International Journal of Communication 18(2024), 4167-4186 1932–8036/20240005

Platform Closure and Creator Creep: What We Can Learn From Korean Indie Musicians

ROBERT PREY♦[1]
University of Oxford, UK
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

SEONOK LEE
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

This article examines how independent musicians in South Korea adapt to digital platforms. The Korean music industry provides a valuable case study because platformization, vertical integration, and what we call "platform closure" occurred earlier and to a significantly greater degree than in the West. This has resulted in Korean indie musicians migrating from music streaming services to social media platforms and adapting their practices to compete with content creators. While we detail the distinct characteristics of the Korean music and platform sector, we argue that Korea's leading position in the global music industry makes the case of Korean indie musicians illustrative for musicians and creative artists adapting to platformization everywhere.

Keywords: platforms, music, Korea, indie musicians, practices

It is clear that we have transitioned into a music economy and culture dominated by platforms. Music streaming is now the largest revenue source for the global recording industry (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry [IFPI], 2023), and online platforms appear to represent the future of music distribution and consumption. Yet, many questions remain regarding how music artists are impacted by "platformization." Defined as "the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life," platformization also involves "the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms" (Poell, Nieborg, & Dijck, 2019, p. 1). This "reorganization" of practices and imaginations is the central focus of this article.

Robert Prey: r.prey@rug.nl
Seonok Lee: seonok.lee@rug.nl
Date submitted: 2024-02-10

[1] This work was supported by The Academy of Korean Studies: Korean Studies Grant 2020 (Grant No. AKS-2020-R82) and the European Union (ERC, PlatforMuse, 101077952). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Music platformization includes a sometimes-bewildering array of digital intermediaries—from streaming services like Spotify to social media platforms like YouTube and short-form video apps like TikTok. To better conceptualize this platform potpourri, media scholars have made a distinction between what could be called "closed" and "open" platforms" (see Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 32). In this framing, streaming services such as Netflix are "closed" because they mainly carry content that has been financed, produced, and prelicensed from traditional media entertainment firms and feature "professional" talent. "Open" platforms are social media and live streaming platforms like YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok which are more open to amateur or user-generated content. There are clear distinctions between music and the audiovisual sector, which Cunningham and Craig (2019) focus on. However, we could think of music streaming platforms (MSPs) like Spotify as examples of "closed" platforms because they require artists or labels to upload music through an official distributor, while social media platforms allow direct uploads.

While useful, the terms "closed" and "open" provide a somewhat crude means for marking the distinction between streaming and social media platforms. We can easily think of platforms that exhibit characteristics of both at various moments in their history. Creators on an "open" platform like YouTube experienced closure during the "adpocalypse" controversy in 2017 (Kumar, 2019), whereas a "closed" platform like Spotify briefly allowed independent artists to upload their music directly to the platform in 2018 (Spotify for Artists, 2019). In early 2024, Spotify signaled a movement toward greater closure when it introduced a policy to demonetize tracks with fewer than 1,000 streams per year in order to redistribute royalties to benefit what it calls "professional artists" (Spotify for Artists, 2023). Thus, we argue that while dividing platforms into fixed binary categories (open/closed) works as shorthand, it is probably more useful to identify processes of opening and closing, within which we can differentially situate various platforms, or categories of platforms, over time.

The South Korean (hereafter "Korean") music sector serves as a compelling subject of study because platformization and what we refer to as the "platform closure" of MSPs occurred earlier and to a significantly greater degree than in the West. Consequently, Korean self-releasing and independent (hereafter "indie") musicians have focused their efforts on social media platforms. As we will demonstrate, this has led them to emulate the "platform practices" (Duffy, Poell, & Nieborg, 2019) of content creators. While we delve into the unique features of the Korean music and platform landscape, we assert that the Korean music industry's leading position gives global relevance to the experiences of Korean indie musicians. As MSPs like Spotify adopt increasingly "closed" policies, it seems probable that less popular artists will attempt to gain visibility through more "open" social platforms. Therefore, the case of Korean indie musicians is more broadly instructive in the context of these global trends. In the following section, we first provide a review of relevant literature before examining music platformization in Korea.

Cultural Production and Platformization

There has been much speculation in recent years about how music artists adapt their creative practices to platforms (Raffa & Pronzato, 2021). Musical creativity and autonomy have long been influenced by record companies and radio formats (Percival, 2011). Streaming and social media platforms have provided artists with new opportunities to circumvent these traditional modes of control, and at least in theory, creativity should flourish. However, research has begun to demonstrate how music is being

"optimized" to increase discoverability, engagement, and monetization on platforms (Morris, 2020). Musicians and other cultural producers "now make cultural goods expressly with search engines, platform economics, and discovery algorithms in mind—or at least with the perception of these regimes, models, and frameworks" (Morris, Prey, & Nieborg, 2021, p. 12).

In recent years, much attention has also been paid to the emergence of new categories of cultural producers, such as social media entertainers (Bishop, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019) and influencers (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017). This emergence has had far-reaching ripple effects on cultural production, as "traditional" artists and cultural producers have been adapting the strategies of influencers and content creators to compete for attention and visibility through platforms (Patel, 2020). Sophie Bishop (2023) has coined the term "influencer creep," which refers to how Instagram-based "influencer cultures have originated key social practices that now animate creative labor more broadly" (p. 1). Her ethnographic and interview-based research on UK artists and makers who are engaged in promoting or selling their art online demonstrates the extent to which "influencing creeps into more forms of work and . . . creeps further into the lives of workers" (Bishop, 2023, p. 2).

The work of musicians has not escaped these ripple effects. The tasks of online self-promotion and branding have become central components of a musician's workday. Some suggest that what it means to be a music artist is changing (Deresiewicz, 2020). Keith Negus (2019) argues that music is merely "content" used to attract "traffic" on YouTube and similar services. As a result, the music artist becomes indistinguishable from a health vlogger or an advertiser. This conflation worries critics who see distinctly different cultural producers and actors reduced on platforms to the catch-all category of "content creator" (Carraro, 2022).

Content creation requires both time and new skills. Musicians have been described as "reluctant entrepreneurs" (Haynes & Marshall, 2018) as they find themselves devoting more and more time to administrative and social media marketing tasks to support their careers. This work is dependent on a growing expenditure of "relational labor" (Baym, 2018) as music artists try to build connections with fans through platforms. While many musicians consider this a "burden," there may also be a generational gap: Recent empirical research on early-career Dutch musicians reveals less time spent on social media and more work satisfaction than may be expected (Everts, Hitters, & Berkers, 2021). Highlighting how platformization may contribute to a reorganization of imaginations, early-career Swedish musicians are more willing to see themselves as entrepreneurs (Albinsson, 2018) while research among Dutch music students shows that they appear to be able to combine artistic and commercial identities more seamlessly than older generations (Schediwy, Bhansing, & Loots, 2018).

As valuable as these accounts are, they are limited by a geographical focus on musicians in dominant Anglo-American and Western European music markets (though they are typically implied to be about musicians and music platformization in general). Researchers have only begun to ask the extent to which these empirical studies and the arguments they generate are generalizable to other music cultures (Li & Hesmondhalgh, 2024; Qu, Hesmondhalgh, & Xiao, 2023). This article provides a case study of indie music artists and platformization in South Korea. Despite extensive research on K-pop fandom culture and the global expansion of the K-pop industry, scholars have largely overlooked the expanding influence of

platforms in the Korean music industries (Park, Jo, & Kim, 2023). This article seeks to address this gap by delving into the Korean platform ecosystem and "platform practices" (Duffy et al., 2019) of Korean independent musicians. In doing so, we contribute to the call to consider how platformization shapes cultural industries in Asia (Steinberg, 2020) and provide insight into the impact of platforms on creative practices across differing cultural and political economic contexts.

Before describing our methodology, we first provide some background on the distinct characteristics of music platformization in the Korean context.

Music Platformization in the Korean Context

At the turn of the 21st century, a number of factors, including strong government support for ICT, resulted in South Korea having the world's fastest and highest penetration rate for broadband Internet (Lee, 2009). In 2004, Korea became the first music market to introduce a subscription music streaming service. Bolstered by parent company SK Telecom's aggressive promotions, this service—called "MelOn"—signed up nearly 4 million subscribers in its first year of existence (Kim & Jin, 2024, p. 143). Soon after, Korea became the first country in the world where digital music sales exceeded physical sales (Lee, 2009). Currently, the country has one of the world's highest rates of streaming consumption (IFPI, 2023).

While globally dominant streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music are present in Korea, their market share is tiny compared with MelOn and other leading Korean MSPs.[2] There is also a clear distinction between the ways in which Korean streaming services and international services like Spotify operate. MSPs such as Spotify mainly *distribute* content produced by record companies and music artists. The leading MSPs in Korea, however, are involved not only in distribution but also in the *production* of content. This is accomplished through direct deals, investments, joint ventures, and strategic partnerships with music and management companies (Park et al., 2023).[3] Korean ICT companies have made significant investments in music and entertainment companies. For example, the Korean Internet conglomerate Naver—which owns the MSP Vibe—invested 100 billion won ($84.5 million) in K-pop agency, SM Entertainment Group, in 2020. This was a few years after Naver became the second largest shareholder of a competing music agency, YG Entertainment (Ha & Lee, 2020).

Vertical integration is exercised by the telecom and social media conglomerates that developed and operate the leading Korean streaming platforms. Already by early 2016, the Korean social media company Kakao Corporation created what music industry analyst Mark Mulligan (2016) calls a "full stack music company": "combining a music service, a messaging app, an award-winning music brand, talent agency and label into a fully integrated entertainment and communication ecosystem" (para. 4). Today, two of the top three telecom companies (SK Telecom and KT Corp.) have their own streaming platforms, as does the top

[2] However, YouTube Music surpassed MelOn in users in late 2023 (Kim & Jin, 2024).

[3] Record companies in the West have owned shares in streaming platforms. The major labels Universal, Sony, and Warner were given between 4% and 7% of Spotify's shares in 2008, while Merlin, the agency that represents independent record labels, received 1% (Ingham, 2020). However, as of 2024, most of these entities have sold all or part of these shares.

search engine portal (Naver) and the dominant social media company (Kakao). Most recently, in 2023, Kakao Corp. (which has operated MelOn since 2016) took control of leading K-pop music agency SM Entertainment.

Thus, the Korean music industry provides us with an important case study. Platformization occurred earlier in Korea than elsewhere, and the country has developed its own music streaming ecosystem. However, to date, relatively little research has examined platformization in relation to Korean musicians and the music industry. Park and colleagues (2023) have documented the global strategies of Korean platform companies, but their research focuses on the mainstream K-pop industry and the influence of platformization on the autonomy of K-pop producers. In a very useful earlier analysis, Lee (2009) asks: "What does the domination by big conglomerates, especially telecommunications companies, mean to music?" (p. 495). A decade and a half later, we can provide one possible answer to this question: "platform closure," by which we mean the transition toward a more restricted online participatory space. Early connotations portrayed platforms as neutral intermediaries that offered egalitarian and open support for an increasing range of users (Gillespie, 2010). Through our case study of Korean self-releasing and indie musicians, we show how particular industrial configurations can result in the progressive closure of platforms. We follow up this analysis by asking how Korean indie musicians respond to platform closure. More specifically, we ask:

RQ1: How do musicians adapt their platform practices in a vertically integrated music market in which the distribution of content is closely connected to its production?

Methodology

This article is the result of a three-year, interview-based investigation of how online platforms are influencing the practices of Korean independent ("indie") musicians. We conducted 31 interviews with indie musicians (N = 20), entertainment executives (N = 4), industry stakeholders (N = 3), and personnel at Korean streaming platforms and digital distributors (N = 4). In the following results, we used either pseudonyms or artist stage names to refer to our interviewees, depending on their requests (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Information About Interviewees.

#	Name (or "pseudonym")	Age (birth year)	Gender	Profession
1	"Jung"	1981	Male	jazz artist
2	"Hwang"	1989	Male	jazz artist
3	"Yoo"	1990	Female	jazz artist
4	Shin Dae-chul	1967	Male	rock artist
5	"Jang"	–	Male	industry representative
6	Amton	198*	Male	pop artist
7	PD Lee-No	1972	Male	rock artist
8	Grace	197*	Female	jazz artist
9	Lee Won-jin	1997	Male	EDM producer/artist
10	"Lim"	1972	Male	distribution

11	Ha Hyung-eon	1997	Female	pop artist
12	Lee Min-kyu	1975	Male	pop/rock artist
13	Yoo Yong-min	1998	Male	folk artist
14	Shirosky	1988	Female	hip-hop artist
15	"Chang"	1972	Male	rock artist
16	Doko	1995	Male	singer-songwriter
17	URC	1987	Female	hip-hop artist
18	STi	1983	Male	hip-hop/R&B artist
19	"Sang"	1983	Male	distribution
20	"Kim"	198*	Female	distribution
21	"Min-joon"	198*	Male	label executive
22	"Ji-hyun"	1989	Female	distribution
23	"Byung-ho"	1986	Male	entertainment agency
24	Matroos	1983	Male	producer
25	Carry Diamond	1981	Male	hip-hop artist
26	Yu Hyun-jin	1987	Male	pop artist
27	"Chan-yeol"	1990	Male	rock artist
28	"Dae-jung"	–	Male	industry association
29	"Dal"	196*	Male	label executive
30	"Dong-geun"	–	Male	chart company
31	"Duri"	–	Male	entertainment lawyer

Both purposive and snowball sampling was used. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Some interviews were conducted online through video calls between 2020 and 2023, while others took place in person during two separate trips to Korea in 2022. We also attended several music industry conferences and meetings in Korea. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed in Korean by an assistant and then translated into English. We read the transcripts several times to identify and refine themes which were generated inductively.

While a highly contested term everywhere, "indie" is used in Korea to distinguish music artists who are unsigned or signed to smaller record labels from so-called "idols," who are signed to major entertainment companies and considered to be "mass-produced by a 'K-pop machine'" (Shin, 2011, p. 149). Korean indie music is also strongly associated with a particular place, namely "Hongdae"—the popular area around Hongik University (Choi, 2014). We use the term "indie" as it is the most widely used in Korean popular discourse as a descriptor and self-identifier. Thus, indie music in South Korea can be defined as genre-indifferent popular music created by small-sized record labels or self-releasing musicians who do not rely on established systems of domestic music entertainment companies or mainstream media channels.[4]

[4] Of the 20 musicians we interviewed, four are signed to an indie label, two work as session musicians, while the remainder are self-releasing. The majority of these self releasing musicians combine music with other forms of employment.

Results and Discussion

Indie Artists and "Platform Closure"

The vertical integration of Korean music production and distribution appears to provide companies with significant control over which artists appear on the homepage of the leading Korean MSPs. In Korea, MSPs either have their own in-house music distribution service, or they operate as a subsidiary of a company that also owns a distribution service. This differs considerably from digital distribution in the West, where distributors such as TuneCore are not affiliated with major streaming services. Their primary role is to upload an artist's music across all platforms and allocate royalties. Distributors in the Korean music industry provide extra services. Korean distributors often secure exclusive contracts with artists and their record labels. In exchange, they work to promote these artists. Not surprisingly, artists—and especially leading idols—who are distributed through a subsidiary or in-house distribution service are prioritized and granted more visibility on the parent streaming service's front page.

For instance, on MelOn, three new releases are displayed when a user opens the application. To explore further releases, users have to scroll horizontally to the right or move to a subsection. This of course affords the three selected new releases much higher visibility. The landing pages of Korean MSPs like MelOn tend to be heavily dominated by music produced and owned by music entertainment companies that are affiliated with or belong to the same corporation as the music platform. As one employee of an MSP-affiliated distributor remarked, "when albums from such artists come out, they receive almost top-tier exposure and promotion" (Interviewee 19).

This has been a topic of much controversy in Korea. Over the years, MelOn has faced several allegations of favoring the promotion of its in-house distributed music. As reported in an investigative article, between July 29 and December 1, 2019, more than 75% of the time, two of the three new releases showcased on the MelOn's front page were releases distributed by MelOn's (at-the-time) parent company, KakaoM. Additionally, a noticeable difference in exposure duration existed between music distributed by KakaoM and music from other distributors. While the company's music remained on the main screen for a full 24 hours, music from other distributors disappeared within a range of 6–18 hours (Shin, 2019).

This discrepancy means that music labels and artists that distribute through MelOn's distributor gain a significant advantage in visibility over artists signed to another company. Many musicians we interviewed told us that MelOn essentially forces musicians to distribute through its own distribution service by strongly hinting to them that they will not receive a prominent placement or promotion on its platform if they choose a competing distributor. Several interviewees said that their new releases were not promoted on Korean MSPs because they had not been distributed by one of the major distributors. A participant from an organization representing the Korean recording industry told us that this state of affairs made it "incredibly challenging" for independent artists to achieve visibility. He described the existing industry as a "cartel" that was accessible "only to insiders" (Interviewee 5). According to this stakeholder, this resulted in a limited number of artists dominating the Korean music charts, in comparison to other major markets.

The indie musicians we interviewed were very aware and critical of this situation. As the EDM producer Lee Won Jin put it regarding the albums and artists promoted on the front page: "Everything has already been decided months ago" (Interviewee 9). Whether this is true or not, it was a common perception among the indie artists we interviewed.

Many interviewees also explained that MSPs were becoming even more closed to indie artists than they had been in the past. The experience of veteran Korean hip-hop artist Shirosky, who was signed to an entertainment agency until she went independent in 2014, illustrates changes in the system over the years and the sense of "platform closure" that many independent musicians felt and expressed:

> At the time of my debut (in 2010), I was selected as a new artist on (the MSP) "Bugs!" . . . So, I'm a case that benefited from platforms. . . . After becoming independent, until around 2015, I believe I received a lot of benefits. Even in 2019, through (the MSP) "Genie," there was promotion, so I still received assistance. However, originally, my music videos were also uploaded through "1theK" (a YouTube channel operated by MelOn), but not anymore. . . . It seems that the proportion of that assistance is gradually decreasing. It has become a bit more difficult for new entrants or independent musicians to promote their music. (Interviewee 14)

Shirosky's experience seems to resonate with many of the interviewed artists. This was further confirmed by an interviewee who has worked for the distribution department of a Korean MSP for over a decade. He told us that the major distribution companies already have too many artists under contract. They are "saturated," he said, and as a result "no longer sign new contracts":

> Just 5 or 6 years ago, anyone could easily sign a contract and release an album. Regardless of whether they gained popularity or not, it was possible. Now, they don't even sign contracts. . . . There are too many albums. (Interviewee 18)

This interviewee estimated that there were around 300 distribution companies in Korea, although most are quite small and specialized.[5] Artists still sign contracts with lesser distributors, hoping that their music will be featured on the main MSPs.[6] Nevertheless, this appears to be an increasingly unlikely possibility as MSPs grow more closed to indie music. What then are the options for Korean indie musicians in this context of "platform closure"?

[5] This interviewee includes a very broad range of distributors, including companies that are only uploading content on their own platforms, as well as companies that handle copyrights instead of artists. The Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) counts 58 distributors in the country, of which 35 are digital distributors (KOCCA, 2023, p. 26). We thank Sanghwa Lee for pointing this out.

[6] There are also other factors—such as the payment of higher fees—why some indie artists chose not to sign contracts with major distributors.

Indie Artists and Changing Practices

In this section, we highlight three findings from our research into how Korean indie musicians have responded to platformization in the context of vertical integration and the "platform closure" that we discussed in the previous section. We found that indie music artists were:

i. Moving from "closed" to "open" platforms
ii. Adapting content and practices for "open" platforms
iii. Becoming more like content creators

Moving from "Closed" to "Open" Platforms

A key takeaway from our discussion of the political economy of music platformization in Korea is that vertical integration has resulted in a system that is much more closed to indie artists. To circumvent this stranglehold of vertical integration, Korean indie artists are focusing their release efforts on social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, or Twitch.[7]

Our interviewees described in detail how indie artists are increasingly concentrating their efforts on "open" platforms. Almost every musician or insider we talked to in South Korea emphasized the importance of YouTube, SoundCloud, Twitch, and other video and live streaming platforms, like the Korean video streaming platform "AfreecaTV." An informant from an organization which represents the Korean recording industry told us that the scarcity of opportunities for indie artists was driving many "to international platforms (such as) SoundCloud rather than relying on platforms like MelOn in Korea" (Interviewee 5).

The hip-hop artist Shirosky recounted how one of her albums was pushed off the front page of MelOn by a well-known idol group signed to a major agency. After being snubbed by all the major Korean streaming services, she began to focus her promotional efforts on YouTube, where the album was enthusiastically reviewed and received by the hip-hop community. As Shirosky related in our interview, it was then that she realized that she did not really need the main MSPs anymore: "It was a bit of a shock for me. . . . I started thinking that the main page of MelOn might not be that influential anymore" (Interviewee 14).

Korean indie musicians have always been prominent online since they were among the first artists to exploit the potential of the Internet. The resurgence of an indie music scene in the late 2000s can in part be attributed to the success of artists like Chang Kiha and indie labels like Boongaboonga Records in mobilizing fans through websites, blogs, and social media (Shin, 2011). Thus, the move from "closed" to "open" platforms could be better conceived of as a return. However, we should not make the mistake of confusing "open" with "neutral." Platforms such as YouTube both subtly and not-so-subtly influence the creative decisions and practices of musicians, as with other creators (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2022). Shifting over to "open" platforms like YouTube is not simply a matter of uploading your music to different platforms.

[7] Social media and livestreaming platforms are also owned and operated by vertically integrated companies. However, Google/YouTube, Amazon/Twitch, etc., are not involved in music production and copyright. This is a crucial distinction with Korean MSPs and music entertainment companies.

It also involves adapting one's practices to the affordances and "logics" of these platforms (Dijck & Poell, 2013). It is to these adaptations made by Korean indie artists that we turn next.

Adapting Practices and Content to fit "Open" Platforms

A hip-hop artist and producer in her mid-30s who goes by the stage name "URC" talked about everything she has to think about when she is releasing an album on various platforms:

> There are so many things to be concerned about these days . . . if I make an album, there are all different sizes for Instagram. Forward, vertical, video, teaser, and YouTube size must be made. And when I distribute it to SoundCloud . . . you want to make a banner for distribution, you have to write an interview, you have to create content. (Interviewee 17)

"The artist-as-entrepreneur" is a common framework used to discuss all the extramusical labor an artist must (reluctantly) do in order to establish a stable career (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). However, we argue that this also involves *thinking* about one's work very differently from how the traditional "recording artist" thought about her work. Instead of appealing to the tastes of an A&R manager or a radio producer, "discoverability" through online platforms requires an artist to take on a "calculative mindset." By this we mean they are required to see their work not as music but rather as datafied content, which is how the platform algorithm sees it (Morris et al., 2021). This is especially true for "open" platforms which do not have human curators, unlike Spotify and other MSPs.

Many of our interviewees expressed their own "folk theories" of how platform algorithms were selecting which tracks to recommend, and how their peers were adapting music production and marketing strategies in accordance. URC, for example, shared her opinion on how algorithms influence track length:

> Music used to be 3, 5, or 7 minutes in the past, but nowadays it's 2 minutes or even 1 minute. There is a . . . female rapper, who consistently makes music videos that are around a minute long . . . and it goes viral because of that. (Interviewee 17)

What works on one platform though, may not work on another. This renders content much more contingent and platform-dependent (Morris et al., 2021). The CEO of a Korean independent record company described how his company was transitioning to a production strategy that emphasized short video content. He pointed out how in recent years established platforms such as Instagram and YouTube had started to mimic TikTok: "We are planning to focus more on promoting in that direction, considering that people are increasingly preferring shorter, more stimulating, and quickly digestible content" (Interviewee 20).

However, this strategy presented his company with a challenge as his most successful artist is a well-known ballad singer. Ballads, he pointed out, are difficult to cut up into short, meaningful segments after they've already been produced. Therefore, he was instructing producers to prepare these segments from the start:

> If it's possible for the artist, we plan everything from the stage of preparing the song. Because after the song is out, it might not fit well to prepare afterward. So generally, we create a guide or demo version of the song to some extent, and then have a discussion. (Interviewee 20)

We asked "Ji-hyun"—an employee of a Korean MSP who works in distribution and manages the MSP's YouTube channel—what requests indie artists were making in regards to optimizing their content for particular online platforms. She suggested that artists were thinking about their music differently from even a few years ago. Artists think of a song as divided into individual parts that correspond with the platform in mind:

> There are more people who compose songs with viral promotions in mind in advance. When we upload to a service like TikTok, we upload it for about a minute by default, but . . . there are many cases where artists or labels give suggestions like "I only want 10 seconds from here," or "I only want 25 seconds from here." (Interviewee 21)

The desire to enhance discoverability also results in more frequent uploads. The music industry used to be organized around album release and touring schedules. With the shift to online platforms, these rhythms have been greatly affected, at least for self-releasing and indie musicians. Several interviewees told us that they were working continuously to reduce the interval between albums and to release music more frequently. This is a strategy particularly geared toward "open" platforms. When we asked "Ji-hyun" if this strategy was successful, she replied: "Actually, there's no impact on music streaming sites, but it does show results on YouTube" (Interviewee 21).

As some artists pointed out, everything is filmed or recorded with the purpose of creating content that can be used to fill the gaps between music releases. Even offline events are specifically organized for content-creation purposes. URC told us how she plans events in order to generate online content:

> I'm part of a crew and once a year, we organize a party called "The Vibes." It is, in fact, a form of content creation. We felt that besides music, we needed to create content like parties to ensure we wouldn't be forgotten. So, we have to keep producing these things. There's no time to rest, with music, events, album production time. It's quite different from the time when there were significant gaps. (Interviewee 17)

Our interviewees do not claim to be making money from most of these strategies. Instead, the aim is to counter what Bucher (2012) calls "the threat of invisibility" by engaging audiences and building, or simply maintaining, a fan base which may potentially be monetized later.

Our interviewees also commented on the increasing dominance of visual content. While visuality has long been central to K-pop (Howard, 2014) and popular music (Negus, 2006), platformization seems to have once again foregrounded these debates. URC summarized what many of our interviewees told us: "Just doing music isn't enough. Content is the most crucial—and to present that effectively—high quality visual representation is incredibly important." According to many of our interviewees, much of the emphasis

on videos and other visual content in the Korean indie music scene can be attributed to the influence of K-pop as a highly stylized genre of "visual music" (Haessler, 2022). This has created the expectation that indie artists must also upload visual content to accompany their music.

A representative for a music distributor told us that "it really feels like a lot has shifted visually" over the past few years in Korea's indie music scene:

> In the past, even if there were multiple tracks, some artists would only shoot one music video for the title track. Nowadays, they shoot two or three, or different versions of the same video, or even request periodic content uploads after the release. They might say, "I'll send you a live performance in a week," or "I have content somewhere in two weeks, and I'll send it to you." (Interviewee 21)

However, the perceived need to produce high-definition videos presents some problems for distributors and platforms. This distributor admitted that she spends a lot of time dealing with video files that she needs to convert because they are too large:

> Some people adjust it if we ask them to lower the size a bit. However, there are those who insist, "No, we shot it in 4K for YouTube, so we want to provide it in 4K." It seems like they focus a lot on the video . . . They pay more attention to the video and provide a lot of additional content like live performances. (Interviewee 21)

In summary, Korean indie musicians are adapting their practices and the content they create to fit "open" platforms, which tend to be video-centric. One result is that indie artists need to create—not so much music—but rather visual *content*. The artists we interviewed know that they are not really competing against other musicians on these video platforms. Instead, they are competing with all the other "content creators": the vloggers, influencers, YouTubers, and TikTokkers. In doing so, they are induced to shift their creative emphasis from music to extramusical expressions of creativity. We turn now to possible implications of this transformation.

Becoming More Like Content Creators

As our interviewees expressed repeatedly, on so-called "open" platforms, they are under constant pressure to engage audiences and build fandom through communication. To this end, many artists told us how they are documenting their lives through vlogs, sharing cooking videos, and preparing various types of additional content. This is very much in line with what creators or influencers do to gain and maintain visibility on social media. In Bishop's (2023) research among craftworkers and makers, she concludes that it has become a "cultural expectatio(n) for artists to share more and more of their "authentic" selves on social media platforms" (p. 3). At the same time, however, as artists, they need to maintain "a practice and a reputation as an authentic artist" (Bishop, 2023, p. 11).

To perform authenticity, artists often employ the two-way communication affordances of platforms like Twitch or YouTube to produce music live. As one EDM producer told us:

> What I mainly broadcast (on Twitch) is how I produce (a song), and I keep the broadcast turned on the whole time I am producing. Or I broadcast some feedback on the songs that I've received by e-mail, or stream an open contest where the users compose songs by using their own beats and kits. (Interviewee 9)

We can understand the above as an example of what Patel (2020) calls "staging the work," which permits the artist to "provide evidence of their creative knowledge and skills and demonstrate [their] creative process as work comes together" (p. 62; see also Bishop, 2023, p. 12).

Nevertheless, not all artists have the ability or the desire to invite audiences into the production process. For example, "Grace"—a struggling middle-aged Korean jazz singer who also teaches at a music academy—told us that many of her students have a channel on the platform "AfreecaTV" where they sing requested songs. According to her, some of them make 1,000 USD per month in virtual tips. However, when we asked her if she would consider doing this as well, Grace looked at us in horror. She said she would never do this because she associates it with buskers singing cover songs and that it would make her feel like "ttanttara"—a derogatory Korean term for "entertainer."

Musicians who have resigned themselves to creating extramusical content for platforms often stated that they saw this work as a "burden." The leader of an indie rock band lamented the gradual disappearance of a time when "musicians only needed to focus on music" (Interviewee 26). While this artist, who is in his early 30s, is perhaps nostalgic for a time he never experienced (and which may not have in fact existed), it is hard to dismiss the "pressure" he felt to constantly come up with extramusical content. Not every musician can create videos or quality extramusical content, and many agreed that the pressure to be "good at everything" could feel "overwhelming" (Interviewee 17). An aging rock musician confessed to us that he was seriously questioning whether he should spend money on recruiting session musicians, renting a recording studio, and hiring an engineer, when much of the added quality would be lost on listeners who mainly consume music on their phones. He acknowledged that this money might be better spent on creating content for platforms like YouTube, but admitted that it would take a lot of effort and time for him to learn how to properly use YouTube. These artists felt estranged by a music ecosystem in which "music is 'content' that attracts subscriptions and 'traffic'" (Negus, 2019, p. 15). They lament the fact that "musicians have found themselves redefined as content providers rather than creative producers" (Negus, 2019, p. 4).

Nevertheless, while platforms may see musicians as content providers, most of our interviewees took pains to differentiate themselves from "creators" and to self-identify as "artists." In fact, several interviewees argued that the affordances of social media platforms offer indie artists the ability to expand the definition of what it means to be a music artist. These indie artists highlighted the positive attributes of transitioning from streaming to social media or from "closed" to "open" platforms. Shifting their focus to social media platforms made them realize that communication on MSPs is very unidirectional. They saw this as one of the biggest advantages of platforms like Twitch or YouTube, where the ability to host live sessions afforded "real-time two-way communication" (Interviewee 9).

For some, this renewed focus and attention to their fans freed them from the chart-climbing strategy that dominates mainstream music in Korea. One folk artist told us that he recently realized that

"gathering people who enjoy music and . . . creating a fandom seems more important than entering the charts" (Interviewee 13). For others, this "forced migration" to open platforms came with artistic opportunities. Younger Korean musicians (outside of the genres of jazz and rock) seem to have a much easier time expanding or adapting their definition of artistic practices, and what it means to be an artist in the platform era. The hip-hop artist/producer URC told us:

> I think it's almost the same from the perspective of art, so making music, making album covers, making music videos and teasers are all falling into art. It's not like "I'm a musician" or "I'm a designer." So, I consider all of these aspects—like the visual and the audio—as parts of the creation process when I start the project. (Interviewee 17)

Musicians like URC welcome the opportunity to expand their artistry—a transformation that could be conceived of as a subtle shift in self-identification: from a *recordin*g *artist* to an *artist* (who happens to also record music). However, the benefits of this shift are felt most by musicians who are either multidisciplinary artists themselves, or who are situated within broader artistic (instead of solely music) scenes. Shirosky, for example, draws on the many creative artists who make up her social network. She reveals:

> Many friends voluntarily contribute (to my music) by creating things. It often happens through collaboration with friends who specialize in video production or fellow artists. While making music videos benefits me, it also serves as a portfolio for themselves. In a way, it's not just outsourcing; it's a collaboration. (Interviewee 14)

For Shirosky, her community of artists sustained her when MSPs no longer provided any support. As another interviewee put it, musicians need to belong to a community if they are not signed by a big company, because "without some form of support . . . the competition is so intense that it's difficult to survive" (Interviewee 17).

Conclusion

This study has examined how a particular type of cultural producer (indie musicians) are adapting their practices in a political economic context (South Korea), in which MSPs and mainstream music companies are vertically integrated. This has resulted in conditions which we describe as "platform closure" for these musicians. As a result, Korean indie musicians can be seen to be:

1. Moving from "closed" to "open" platforms
2. Adapting practices (and content) to fit these platforms; and,
3. Becoming more like content creators

What are the implications for musicians as they are forced to transition from more "closed" MSPs to "open" social platforms? What does this portend for the future of indie musicians as they become increasingly entangled with the algorithmic and promotional logics of the platforms that they depend on to sustain their careers?

Many of the responses provided by our Korean interviewees correspond with findings from our work among indie musicians in other countries (Prey, 2020). Indie artists who attempt to build visibility through "open" platforms are increasingly adapting practices which are *perceived* to enhance their discoverability. These practices often mimic strategies of successful content creators and influencers on these platforms. More frequent uploading of (extra)musical content with an emphasis on visuals are familiar tactics of music artists everywhere as they compete for visibility with creators on YouTube and other global platforms. Furthermore, as Cunningham and Craig (2021) astutely note, "creators both produce and distribute content *and* manage communities" (p. 8). As a result, music "creators" cannot just make music or related content, they need to constantly engage with fans.

This shift comes more naturally to some artists than to others. It is perhaps productive to distinguish between who wins, and who loses, as music artists attempt to compete with other content creators. Our research among Korean indie artists seems to indicate that "winners" and "losers" divide along the lines of genre and age. However, as Korean indie artists shift their attention from domestic streaming platforms such as MelOn to "open" platforms, the biggest winner appears to be YouTube. YouTube Music is growing rapidly in South Korea, as it is around the world (Willman, 2022). In 2023, YouTube Music took over from MelOn the title of the most popular streaming platform in Korea. Almost every musician or insider we talked to emphasized the importance of YouTube.[8] The leading Korean MSPs all operate their own YouTube channel where they also distribute their music. Indeed, we could think of YouTube as the "conductor platform": All content flows through YouTube.

In many ways, our research confirms findings by Bishop (2022, 2023), who conducted research in a different cultural and artistic context. The craft workers and makers that Bishop researched in the United Kingdom borrow key practices from Instagram influencers as they attempt to gain visibility on social media. In the Korean indie music scene, YouTube plays a far more influential role than Instagram. As a result, the practices of YouTube "creators" have begun to "creep" into the working lives of Korean indie musicians. Building off of Bishop (2022, 2023), we could call this "creator creep."

The term "creator" was introduced by YouTube a decade ago and has now spread across the social media landscape. The YouTube executive who first came up with the term "creator" has said that they needed a term that captured how these people "were more than onscreen talent. . . . They could write, edit, produce, do community management, and were entrepreneurs" (Lorenz, 2019, para. 9). This job description almost perfectly captures the practices of the musicians we talked to. As a result, we argue that—in terms of practices—contemporary platform-dependent musicians have less in common with traditional recording artists than they do with the other content creators they appear alongside on YouTube, and other "open" platforms.

One final question needs to be made more explicit however: To what extent is the Korean case comparable to the situation of artists in other countries and what can we learn from Korean indie musicians?

[8] For example, "Ji-hyun"—who manages a Korean MSP's channel on YouTube—told us that "YouTube . . . seems unbeatable" and that the revenue that her company generates from their YouTube channel is "more than I expected" (Interviewee 21).

Global MSPs like Spotify are becoming more "closed" to unpopular music as they attempt to deal with the astonishing growth in music uploaded to their servers every day.[9] Recently, Spotify and Deezer have announced that they will begin to institute new payment models that will end up demonetizing many small-scale artists. Spotify will require tracks to have a minimum of 1,000 listens every year to receive royalties. According to Spotify's data, only 37.5 million tracks out of the more than 100 million total tracks on Spotify have surpassed 1,000 streams, meaning that two-thirds of all tracks will be demonetized (Spotify, n.d.). This policy change has caused much controversy among musicians and stakeholders throughout the music industry. While it remains to be seen how smaller artists or labels will react, it appears likely that self-releasing and smaller indie artists will further increase their efforts to build an audience and monetize their music through "open" platforms.

The Korean music industry has long been highly distinctive (Howard, 2014), and its degree of vertical integration is not matched in the West. However, Korea was also the first platform music industry in the world and as a result, Korean musicians have had to adapt their practices earlier and to a greater extent than musicians in the West. As indie musicians in the West react to new policies instituted by MSPs like Spotify and Deezer, we can learn from the platform practices of Korean indie musicians. Korean indie musicians provide us with a glimpse into a potential future—a future wherein the curatorial power of music companies returns us back to the days before the apparent promise of platforms and their "long tail" of niche content.

References

Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labor: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia, 161*(1), 86–100. doi:10.1177/1329878X16665177

Albinsson, S. (2018). Musicians as entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs as musicians? *Creativity and Innovation Management, 27*(3), 348–357. doi:10.1111/caim.12254

Baym, N. K. (2018). *Playing to the crowd*. New York, NY: NYU Press. doi:10.18574/nyu/9781479896165.001.0001

Bishop, S. (2018). Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm. *Convergence, 24*(1), 69–84. doi:10.1177/1354856517736978

Bishop, S. (2022, June 9). Influencer creep: Self-documenting and self-branding are becoming basic to all forms of work. *Real Life Magazine*. Retrieved from https://reallifemag.com/influencer-creep/

9 The number of tracks uploaded to MSPs everyday has been increasing dramatically—doubling from an already impressive 60,000 tracks daily in 2021 to a reported 120,000 uploaded tracks by late 2023 (Stassen, 2023).

Bishop, S. (2023). Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/14614448231206090

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society, 14*(7), 1164–1180. doi:10.1177/1461444812440159

Carraro, R. (2022). *From artists to creators, from music to audio: A critical discourse analysis of Spotify's "audio first" strategy* (master's thesis). London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. Retrieved from https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/msc-dissertations/2021/Carraro.pdf

Choi, H. (2014). *Value and value creation–popular music in the digital era: The case of the independent music industry in South Korea* (doctoral dissertation). The University of Manchester, UK. Retrieved from https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/value-and-value-creation-popular-music-in-the-digital-era-the-cas

Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (Eds.) (2021). *Creator culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Deresiewicz, W. (2020). *The death of the artist: How creators are struggling to survive in the age of billionaires and big tech*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Dijck, J. van, & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication, 1*(1), 2–14. doi:10.12924/mac2013.01010002

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. doi:10.12987/yale/9780300218176.001.0001

Duffy, B. E., Poell, T., & Nieborg, D. B. (2019). Platform practices in the cultural industries: Creativity, labor, and citizenship. *Social Media + Society, 5*(4), 1–8. doi:10.1177/2056305119879672

Everts, R., Hitters, E., & Berkers, P. (2021). The working life of musicians: Mapping the work activities and values of early-career pop musicians in the Dutch music industry. *Creative Industries Journal, 15*(1), 97–117. doi:10.1080/17510694.2021.1899499

Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of "platforms." *New Media & Society, 12*(3), 347–364. doi:10.1177/1461444809342738

Ha, S. Y., & Lee, J. Y. (2020, August 11). Naver and Kakao continue hunt for exclusive content. *Joongang Daily*. Retrieved from https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/08/11/business/industry/Bang-Bang-Con-online-concert-content-business/20200811191207239.html

Haessler, E. L. (2022). Visual music: K-Pop's "CAWMAN" effect on a transnational music subculture. *INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology, 1*(8), 124–149. doi:10.51191/issn.2637-1898.2022.5.8.124

Haynes, J., & Marshall, L. (2018). Reluctant entrepreneurs: Musicians and entrepreneurship in the "new" music industry. *The British Journal of Sociology, 69*(2), 459–482. doi:10.1111/1468-4446.12286

Howard, K. (2014). Mapping K-pop past and present: Shifting the modes of exchange. *Korea Observer, 45*(3), 389–414.

Ingham, T. (2018, May 14). *Here's exactly how many shares the major labels and Merlin bought in Spotify—and what those stakes are worth now*. Music Business Worldwide. Retrieved from https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/heres-exactly-how-many-shares-the-major-labels-and-merlin-bought-in-spotify-and-what-we-think-those-stakes-are-worth-now/

International Federation of the Phonographic Industry. (2023). *Global music report*. Retrieved from https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Global_Music_Report_2023_State_of_the_Industry.pdf

Kim, S., & Jin, D. Y. (2024). *Korea's platform empire: An emerging power in the global platform sphere*. London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003441694

Korea Creative Content Agency. (2023). *2022 content industry statistics*. Korea Creative Content Agency. Retrieved from https://www.kocca.kr/kocca/bbs/list/B0158948.do?menuNo=204156

Kumar, S. (2019). The algorithmic dance: YouTube's adpocalypse and the gatekeeping of cultural content on digital platforms. *Internet Policy Review, 8*(2), 1–21. doi:10.14763/2019.2.1417

Lee, J. Y. (2009). Contesting the digital economy and culture: Digital technologies and the transformation of popular music in Korea. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 10*(4), 489–506. doi:10.1080/14649370903166143

Li, Z., & Hesmondhalgh, D. (2024). From P2P to the cloud: Music, platformization, and infrastructural change in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 1–17. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/17544750.2024.2347626

Lorenz, T. (2019, May 31). The real difference between creators and influencers. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/05/how-creators-became-influencers/590725/

Morris, J. W. (2020). Music platforms and the optimization of culture. *Social Media + Society, 6*(3), 1–10. doi:10.1177/2056305120940690

Morris, J. W., Prey, R., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Engineering culture: Logics of optimization in music, games, and apps. *Review of Communication, 21*(2), 161–175. doi:10.1080/15358593.2021.1934522

Mulligan, M. (2016, January 12). Kakao Corp turns MelOn into a full stack music company. *MIDiA Research*. Retrieved from https://www.midiaresearch.com/blog/kakao-corp-turns-melon-into-a-full-stack-music-company

Negus, K. (2006). Musicians on television: Visible, audible and ignored. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 131*(2), 310–330. doi:10.1093/jrma/fkl005

Negus, K. (2019). From creator to data: The post-record music industry and the digital conglomerates. *Media, Culture & Society, 41*(3), 367–384. doi:10.1177/0163443718799395

Park, S., Jo, H., & Kim, T. (2023). Platformization in local cultural production: Korean platform companies and the K-pop industry. *International Journal of Communication, 17*(22), 2422–2443.

Patel, K. (2020). *The Politics of expertise in cultural labour: Arts, work and inequalities*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Percival, J. M. (2011). Music radio and the record industry: Songs, sounds, and power. *Popular Music and Society, 34*(4), 455–473. doi:10.1080/03007766.2011.601598

Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Dijck, J. F. T. M. van. (2019). Concepts of the digital society: Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review, 8*(4), 1–13. doi:10.14763/2019.4.1425

Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Prey, R. (2020). Performing numbers: Musicians and their metrics. In D. Stark (Ed.), *The performance complex: Competition and competitions in social life* (pp. 241–259). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Qu, S., Hesmondhalgh, D., & Xiao, J. (2023). Music streaming platforms and self-releasing musicians: The case of China. *Information, Communication & Society, 26*(4), 699–715. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2021.1971280

Raffa, M., & Pronzato, R. (2021). The algorithmic imaginary of cultural producers: Towards platform-optimized music? *H-ermes. Journal of Communication, 19*(2021), 293–321. doi:10.1285/i22840753n19p293

Schediwy, L., Bhansing, P. V., & Loots, E. (2018). Young musicians' career identities: Do bohemian and entrepreneurial career identities compete or cohere?" *Creative Industries Journal, 11*(2), 174–196. doi:10.1080/17510694.2018.1489197

Shin, H. (2011). The success of hopelessness: The evolution of Korean indie music. *Perfect Beat, 12*(2), 147–165. doi:10.1558/prbt.v12i2.147

Shin, M. (2019, December 30). Melon, introducing new music. . . . mainly "ours." *Hankyoreh*. Retrieved from http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/music/922634.htmlk

Spotify. (n.d.). *Loud and clear*. Retrieved from https://loudandclear.byspotify.com/

Spotify for Artists. (2019, July 1). We're closing the upload beta program. Here's what artists need to know. *Spotify for Artists*. Retrieved from https://artists.spotify.com/en/blog/we're-closing-the-upload-beta-program

Spotify for Artists. (2023, November 21). Modernizing our royalty system to drive an additional $1 billion toward emerging and professional artists. *Spotify for Artists*. Retrieved from https://artists.spotify.com/en/blog/modernizing-our-royalty-system

Stassen, M. (2023, May 25). *There are now 120,000 new tracks hitting music streaming services each day*. Music Business Worldwide. Retrieved from https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/there-are-now-120000-new-tracks-hitting-music-streaming-services-each-day/

Steinberg, M. (2020). LINE as super app: Platformization in East Asia. *Social Media + Society, 6*(2), 1–10. doi:10.1177/2056305120933285

Willman, C. (2022, January 18). Streaming music subscriptions grew 26% in 2021, with YouTube music as fastest growing DSP in the West. *Variety*. Retrieved from https://variety.com/2022/music/news/streaming-music-growth-worldwide-youtube-spotify-apple-1235156594/