way you navigate streaming and digital platforms?

23. Do you think there are specific challenges or advantages for independent artists in Lille compared to other places?

24. Do you collaborate with other artists, producers, or managers in the local scene? How does that help you navigate the music industry?

25. How do you balance staying connected to your local audience while also trying to reach a wider audience online?

Section 5: Industry Challenges & Future Perspectives (Cultural Industry & Resistance to Platform Logics)

26. What do you think are the biggest challenges independent artists face today?

27. Do you feel like streaming platforms help or hurt independent artists? Why?

28. Have you found any ways to work around the challenges posed by streaming platforms? (e.g., alternative revenue streams, fan communities, crowdfunding, etc.)

29. If you could change one thing about the way digital platforms work for artists, what would it be?

30. Where do you see yourself in five years in terms of your music career?

Closing & Final Thoughts

31. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience as an independent artist in the streaming era?

32. Do you have any questions for me about this research?

Appendix D

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Lucien Anglade

Student ID: 736478

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050

Supervisor Name: Tim de Winkel Supervisor's Name

Date: 26/06/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).

- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)

- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.

- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)

- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically Atlas.ti and ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: *Lucien Anglade*

Date of Signature: 26/06/2025

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. <u>I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.</u>

AI tools such as Atlas.ti and ChatGPT were used in formatting, translating, summarizing documents during my research process, generating content, and cross checking my initial codes.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: *Lucien Anglade*

Date of Signature: 26/06/2025