Music and Digital Culture

An Exploratory Study of College Students Musical Experience on YouTube

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Abstract: The technological revolution in the recorded music industry since the 1990s is both fundamental and unprecedented. Today, digital music brings in most of the industry's revenue and artists are expected to have an online presence. In this paper, we analyze the changing pattern of online music consumption of 208 digital media users (between the age group of 15 and 35) and the consequent changes in their perception of the artistic enterprise. The study relies on quantitative approach and data collected through survey method (online Questionnaire). Our data aligns with earlier research on the YouTube effect that the introduction of digital streaming services, YouTube in particular, changes users overall musical experience. Also, these changes are multi-directional in nature: while we see a shift in a more traditional 'radio-mode' of music listening on one hand, on the other, we see a more involved and active participation of audiences especially on YouTube. For many users, the visual is inseparable from the audio. This paper opens an avenue for further research into the nature of these new medium and the characteristics of the changes which accompanies them which could help in digital music marketing, branding, production and distribution.

Index Terms - **Digital Culture, Music, Society, YouTube, Consumption, Conception**

I. INTRODUCTION

The technological revolution in the recorded music industry since the 1990s, with the emergence of information and communications technology (ICT) and the Internet, and the even more recent digitization of the services, is fundamental. The introduction of new digital and social media platforms has changed the course of society in various ways, and degraded the relevance of traditional media in some (Kumar, 2021). The gradual media and technological change over the past one hundred years have resulted in what researchers characterizes as a 'post-performance' world (Thibeault, 2012). In the new technological age of media, recording and face-to-face live performance accounts for only a small percentage of an artist's musical experience. According to a report in 2015, digital music brings in 55% of music industry revenue, 20% from physical sales, 15% from television and radio and 10% from public performances (FICCI-KPMG Report, 2015). However, the effects of these technological changes on music and marginalization in the artistic industry is yet to be fully understood. Meanwhile, classical theorists like Theodor Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu identifies the distinction between popular and unpopular music and its sociological connotations, showing their distaste of modern music and its future.

The YouTube effect (including other streaming platforms like Apple Music and Spotify) has changed art and the way people consume, create, and share music. Like the gramophone, record player, cassette tape, CD, and digital audio file, YouTube has affected the musical art form. This can be seen through how people access music videos. On YouTube, music video–related material makes up one of the largest categories of online videos, and they consistently top the site's charts for "most-viewed," "most-popular," and "most-discussed" videos (Edmond, 2014). This unprecedented availability of music content in different formats, potentially impacts not only music production, distribution and reception, but also music discovery, exploration and reception (Airoldi et al., 2016). YouTube in particular is a medium of mass communication which offers both visual and audio contents like television. But what separates it from the traditional medium is its ability to produce instantaneous feedback or interaction from the audiences (through Likes, Comments, Share, etc.) which may influence content production in the future. Edmond (2014) elaborated how music (videos) has become an integral part of YouTube and how it shifts from Television to the internet.

II. THE CHANGING MUSICAL LANDSCAPE

The emergence of information and communications technology (ICT) and the Internet, simultaneously affects both of the competitive advantages of the major players: distribution and promotion. Regarding distribution, the digital revolution is characterized by major improvements in compression, broadband Internet access and storage capacity. As for promotion, ICT and the Internet have given rise to consumer-to-consumer promotion, with automated "recommender systems" (algorithms) and "online word of mouth" (Moreau, 2013). Cayari (2011) discussed the changes that was brought about by the digital revolution in information and communication technologies. She postulated that media had changed from a passive form into a more interactive form; and that these new multimedia forms would allow users to have more control over their consumption of information and media. These new

media also allow art to take on a new form while these new technologies allow art to be consumed, created, and shared like never before.

Edmond (2014) maps the transitional phases of music video culture during the last couple of decades and the changing role of video music for artists, audiences, and record industries in contemporary YouTube era. He elaborated how music (videos) has become an integral part of YouTube and how it shifts from Television to the internet. The new music culture brought by digital aggregates like YouTube is characterized by 'searchable, on-demand nature of Internet browsing'. Figueiredo et al. (2014) investigate what drives the popularity of information on social media platforms highlighting the importance of content in driving information popularity on social media. The explosive popularity of social networking sites has made a huge splash in the lives of musicians and has greatly altered the way marketing teams work towards promoting artists. The success of an artist is no longer measured in how much money they make on their albums or during a tour. Today, artists are expected to have not only a presence in the real world but in the online world as well. Fans are now demanding relationships with their favorite bands because of these social networking sites. Ridder (2013), drawing on a participatory observation in the popular social networking site (SNS) Netlog among Northern Belgium youngsters, stated that new media are heavily used for 'intimate interactions. What artists and labels are beginning to see as the most beneficial means of promotion is in establishing a community around the artist through drawing in listeners and fans via popular social media sites (Stafford, 2010). Liikkanen & Salovaara (2015) traces the dominance of musical content on YouTube and the role of the digital medium in reshaping the music industry by evaluating three studies that focused on YouTube music. They also study the differences in viewing and listening patterns between music and other content genres on one hand and between different types of music videos on the other. They found that users have extensively appropriated YouTube for music use. Lyrics videos were the second most numerous subtype which highlights the importance of user-generated content types in YouTube.

III. DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Existing theories in social science regarding mass communication and interpersonal communication is not enough to interpret the fast-evolving nature of new or digital media which encompasses both the characteristics of the two models (Schroeder, 2017). Digital media have displaced and complement traditional media, especially among younger people. According to Schroeder (2017), new media enable a more differentiated and fine-grained push of media towards audiences, on the one hand, and a scaled-up and more active media engagement by people, on the other. Moreau (2013) analyses the cultural lag faced by major recording companies on the introduction of new technological developments; how digital platforms like Napster, YouTube, Spotify, etc., forced the institutions of music and the companies in re-structuring their business model, reluctantly ('technological discontinuity' or 'disruptive innovation'). He also discussed the process of 'dematerializing' music and the decline of 'star system' which was once an effective strategy of the labels.

Massimo Airoldi et al., (2016) explored the relationship between technology and society in their study of the network of associations among 22,141 YouTube music videos retrieved by 'following' the platform's recommender algorithm, which automatically suggests a list of 'related videos' to the user in response to the video currently being viewed. They proposed the presence of 'crowd-generated music categories' (50) which comprises of clusters of music formulated by the listening habits of YouTube users backed by the company's algorithm. This suggests the interplay of digital technology and human behavior. They also proposed 'situational' category of music which transcends musical genres and incorporates the moods or social situation of the listeners. Daniel (2019) considers the CD as a cultural artefact of the 1990s and a digital and disruptive innovation that laid the platform for a number of additional disruptive technologies in the music industry. Before the digital revolution, radio broadcasting appeared to be a very efficient promotion tool for recorded music. The Decca label reportedly "invented" the "star system" in 1929 by massively broadcasting the works of a few artists from its roster (Moreau, 2013). Now, YouTube seems to carry that role previously enjoyed by the radio forward.

IV. OBJECTIVES

    a) To map the online behavior and music listening habits of the subjects on YouTube.
    b) To identify the changes (if any) in production, consumption, and distribution of music in the digital era.

V. METHODOLOGY

This paper is an exploratory study on YouTube user's musical experiences and it relies on quantitative approach in order to meet its objectives. The exploratory nature of the study finds its roots in the unavailability of similar research in the proposed research area. For data collection, the authors employ survey method using online questionnaire (via Google Forms). This (online) technique of data collection was chosen because of the time and space constraints imposed by the pandemic, which makes it difficult for the researchers to conduct face-to-face interactions with the research subjects. The Questionnaire consists of both close-ended and open-ended questions which basically aims to uncover the overall online music consumption habits of the respondents. 208 samples were collected for the research using convenience sampling method (non-probability sampling) from three colleges in Aizawl City, namely Pachhunga University College, Government Aizawl College and Mizoram Christian College (SYNOD). The results were processed and analyzed with the help of Spreadsheet and software that comes with Google Forms.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The general objective of this research is to understand the changes, if any, in people's perception of music corresponding to changes in the medium, from TV and Radio to YouTube and Spotify, by analyzing their consumption pattern, and the subsequent change in tastes and preferences of people in general. These changes, if identified, can signify further changes in the marginalization of music types from genre and gender to other categories, the characterization of which will be the responsibility of further research. 54.3 per cent of our respondents are 'male' while the other 45.7 per cent are female. Therefore, our sample is more or less a good representative in terms of gender. 25.7 of them consider themselves as 'musician' (one who actively plays any one of the musical instruments). 62.6 per cent of the respondents spends one hour or more a day for music consumption, out of which 12.5 per cent spends more than 2 hours a day; 37.5 per cent spends less than 30 minutes per day for music (i.e., averaging the length of a normal song to be 5 minutes, approximately). This implies the representativeness of the sample in terms of musicality or technical know-how, at least as an active listener.

Our data suggested the marginalization of traditional media like Television and Radio on younger populations because 46.2 per cent of our respondents say they only access musical contents through digital apps like YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, etc. However, other than digital streaming platforms like YouTube, Spotify and Apple Music, television was their next main source of musical consumption. More than half of the respondents i.e., 57.7 per cent use YouTube as their primary medium of music consumption; Spotify comes second at 35.1 per cent of the respondents using the digital streaming service primarily for music consumption, while Apple Music acquires only 4.3 per cent and the other 2.9 per cent uses other apps. Among the respondents, only 10.6 per cent use YouTube Premium (monthly subscription based) while 89.4 per cent use the free-version of YouTube. Half (50 per cent) of the respondents say that their amount of musical consumption increases after they use such platforms like YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, or others, while the other 50 percent say it neither increases nor decreases their musical consumption.

The social features of YouTube, in particular, made it easy to induce audience's feedback for content creators, which may affect future productions. In other words, YouTube made it easier for artists to engage with their fan base and the general online community, which can help especially the amateur content creators in knowing what their audiences likes or dislikes, by analyzing the reactions on the platform. 67.8 per cent checks the number of Likes a song gets on YouTube when listening to it, out of which 18.8 per cent says they 'always' check the number of Likes; 32.2 per cent do not check the Likes of a song. 82.7 per cent checks the number of Views a song gets on YouTube, out of which 33.7 per cent say they 'always' check the number of Views; 17.3 per cent do not check the number of Views. 64.9 per cent checks the number of Subscribers a musical channel gets on YouTube, out of which 17.3 per cent 'always' do; 35.1 per cent do not check the number of Subscribers a particular channel gets. However, only 14.3 percent of them said that the number of Likes and Views a particular song gets is important to them because they thought the numbers has a direct relationship with the quality of the song.

Our research also backed up the claims of earlier research which suggested that new media technologies allow and encourage users to be more active and interactive with the contents (Cayari, 2011). People like to have certain level of control over their media consumption which was impossible during the earlier days of Television and Radio. In our study, 90 per cent of the respondents said that they select a song or make playlists on their app manually; out of which 42.9 per cent makes 'genre/mood' playlists, 29.4 per cent makes playlists of songs they generally like, while the other 27.6 per cent makes 'situational/background' playlists i.e., listening while doing other activities like working out, studying, while sleeping, etc. On the other hand, 10 per cent said they usually rely on the algorithm or preset playlists made by their app for music consumption. 68.8 per cent of the respondents mostly listen to 'English/Western' songs, 20.7 per cent mostly listen 'Mizo' songs, 8.7 per cent mostly listen 'Korean' songs while 1.9 per cent opted 'other' category. 64.3 percent of the respondents 'sometimes' use the social networking features of YouTube (Like, Comment, Share, etc.), 27.1 percent rarely use them and 8.6 per cent 'frequently' uses those features of YouTube.

From our data, only 37.1 per cent responded that they have 'genre preference' or an inclination to only certain kinds of music while 62.9 percent responded that they listen to all kinds of music. However, 60 per cent of the respondents thinks that some genres of music are culturally superior (in terms of dress, manners, or overall behavior of the artist(s) or their respective fans) to others; also, 71.4 percent thinks that some genres of music are technically superior (in terms of musical ability or aptitude) to others. Therefore, even though people are more flexible in their genre consumption, there still seems to exist some sort of discrimination or marginalization of certain kinds of music. Among the respondents, 74.3 per cent said that they generally listen to music with its visuals (music videos) while 25.7 per cent said that they generally listen to audios alone. 67.1 per cent of them thinks that videos are integral to music, that videos are essential to musical experience, while 32.9 per cent thinks that audios are enough most of the time. These data strongly suggested the increasing role of videos or visuals in complementing the musical experience of users. On the other hand, 41.4 percent of the respondents thinks that 'lyrics' is the most important ingredients of a good musical experience, while 52.9 per cent thinks 'music' is the most important ingredient and only 5.7 per cent thinks 'videos' or the visual aspect of music to be the most important constituent of a good musical experience.

VII. CONCLUSION

The mainstreaming of YouTube from a 'promotional tool' to one of the biggest and most influential media for content distribution, is an unprecedented but relatively quick process (Daniel, 2019). One of the most affected areas of this phenomenon is the music business (Edmond, 2014; Airoldi et al., 2016; Liikkanen & Salovaara, 2015). Our study supports this proposition made by previous research since most of our respondents use YouTube as their primary medium of music consumption. Also, almost half of our respondents say they only access musical contents through digital apps and 50 per cent of them say that their amount of musical consumption increases after they use such services, like YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, and others. This indicates the marginalization or the declining currency of traditional media like Television and Radio in terms of musical consumption, especially in the younger audiences. One of the most important characteristics of these changes brought by digital media platforms is the increasing role of videos or visual elements of music as an integral part of the overall musical experience. Majority of the respondents responded that videos are essential to them and that they played an important role in connecting with the song. This indicates the further downfall of non-visual media platform like Radio as a competitor of these new media.

One of the key features of the changing consumption pattern facilitated by these digital platforms is the apparent return to 'radio mode' of music listening. The algorithms of these streaming services sometimes play the role of a traditional radio jockey, in a sense that a significant portion of the online audiences listen to songs selected by third-party facilitator i.e., the 'recommendation algorithms', also called 'recommender systems' or 'online word of mouth' (Moreau, 2013). In our study, around half (49 per cent) of the respondents say they mostly listen to songs on the 'app suggestion' i.e., songs curated by the algorithm from their past consumption. This indicates the possibility of a shift in the role as the facilitator of the 'star system' which was enjoyed by the radio in the first half of the twentieth century by pushing certain artists and their songs on the traditional media relatively more than others (Moreau, 2013). YouTube also changes the way audiences conceive and engage with music as an art. The social features of YouTube, in particular, made it easy to induce audience's feedback for content creators, which may affect future productions. In other words, YouTube made it easier for artists to engage with their fan base and the general online community, which can help especially the amateur content creators in knowing what their audiences likes or dislikes, by analyzing the reactions on the platform. This data suggests the marginalization of smaller media platforms with smaller audiences since the big players like YouTube and Spotify enjoy a competitive advantage.

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