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Conceptualizing the Influence of Digital Musicpreneurs on the Music Streaming Ecosystem in the Global South: An Actor-Network Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study employs Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to investigate the influence of digital musicpreneurs on Ghana's music streaming ecosystem, shaped by the rise of music streaming and independent music production. Using qualitative research of 66 participants under a pragmatic constructivism framework, this study explores the interactions among key actors in the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana. The findings of the study highlight the challenges faced by artists due to a lack of professional structures, leading them to assume multiple roles. Various artiste managers, often close associates, hold significant sway in artist management. Furthermore, the integration of streaming data into music awards decisions reflects evolving success metrics and fanbase communities provide crucial support and promote streaming culture, becoming pivotal resources for artists. This study enhances comprehension of Ghana's dynamic music streaming landscape, offering insights into the actors' roles, challenges, and prospects for growth.

Keywords: Digital musicpreneurs, Streaming ecosystem, Music industry, Ghana, Global south, Actor-network theory

INTRODUCTION

For almost a decade, music streaming services (MSS) have changed the economic fortunes of the music industry globally. The International Federation for Phonographic Industry (IFPI) reports that since 2015 streaming has consistently dominated the music industry revenue, currently accounting for more than 67% of total global recorded music revenue (IFPI, 2023). In the Global South, this growth has been marked with the recent interest of global giants in the music streaming industry such as Boomplay and Spotify seeking to gain grounds in several Sub-Saharan countries including Ghana

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(Collins, 2021). Despite the significant growth and interest in the contemporary music industry, the specific dynamics and framework within which streaming operates in the context of Ghana's music industry is yet to be explored. This study thus aims to explore and conceptualize the influence of digital entrepreneurs in the streaming business ecosystem in Ghana, utilizing an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) analysis. With the rise of music streaming and the advent of independent music production and distribution, a new category of entrepreneurs known as "digital musicpreneurs" have emerged as key players in reshaping the music industry landscape.

Drawing on the ANT framework, this paper adopts a comprehensive approach to analyze the intricate interactions, relationships, and role played by these digital musicpreneurs and various actors within the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana. This study provides an empirical understanding of the influence of these entrepreneurs on the ecosystem.

DIGITAL MUSICPRENEURS IN STREAMING ECOSYSTEMS: GLOBAL SOUTH PERSPECTIVE

The actors in the contemporary post-streaming music industry are significantly different from that of the pre-streaming era. To understand the character of actors and their significance in the streaming era, there is the need to understand how the music industry has evolved since the introduction of IT in its production and distribution value chain. Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) provides account of three periods in which the music industry has experienced transformation through technology:

1. Period 1 (1999-2003): this period is characterised by the rise of file sharing enabled through the internet.
2. Period 2 (2003-2008): this period marks the emergence of iPod and MP3 players built on a copy-protection systems.
3. Period 3 (2008-present): this period has witnessed the continuous growth of music streaming services as mobile applications with ability to function on laptops and tablets.

It is important to note that the discussion of transformation in the music industry from the 1999 era is not to suggest that innovation in the industry only commenced in this period. Rather, the IT led transformation of the music industry in the selected periods seeks to place this study into proper context of digitalisation of music.

In the Global South, transformation in the music industry by technology do not necessarily match these periods since the region has been behind in most technological innovations and developments. In Ghana, the physical sale of CDs remained the major source of revenue for the music recording industry for almost a decade in the early 2000s until the advent of MP3 files enabled through internet. Besides the use of iPods were not popular in Ghana as it was in the Global North due to limited technological infrastructure and internet penetration Blogging websites such as Ghanamotion.com and Ghanandwom.com were examples of leading sources of music in the MP3 era. Limited access to internet meant that most people had to download

the music unto their portable MP3 players which run on batteries and did not require internet for continuous consumption. The download and file-sharing culture in Ghana lingered on for many years and led to the rise of illegal download and sale of music on flash drives and other SD cards raising another piracy quagmire (dailyguidenetwork.com, 2017; ghanaweb.com, 2021). Music streaming was not introduced into Ghana until 2018 when Boomplay, a Chinese owned music streaming service focused on promoting African music set up a country office in Ghana (Hansen, 2022). Spirited fans of music artiste who had knowledge about the growth of streaming in the Global North had to rely on the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to access Spotify and Apple Music.

In recent years, however, music streaming has become increasingly popular in the Global South with streaming revenue from Sub-Saharan Africa growing steadily away from a 'free' ad-supported model to a paid subscription-based model (IFPI, 2021, 2022, 2023). Considering that music streaming in Africa remains at its nascent stages and yet shows significant promise of growth in the region, it is opportune to understand the network of entrepreneurs in this contemporary digital music industry, termed in this study as 'digital musicpreneurs'.

ANT THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION FOR STREAMING ECOSYSTEMS

This study relies on the actor-network theory (ANT) to provide an understanding of the network of actors that influence the music streaming ecosystem. Fundamentally ANT describes interactions between human and non-human actors in a network of relations (Latour, 2011; Law, 1999) From its origin, this theory advances that entities take their form and acquire their attributes because of the relations they have with other entities and therefore entities do not have inherent qualities outside the network (Law, 1999). This theory therefore offers understanding of the network of relationships that exists among actors in the contemporary music industry when it is applied to the streaming ecosystem.

A major tenet of the ANT theory is its proposition that non-human actors equally participate in a network with human actors (Callon, 1984, 1986). This is particularly evident in the streaming ecosystem where digital streaming platforms (DSPs) and social media platforms have become equally important distribution and promotional tools for music aside artistes and sound engineers whose human capital result in creating unique music. Therefore, in mapping out the music streaming ecosystem, there is the need to include both the human and non-human actors who contribute to value creation. Again, ANT advances that human actors, material, semiotics, artifacts and other actants collectively interact in the network as a whole (Latour, 1993). This is exactly the network composition of the streaming ecosystem which is represented by a complex relationship between technological devices and software, streaming provider, database, publishers, content originators, device makers, users and advertisers (Colbjørnsen, 2021). Though these actors are different, they act as a whole in a network, allocating resources

to deliver value in the ecosystem. Besides, the nature of actor networks as depicted by ANT shows an interaction between actants which are not only nodes in the network but rather actants that produce action towards other actants in the network (Latour, 1993; Williams, 2020). This is particularly important in understanding the character and role of actors in the music streaming ecosystem as a distinct network from the pre-streaming era.

Few studies have explored how the actor-network theory could explain the interactions between actors in the music streaming ecosystem. Most contemporary applications of ANT have examined traditional businesses such as healthcare, banking and educational institutions (*see* Kwofie et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). An exception is Colbjørnsen (2021), who explores the actors that constitutes the parts and nodes of a music streaming network as well as the power relationships between these various parts. This study found that no single actor can fully control power relationships in the network. Though this study is novel, it focuses on a streaming services operation in the Global North, thus not fully representing the unique socio-technical relationships that may exist in the Global South.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research method using a pragmatic constructivism philosophical paradigm. This study used the music streaming ecosystem of Ghana as a single-embedded case study comprising music actors as units of analysis.

These units were purposely selected based on KPMG's (2014) comprehensive report of the Ghana music industry Furthermore, categories such as the fan base, which was not initially included, were later considered units of interest in the study based on repetitive description of them as resources to artistes by respondents.

Participants and Procedures

A total of 66 actors in Ghana's music streaming ecosystem participated in this study. Out of the total respondents, 52 participants were interviewed in person. The interviews were complemented with three separate focus group discussions comprising 14 respondents, participant observations and relevant documents on streaming. Data on the participants is provided in Table 1 in the Appendix.

FINDINGS

To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, all interviewees were provided with participant identity descriptors that had no direct reference to the identification of the respondent.

The actors in the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana are presented with a description of their constituents, role and characteristics. Some of the actors, particularly, the digital distributor, DSP, sound engineer, fanbase and influencers have both human and non-human (technological) characteristics by

which they generate value in the music streaming ecosystem. These human and non-human actors for the purpose of this study are socially constructed as digital 'musicpreneurs', reflecting both the musical and entrepreneurial role of the actors in the digital ecosystem of streaming. These actors are further described below.

Actor 1: Music Artiste

The findings from the study showed that music artistes were the central human actors within the streaming ecosystem and constituted the creative entrepreneurs who create music through composing, recording and performance. The composition role includes writing of lyrics for a song, while the recording includes the singing of song unto a sound recorder. Performance role of a music artiste refers to live performance where the artiste sings the song to an audience or avails himself to take photo and video shoots either for his or her songs or for other promotional activities. From the findings, the music industry in Ghana does not have appropriate professional structures. Thus, music artistes in the Ghanaian music industry often perform multiple creative roles of writing and composing their music as well as recording and performing same. One artiste who had a postgraduate degree yet was confused about his artistic role confirmed that,

> *It's not like taking it so seriously. So it's very difficult for me to actually put myself in a bit of in a box, but I think we can go with him recording artists* – Artiste 1

Some respondents bemoaned this dual professional role coupled with other personal responsibilities and attribute their low streaming numbers to such lack of dedication.

Actor 2: Artiste Manager

In this study, artiste managers comprised of the immediate persons who were referred to as managers by their respective music artistes and were responsible for the day-to-day and overall management of the engagement and marketing activities of the creative work of the music artiste. These persons include record label managers, road managers and artiste managers.

Record Label Managers

Observations from the field showed that there were hardly any major record label managing music artistes in Ghana. One of such organizations which appeared more formal in its organizational set-up in terms of office space and human resources employed on full-time jobs such as administrative clerks, digital content managers and technical and artiste managers was Lynx Entertainment.

Road Managers

The responsibility of road managers is basically to oversee all the public relations and public engagement activities of the music artiste on a regular basis. This includes the day-to-day scrutinizing of interview questions, providing

water and meals for the music artiste during live performances and public engagement and handle all bookings for conversations the public wants to have with the music artiste.

Artiste Managers

Artiste managers are among the most influential industry professionals dictating the regular and planned activities of music artistes. They include managers who have formed groups of road managers to give company to music artistes during their public engagements, sometimes collectively referring to themselves as 'label' to individuals who manage all professional and marketing activities of the music artiste. They also tend to have overall responsibility for the online engagement as well as the streaming performance of their music artistes. Most of these managers comprised family members, friends and close associations with whom the music artiste has high levels of trust and confidence in protecting their creativity, celebrity status and appeal to the public.

Actor 3: Digital Streaming Platform (DSP)

In Ghana, the most popular DSP is Boomplay, a company owned by Transsion Holdings, a Chinese phone maker and NetEase, a Chinese internet company. Boomplay currently operates globally but with regional offices mainly in Sub-Saharan African countries including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Cote d'Iviore and Cameroon. The presence of the platform in these countries shows the unique focus the company has in promoting African music and a streaming culture in Africa. Boomplay started operations in Ghana in 2018 and was the first streaming service to establish an office in Ghana. Currently, Boomplay has over 75 million monthly active listeners, hosts 7.5 million music artists and over 100 million licensed songs (Boomplay, 2023).

The Boomplay office in Ghana operates an open-door policy that allows music artistes, both emerging and star artistes, to walk in and interact free from judgement on their infantile knowledge on streaming. This is essential as the culture of streaming in Ghana is still in the developmental stages. Besides, the office has a photo studio setup with equipment which helps it to actively engage in the online promotion of artistes who seek to use their services through promotional activities such as Boomplay awards for reaching streaming milestones.

Actor 4: Sound Engineer

Sound engineers refer to technical professionals in the music industry who provide the technology for the recording and mixing of music. In most cases, these engineers also take on roles as where they engage with music artistes in the selection of songs as well as the arrangements of songs. In the streaming ecosystem, sound engineers have realized an ever-increasing role by being responsible for the quality of music suitable for streaming platforms and in some cases, have identified themselves as original creators of music, owning

such music and thus earning streaming income and other related benefits from such songs.

The streaming ecosystem have also empowered the sound engineer providing more protection of their creativity. As a result of the availability of streaming platforms, sound engineers are now able to keep their works properly identified to them as the original owners, making them able to direct its usage, prevent illegal and pirate abuse as well as earn from their works. Engineer 2 further explained that,

> *"…even beats when you produce beats and put it on Spotify as a producer. When the artists finish the song, and upload, the artist cannot put it as a producer to they can put it as an artist, then you get royalties from it whenever someone listens to it.* – Engineer 3

Actor 5: Digital Distributor

Digital distributors are major actors in the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana. In this study, the term digital distributor was used to characterize both aggregators and distributors of digital music. As described by Distributor 2, aggregators are middle companies between a music artiste and a distributor whereas a distributor links music artistes to digital streaming platforms (DSPs). Aggregators often host catalogues of music through their dashboards which they offer to the DSPs. Though music artistes could directly make use of distributors, they could be limited in engaging such distributors to offer them promotional services such as playlisting. In Ghana, the dominant distributors used by music artistes are Ditto Music, TuneCore and DistroKid, all of which operate virtually and do not have offices in Ghana except for Ditto Music, who have two representatives in Ghana working for them.

Most Ghanaian music artistes work with local aggregators who are usually small sized businesses and offer services such as publishing, assigning international standard recording code (ISRC) to music, engaging with DSPs for playlisting of songs on their catalogues, providing revenue to music artistes from streaming sources and providing analysis of music performance to artistes. Considering the relative newness of the streaming ecosystem and intensity of knowledge in digital technologies and applications required for success of music in this ecosystem, local aggregators are often compelled to offer education on streaming to music artistes.

Actor 6: Influencers

Influencers also play a vital role in the promotion of music in the streaming ecosystem. Findings from the study showed that influencers often have various backgrounds as bloggers, curators, social media content creators or individuals who have large social media following and therefore leverage on that to promote music or an artiste, in most cases for a fee. These bloggers and curators aside, content creators on social media have also emerged as major influencers in the streaming ecosystem because of two reasons; first, the importance and popularity of social media in promoting music and second, the considerable number of followers they wield on social media platforms such as X, Instagram and Tik Tok.

Actor 7: Fanbase

Fanbase communities have emerged as important resources in the music streaming ecosystem. Through social media and other digital platforms, individuals who love a music artiste and/or their music identify themselves with a community of loyal fans who use their digital resources such as social media numbers to promote the artiste, engage in planned streaming parties to increase the streaming numbers of their favourite artiste or offer cost-free services to the artiste at music concerts as volunteers. These fanbase groups create a community of loyal followers of a music artiste and identify themselves with the artiste, his or her music, lifestyle or even name. These fanbase communities are highly organised with formalized structures such as a President, Secretary and Organizer among others. They hold periodic meetings sometimes on social media or through social events and offer social support to members of the group in the form of their physical or monetary contribution to members during social activities such as naming ceremonies or weddings.

Besides the social support, their utmost relevance in the music streaming ecosystem is their aggressive involvement in promoting a streaming culture where it is largely considered "*a disgrace*" – Fan 4, to download for free the song of an artiste rather than stream it to bring revenue to the artiste. These fans remain key resources to the promotional efforts of artistes and are largely considered by various actors in the music industry as instrumental in the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana.

Actor 8: Musician Association (MUSIGA)

The Musicians Union of Ghana (MUSIGA) is the main association that embodies musicians in the country and seeks to promote their welfare. The findings of this study revealed that the major role of MUSIGA in the streaming ecosystem was educating musicians in the country about the value of streaming and the publishing rights. MUSIGA through donor funds and government support, has been organizing training workshops and development programmes for its members across the country.

Actor 9: Collective Management Organization (GHAMRO)

The collective management organization responsible for collecting royalties for musicians as copyright holders in Ghana is the Ghana Music Rights Organization (GHAMRO). GHAMRO constitutes part of the formal institutional set up that plays a role in ensuring that the rights of musicians are protected in the streaming ecosystem. GHAMRO has currently formed partnership with CAPASSO, a digital rights licensing agency in South Africa to assist it with the collection of digital performance rights from streaming services for their right holders in Ghana.

Actor 10: Copyright Office

The Copyright Office in Ghana also offers copyright protection services to musicians. The Office has a Copyright Monitoring Team which is made up of nine (9) members and has a responsibility for monitoring copyright work, investigating copyright infringements and undertaking anti-piracy activities.

The office however seems to lack the requisite capacity to enforce copyright laws though they have a responsibility in collaborating with DSPs to protect the rights of musicians.

Actor 11: Awards Company

Companies who also specialize in offering of music awards to musicians also play an important role in offering symbolic value and reputation to musicians. These companies because of the data provided on streaming platforms are now able to empirically decide musicians who deserve awards by relying on streaming data. The major award companies in Ghana are Charter House and 3Music who organize the Vodafone Ghana Music Awards and 3Music Awards respectively.

DISCUSSION

The findings regarding the various actors within the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana shed light on the complex dynamics of the music industry in the digital age. This discussion connects these findings to relevant literature and provides insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by these actors. The role of music artistes as central creative entrepreneurs is well-documented in the literature. Artists are at the heart of the creative process, composing, recording, and performing music (Hracs & Webster, 2021). However, this study highlights the lack of professional structures for artists in Ghana, leading them to take on multiple roles. This resonates with research on the challenges faced by independent artists who often handle various aspects of their careers (Price, 2016). Besides, the presence of various types of artiste managers, including family members and friends, reflects the diverse social capital that exists within the streaming ecosystem in Ghana.

In addition, Boomplay currently dominates the Ghanaian streaming market and its flexible business model highlight the power of regional streaming platforms (Barata & Coelho, 2021). With regards music distribution, aggregators play a critical role in promoting the work of music artistes and educating them on the benefits of streaming. The creation of marketing and promotion plans by aggregators and distributors reflects the industry's shift towards data-driven promotional strategies in the streaming era (Price, 2016). The integration of streaming data into music awards decisions reflects the changing metrics of success in the digital music era. Streaming data has become a significant factor in determining award recipients (Hracs & Webster, 2021). Fanbase communities' role in providing social support and promoting a streaming culture for their favourite artists reflects the importance of fan communities in the music industry (Duffett, 2016). These fans in the current music streaming era have become not only active consumers of music but also vital resources for artistes. Finally, though there are efforts by GHAMRO and the Copyright Office to protect artists' rights and collect royalties, these institutions face critical challenges that challenge their ability to cope in the streaming ecosystem.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study explores the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana, shedding light on the roles and challenges faced by various actors. Key findings reveal that artists serve as central creative entrepreneurs, yet many grapple with a lack of professional structures and dual professional roles, often engaging in other professions alongside their music careers. Artist-manager relationships are pivotal, even in the absence of major record labels, and family members or friends often take on managerial roles. There is therefore the need for more investment in the music industry to create more professional units that support musicians to thrive in the streaming era.

The study also has significant policy implications which include the need to formalize music structures, support local streaming platforms, and provide education and training for artists and industry professionals. Strengthening copyright regulation, integrating streaming data into award decisions, and fostering partnerships with influencers and fanbase communities can enhance the music streaming landscape.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the music streaming ecosystem in Ghana represents a dynamic digital transformation in the music industry. By adapting to the roles and challenges within this ecosystem and implementing policies that support artists and local platforms, Ghana's music industry can harness the full potential of the digital era while creating and sharing music with audiences worldwide.

APPENDIX

Table 1.

	Interviews	FGD	Observations	Documents
Artiste	7	3 FGD	5 Visits to Boomplay	Sample revenue
Sound Engineers	7	FGD 1 - 8 dancers	4 Visits to Music Events	Streaming party applications
Artiste manager	9	FGD – 3 respondents	1 Visit to VGMAs	Streaming milestones
DSP Expert (Boomplay)	6	FGD 3 – 3 respondents	2 Visits to of DWP	Music promotions
Distributor	4			
Award Company	2			
Fanbase	6			
Influencers	4			
GHAMRO	2			
Copyright	3			
MUSIGA	2			
Total	**52**	14		
Overall Total	**66**			

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