

The Impact of Digitalization on Music Consumption Behaviour and Artist Revenue Models in the Streaming Era

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000134>

Received: 16 July 2026; Accepted: 22 July 2026; Published: 01 August 2026

ABSTRACT

The Music Industry was seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It impacted how musicians made and marketed their music and how the accessibility of music for consumers changed. The aim of this study is to identify the relationship between the two aspects of music production and marketing and the consumption of music by listeners in the post-pandemic era. The study sample comprised five participants of different age groups: Participant 1 (18), Participant 2 (21), Participant 3 (37), Participant 4 (40), and Participant 5 (47). Personal interviews with each participant were conducted to collect data regarding changes observed in the industry, their opinions on these changes, and how music accessibility differs for them compared to the past. The data revealed that four out of the five participants believe that music has become much more accessible through social media platforms and streaming services, which have also enabled them to discover new songs and artists. Every participant agreed that the way music is made and marketed today is significantly different from how it used to be, and that this transformation accelerated due to the digitalization of music in the post-pandemic period.

Keywords: Music Industry, Marketing, Digitalization, Consumer Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on the music industry, both positive and negative. In terms of negative impact, the industry experienced substantial revenue losses as a result of the cancellation of live events and a decline in album sales (Denk et al., 2022). As a result, artists increasingly relied on streaming services such as YouTube and Spotify. Even though people were at home for extended periods, the pandemic witnessed a decline in music streams alongside an increase in music releases (Sim, 2024).

However, in terms of positive outcomes, the pandemic acted as a major accelerator of the digitalization of music. Since artists began relying more on streaming services rather than traditional radio broadcasting to promote their music, social media became an increasingly important marketing tool (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2024). The pandemic also facilitated creative business innovations, which had a fairly positive impact on the music industry (Olver & Lalchev, 2022). Being one of the most affected industries, artists had to adapt by creating new works with strong digital appeal. Alongside the quality of music, marketing also played a major role in maintaining an artist's relevance within the industry (Wahid, 2021). Artists relied heavily on social media to market their music, as people spent a significant amount of time on these platforms to connect, stay in touch with friends, and interact with new people around the world (Salo et al., 2013).

During lockdown, many people spent most of their time on social media platforms, where they interacted with people worldwide and even formed online communities and groups. In fact, there was an increase in music streaming and consumption among such groups, and many individuals began exploring different genres rather than limiting themselves to a single genre. This resulted in listeners discovering and supporting new and upcoming artists (Ghaffari et al., 2023). After observing how these emerging artists gained popularity, many musicians began employing similar marketing methods to promote their own music.

One very prominent change observed in music created by such artists is the change in song length. Artists began creating music tailored to short-form video and content creation applications such as TikTok and Instagram in order to appeal to a larger audience. Traditionally, songs often included a bridge (the third verse

of a song, usually different from the first two verses) toward the end. However, the lockdown period saw a decline in the inclusion of bridges in songs. Many songs that become viral on short-form content platforms gain popularity primarily because of specific 15–20-second snippets used in videos. In fact, people tend to resonate more with these particular snippets, known as hooks, rather than the complete song (Billboard, n.d.). As a result, song lengths have gradually shortened, and many artists, rather than creating music primarily for artistic value, are creating music for the masses by focusing more on the hook of the song (usually the chorus) than on the rest of the composition. In other words, artists are increasingly creating music based on trends in order to go viral on TikTok or Instagram and generate revenue.

How can catering music to social media increase the chances of commercial success today?

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a drastic increase in social media users. Due to social distancing measures and prolonged isolation, people sought ways to communicate and stay connected, which became possible through social media platforms (Feldkamp, 2021). Eventually, these platforms transformed from simple communication channels into digital marketplaces. Many businesses, in order to remain relevant during lockdown, began advertising their products online so that users could directly purchase them through their mobile phones or computers (Wandoko & Panggati, 2022).

Similarly, rather than relying on live concerts, events, and traditional promotional campaigns, artists increasingly relied on social media to remain relevant and reach larger audiences, thereby increasing their chances of achieving greater commercial success. They also began adapting their music to social media algorithms by studying the latest trends observed in viral content so that their songs would resonate with a wider audience (Wang, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a **qualitative research design** using a **thematic analysis** approach to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced music production, marketing strategies, and consumer music consumption. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding changes in the music industry rather than measuring variables quantitatively. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed responses while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences.

A total of **five participants** were selected using **purposive sampling**. The participants belonged to different age groups to obtain perspectives from multiple generations and understand how experiences with music consumption differed over time. The participants were aged **18, 21, 37, 40, and 47 years**, ensuring representation from both younger and older listeners who had experienced different stages of technological evolution in music consumption.

Data were collected through **individual semi-structured interviews** conducted either in person or through an online communication platform. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions focusing on:

- Changes in music consumption after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Accessibility of music through streaming platforms.
- The influence of social media on discovering music.
- Changes in music production and marketing.
- Opinions regarding viral music trends and controversies.
- Personal preferences while choosing music.

The interviews encouraged participants to discuss their experiences freely while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification and deeper understanding.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research before the interviews commenced and were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and no personally identifiable information has been disclosed in this study.

Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim before analysis. A **thematic analysis**, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify recurring patterns within the data.

The analysis involved six stages:

1. Familiarization with the interview transcripts.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Identification of recurring themes.
4. Reviewing and refining the themes.
5. Defining and naming the themes.
6. Preparing the final thematic report.

Five major themes emerged from the interviews:

- Accessibility to music through streaming platforms and social media
- Reliance on controversies to promote music
- Changes in how music is made
- Discovering music through social media and algorithms
- Qualities that make listeners prefer certain songs

These themes were then compared with existing literature to interpret the findings.

Consolidated Themes Emerging from the Interviews (N = 5)

Theme	Summary of Findings Across Participants	Representative Participant Evidence
Accessibility to Music through Streaming Platforms and Social Media	All participants agreed that music has become significantly more accessible because of streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube. Younger participants emphasized discovering new artists through Instagram Reels, whereas older participants reflected on the transition from cassettes, CDs, and radio to digital streaming. Participants also noted that greater accessibility has diversified their music preferences and increased overall music consumption.	"Music has become much more accessible because we have it on all our devices." (P1) "I have experienced the journey from cassettes to Spotify." (P3) "Instagram is probably the only way to discover new music." (P4)
Reliance on Controversies to Promote Music	Four participants believed that controversies, whether positive or negative, can increase an artist's visibility and ultimately benefit music promotion by generating curiosity and public discussion. One participant disagreed, arguing that the music industry does not intentionally rely on controversies because of the potential loss of listeners. Overall, participants viewed controversy as a high-risk but potentially effective promotional strategy.	"Even negative publicity is good publicity." (P3) "It's a 50-50 situation because it can also backfire." (P1) "I don't think music relies on controversies." (P5)

Changes in How Music is Made	Participants consistently observed that music production has shifted toward creating shorter, catchier songs optimized for social media platforms. They felt that contemporary music places greater emphasis on beats, hooks, dance trends, and viral snippets rather than lyrical depth or complete musical storytelling. Songs are increasingly designed to capture attention within the first few seconds and perform well on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.	"Only one catchy bridge is enough to make people listen." (P1) "Now it's less about lyrics and more about beats." (P2) "Music is less for melody and more for trends." (P4)
Discovering Music through Social Media and Algorithms	All participants acknowledged that social media algorithms influence music discovery. Younger participants believed algorithms largely reinforce their existing preferences while introducing similar artists. Older participants noted that social media also revives older songs, exposing new generations to music that was previously overlooked. Several participants admitted that they often know only the viral portion of a song rather than listening to the complete track.	"My algorithm already knows my taste." (P1) "Instagram introduced me to many Pakistani artists." (P2) "Old songs are becoming popular again." (P3) "I only know the 15-second viral part." (P4)
Qualities that Make People Like Certain Songs	Participants described different characteristics that make music appealing. Younger participants emphasized meaningful lyrics, emotional connection, and relatability. Older participants highlighted originality, versatility, melody, vocal ability, instrumental quality, and nostalgic value. Across all interviews, emotional resonance emerged as the strongest common factor influencing music preference.	"I connect with songs because of their lyrics and story." (P2) "Soft, melodious music with a unique sound appeals to me." (P3) "Songs should remind listeners of moments in their lives." (P5)

The findings suggest that the post-COVID digital music ecosystem has fundamentally transformed music production, promotion, and consumption. Participants consistently reported that streaming services and social media have increased accessibility while algorithms have become powerful gatekeepers of music discovery. Artists are perceived to be adapting their creative processes by producing shorter, trend-oriented songs optimized for virality. Although opinions differed regarding the effectiveness of controversies as promotional tools, most participants acknowledged their influence on audience attention. Despite these technological changes, emotional connection, relatability, originality, and meaningful storytelling remain central factors influencing listeners' music preferences.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between the ways in which music is currently produced and marketed to cater to consumers and how consumers respond to these contemporary marketing and production strategies. To establish this relationship, interviews were conducted with five participants representing different age groups (one participant aged 15–20 years, one aged 20–30 years, one aged 30–40 years, and two aged 40–50 years). This age-based distribution enabled comparisons between contemporary music consumption patterns and those observed across different generations.

Overall, participants expressed diverse opinions; however, several common patterns emerged. Four of the five participants agreed that music has become significantly more accessible with the rise of streaming platforms and social media, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant in the 40–50 age group partially agreed with this view but argued that streaming platforms have contributed less to increasing accessibility and more to curating music according to users' existing listening preferences through algorithm-driven recommendations. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that streaming platforms have revolutionized music consumption by providing highly personalized listening experiences (Barata & Coelho, 2021).

All participants agreed that substantial changes have occurred in the way music is produced compared to previous decades. Four of the five participants observed that songs have become considerably shorter and are increasingly centred around one particularly catchy section that has a high probability of becoming viral on social media platforms. According to Participant 2, contemporary songs also place less emphasis on meaningful lyrics than older songs. Instead, artists now focus on creating memorable choruses or hooks that are more likely to attract attention on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Consequently, many listeners

recognize songs only through their popular 15–20-second snippets rather than engaging with the complete composition, a trend that has also been discussed by Billboard (n.d.).

Despite concerns regarding artistic quality, participants acknowledged that these production strategies have benefited artists by increasing discoverability. Every participant indicated that they frequently discover new music through social media platforms, with one participant stating that social media has become their primary source for discovering new songs and artists. These findings support previous research suggesting that social media has become one of the most influential marketing tools within the contemporary music industry and is now considered indispensable for musicians seeking commercial success (Bodde, 2023).

Participants also discussed the growing use of publicity strategies beyond conventional marketing. Four of the five participants believed that artists sometimes deliberately become involved in controversies immediately before releasing new music in order to generate public attention and increase streaming numbers. Three participants further suggested that negative publicity often functions as positive publicity because it increases public curiosity about an artist's future activities. These perceptions align with the findings of Magnus-Sharpe (2026), who reported that controversies generally do not lead to sustained declines in streaming demand and may even contribute to temporary increases in music streams. However, one participant from the youngest age group argued that controversial publicity could negatively affect an artist's reputation and discourage some listeners from engaging with their music. To minimize such risks, artists frequently rely on public relations professionals who specialize in managing crises and protecting public image (Kanic, 2024).

One finding that differed from the initial expectations of the study was that, although participants acknowledged the increasing commercialization of music production through shorter songs, simplified lyrics, and viral-oriented compositions, every participant still reported valuing qualities such as originality, versatility, meaningful lyrics, and emotional storytelling when selecting music. Furthermore, all participants stated that they continue to listen to older music, while four of the five participants reported listening to older songs more frequently than recently released music. One participant also observed that social media has revived interest in older songs that initially received limited recognition, enabling younger audiences to rediscover music that had previously been overlooked.

Overall, the findings suggest that although music production and marketing strategies have evolved substantially in response to digital platforms, listeners continue to value authenticity and emotional connection. Regardless of the marketing techniques employed or the influence of algorithms on music discovery, participants consistently emphasized that long-term appreciation of music depends on its ability to resonate with listeners' emotions, experiences, and personal identities, consistent with the findings reported by Fosset (2024).

The findings further suggest that it has become increasingly important for artists to adopt contemporary marketing strategies and production techniques in order to remain competitive within the digital music industry. Nevertheless, artists should also preserve the artistic qualities of their work rather than focusing exclusively on commercialization. Creativity, originality, and musical distinctiveness continue to influence listeners' preferences and contribute to long-term audience engagement. While aligning music with current trends and platform algorithms may generate short-term visibility and commercial success, participants indicated that artists who develop versatile discographies, meaningful lyrics, and emotionally resonant music are more likely to sustain long-term listener loyalty than those who rely solely on viral trends. The findings of this study have several implications for the music industry, digital marketers, streaming platforms, and researchers.

Firstly, the findings demonstrate that **social media has evolved from being merely a promotional platform into an integral component of music discovery and consumption**. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube now function as gateways through which audiences discover artists and songs. This indicates that musicians and record labels should consider social media content as an essential element of their overall marketing strategy rather than a supplementary promotional tool.

Secondly, the study highlights the growing influence of **algorithm-driven recommendation systems** in

shaping consumers' listening habits. Streaming platforms increasingly determine which songs receive exposure through personalized recommendations, curated playlists, and viral trends. Consequently, artists may feel compelled to produce music that aligns with platform algorithms in order to maximize visibility and commercial success.

Thirdly, the findings suggest that although commercial success is increasingly associated with short-form, viral-friendly music, listeners continue to value authenticity, emotional connection, originality, and meaningful lyrics. This implies that while algorithm-oriented music may achieve immediate popularity, sustainable success is likely to depend on maintaining artistic quality alongside digital optimization.

The study also provides useful insights for music marketers. Rather than relying solely on controversial publicity or viral campaigns, marketers should develop long-term branding strategies that encourage stronger emotional relationships between artists and audiences. Such strategies may contribute to greater listener loyalty beyond temporary social media trends.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the growing literature examining the intersection of digital transformation, consumer psychology, social media marketing, and the music industry in the post-pandemic era.

Although this study provides valuable insights into post-pandemic music consumption, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study employed a **small sample size of only five participants**, limiting the generalizability of the findings. The experiences and opinions presented may not accurately represent the broader population of music consumers.

Secondly, the study used **purposive sampling**, which may introduce sampling bias, as participants were selected based on accessibility and relevance rather than random selection.

Thirdly, participants represented only a limited number of age groups. Although different generations were included, other demographic factors such as educational background, cultural context, occupation, and geographical location were not considered. These factors could significantly influence music consumption behaviour.

Another limitation is that the study relied entirely on **self-reported interview responses**. Participants' recollections and opinions may have been influenced by memory bias, personal preferences, or social desirability bias.

Furthermore, the research focused exclusively on listeners' perspectives. The views of artists, producers, music marketers, record labels, and streaming platform professionals were not included. Their perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how music production and marketing strategies have evolved.

Finally, because the study was conducted within a specific period following the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings represent consumer perceptions during a particular stage of digital transformation. As social media platforms and streaming algorithms continue to evolve rapidly, consumer behaviour may also change over time.

Future studies could expand upon the present research in several ways.

First, researchers should conduct studies using **larger and more diverse samples** to improve the generalizability of findings across different populations, countries, and cultural contexts.

Second, future research could adopt a **mixed-methods approach**, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to better understand both the depth and prevalence of changing music consumption behaviours.

Third, comparative studies could examine differences between **Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers** in terms of music discovery, streaming habits, and the influence of recommendation algorithms.

Future researchers may also investigate the perspectives of **artists, producers, record labels, music marketers, and streaming platform professionals** to better understand the business decisions influencing contemporary music production.

Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining whether current trends, such as shorter songs, viral hooks, and algorithm-driven music production, remain dominant or evolve as digital platforms continue to change.

Finally, future research could explore the psychological mechanisms underlying viral music, including the effects of emotional engagement, nostalgia, social identity, fear of missing out (FOMO), and algorithmic recommendations on consumers' music preferences and purchasing behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The Music Industry is a highly dynamic industry. Almost every decade, a new innovation emerges that completely changes the way people consume music. At the same time, it also changes how artists market their music and how they create music to cater to that innovation or technology. From radio to streaming platforms and social media, the way music has been discovered and consumed has changed significantly over time, and so has the way music is made and marketed.

Nowadays, most songs have a stronger commercial focus in order to reach larger audiences and cater to the latest trends and social media algorithms. Along with this, artists now spend considerably more on marketing than they did in previous decades. Since many aspects of the music industry were digitalized after the COVID-19 pandemic, new strategies have become necessary for artists to remain relevant in such a dynamic industry.

From the consumers' perspective, social media has become the primary source through which they discover new music. In fact, it also tends to shape consumers' listening preferences, as almost every consumer is active on social media and listens to music on a daily basis. Streaming platforms and social media have made music much more accessible, which is particularly advantageous for listeners with diverse musical preferences. Streaming platforms create curated playlists based on users' listening activity, and this feature also helps consumers discover new songs.

However, many consumers believe that most songs produced today are becoming increasingly generic because they are created primarily for virality by following trends circulating on social media. In contrast, most consumers still prefer listening to artists who are versatile and possess unique musical styles and strong lyricism. Songs with these qualities tend to resonate more deeply with listeners' emotions and personal experiences.

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