

an empirical basis to support such theories, which are informed by a diagnosis of the times. According to a recurring argument, it is crucial to reconstruct the actual ways in which human actors engage with digital platforms in terms of music production and reception. It is important to recognize that users do not necessarily utilize platforms in the same manner as platform companies may have initially envisioned during the development process (Hesmondhalgh 2022, 15; Jansson 2023, 3209). Consequently, while platform-deterministic approaches should be avoided, researchers must also prioritize investigating specific cultural domains within the platform context (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 19–20). This is necessary in order to substantiate previous theories, which are prone to over-generalization when it comes to the supposed effects of platformization on music creators. In order to do so, it is necessary to present detailed findings on how musicians in specific fields on different platforms are actually influenced by specific platform logics (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 4). In the words of Nieborg and Poell: “The challenge ahead is to develop in-depth case studies of how platformization unfolds in particular geographies, fields, and instances of cultural production” (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4288).

3.7 Empirical Research on Cultural Production on Platforms

What are the primary motivations for cultural workers to become active on specific platforms with specific content? What strategies do they develop to align with the underlying logic of these platforms? And how do such strategies manifest in the aesthetic objects that circulate on different platforms? These are the essential questions that must be addressed in (not only) music-related research on platforms if we wish to generate substantial insights into the socio-technical relationships between cultural workers and platforms.

The processes of cultural and media production have been extensively researched for some time, particularly in the fields of production studies and media industry studies. The analysis of working contexts in specific media industries and the corresponding processes of cultural production can now look back on a history of approximately eighty years (cf. Caldwell 2013; Vonderau 2013; Vonderau 2023). The key question in this field of research is why certain cultural objects emerged in certain historical phases and under certain economic, technological, social, and cultural conditions, subsequently becoming popular, while others remained virtually unknown or did not emerge

at all. A significant body of relevant research has focused on the impact of television and film (e.g., Banks, Conor, and Mayer 2016; Caldwell 2008; Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell 2009). Recently, this research has expanded to encompass the effects of platformization (Sundet 2021). In the context of music-related research on production cultures, researchers have thus far focused primarily on work processes in the recording studio and the network-like connections between people involved in the artistic, technical, and economic aspects of creating music recordings. These areas of research are described with terms such as “The Art of Record Production” and “The Musicology of Record Production” (e.g., Frith and Zagorski-Thomas 2012; Zagorski-Thomas 2014; Zagorski-Thomas et al. 2019). Researchers in this field typically employ established qualitative research methods, for instance by accompanying, observing, or interviewing subjects engaged in specific music-related production processes during their day-to-day work. These approaches are employed to empirically reconstruct the specific practices of those responsible for the products, thereby mapping the conditions under which aesthetic objects are created.

In principle, such approaches can be beneficial for an investigation of production cultures within the context of digital platforms. However, it is essential to first determine which groups of individuals to consider as potential interview partners in such research projects and whether researchers can effectively engage with these individuals to gain access to their working contexts and knowledge. Given that aesthetic objects in the platform context are always created on the basis of socio-technical relations between platforms and cultural practitioners and are sorted and curated by platforms, a dialogue with individuals responsible for the platforms would be a valuable means of gaining insight into the background of specific production cultures influenced by certain platform logics. This could include executives of platform companies as well as software developers and engineers responsible for the development of platform algorithms, or content curators and moderators. Nevertheless, contacting these individuals is often fraught with difficulties and is rarely feasible. This issue has been extensively discussed by Bonini and Gandini in their article on music curation on Spotify (Bonini and Gandini 2019). The authors employed a classical production studies approach in order to reconstruct the logics of music curation, which involved contacting, interviewing, and shadowing Spotify employees in their daily work. However, it became evident that Spotify as a company did not permit such research. Despite repeated attempts over several months, it was not possible to gain insight into the work of Spotify curators. The difficulty of gaining access to certain areas of the media industry

has long been a fundamental problem of production-based research, which, according to Bonini and Gandini, is further compounded in the case of platform companies (Bonini and Gandini 2019, 2). It is also pertinent to mention the research conducted by Nick Seaver, who was able to gain insights into the work of the individuals responsible for the development of Spotify's music recommendation algorithms (Seaver 2022). It is important to note that Seaver's data was collected between 2010 and 2013, a period before Spotify's transition from a music database to a provider of a "branded musical experience" (Prey 2020, 2). The applicability of his findings to the current situation is therefore limited. Given the current circumstances, it is unlikely that researchers will be able to gain similar access to this field of work. Bonini and Gandini therefore set out to identify individuals who had previously worked in the field of music curation but were no longer employed by platform companies. Additionally, interviews were conducted with individuals occupying various roles within the music industry, including those engaged in music management and software development. These individuals were also asked for their perspectives on music curation (Bonini and Gandini 2019, 4). According to Bonini and Gandini, this detour is crucial for gaining insights into platform-related work processes without being dependent on the willingness of platform companies to provide information (Bonini and Gandini 2019, 8).

This indicates that platform-related production research cannot be conducted by contacting leading employees, programmers, or content moderators of the platforms. It is more useful to seek dialogue with individuals who possess specific knowledge of the functional logic of particular platforms, but who do not work for the companies in question. As in the case of Bonini and Gandini, these individuals might be former employees of platform companies. Contacting successful content creators might also be plausibly useful. We can assume that such individuals have worked extensively with specific platform logics over an extended period of time and have developed strategies for becoming visible and successful on these platforms. As a result, they are highly familiar with certain functional logics of the platforms, but do not work for the platform companies and are therefore not subject to any confidentiality obligations. It is important to note that even successful content creators may not possess detailed knowledge of the functional logic of the platforms' algorithmic systems or platform-specific curation processes. However, based on their experience, they are able to provide insight into the strategies for success they have developed in the context of the platform. This promises valuable insights into how human actors *actually* interact with platforms.

Bonini and Gandini, as well as Seaver, employ established methodologies. Qualitative research methods such as expert interviews and participant observation are well-suited for reconstructing the knowledge of individuals engaged in platform-related production. Indeed, this field of research necessitates such approaches, as specific insider information can only be obtained through direct dialogue or by shadowing cultural workers (Nieborg, Duffy, and Poell 2020, 2–3).

Empirical case studies in the field of platform-related production research are currently scarce, although some instructive work has been published in recent years. In particular, two special issues of the journal *Social Media + Society* (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019a; Nieborg, Duffy, and Poell 2020a) should be mentioned here. The collected studies are characterized by their heterogeneity in terms of content and their methodological homogeneity. The cases examined include live streamers on Twitch (Johnson and Woodcock 2019), BookTubers (Tomasena 2019), webtoon producers (Kim and Yu 2019), and LGBTQ influencers (Duguay 2019). All of these studies employed qualitative methods, primarily interviews. This suggests that heterogeneous production fields have emerged on different platforms, but that these can generally be adequately explored using qualitative methods.

For instance, in their study of Chilean fashion and lifestyle content creators, Arriagada and Ibañez demonstrate that production strategies in this area are highly contingent upon the logics of the Instagram platform and the creators' respective interpretations of these logics. The interviewees adapt to the platform-specific styles of communication, for instance, taking great care to provide their followers with regular glimpses into supposedly private contexts. Moreover, advertising revenue is always measured in terms of reach, which underscores the necessity of developing specific strategies for engaging with the platform's algorithmic systems, with the objective of making their content more visible (Arriagada and Ibañez 2020, 9). In a study of LGBTQ influencers on Instagram, Duguay posits that a relatively homogeneous image of this group of people has emerged on the platform. As the author demonstrates through interviews with content creators, this is primarily due to the fact that the product managers have engaged extensively with the logic of the platform and subsequently developed promising strategies for success on the platform. This entails not only reproducing certain staging practices that have proven successful, but also utilizing popular hashtags. Content creators are largely guided by the platform-specific challenges that arise from the combination of Instagram's guidelines and user reactions (Duguay 2018, 106).

The findings of these two studies, briefly outlined here, demonstrate that specific socio-technical relations can emerge on digital platforms in certain niche segments. As is common in algorithmic cultures, human actors are to some extent dependent on the platform's algorithms, and they also have to engage with the media genres provided by the platforms and the aesthetics of self-presentation conventionalized on certain platforms. Algorithmic imaginaries must be developed in order to increase visibility and learn how to cope with the platform's affordances. As a result, platform-specific and niche-dependent presentation conventions emerge, which ambitious content creators must adhere to in order to be successful in the long run. These processes can only be reconstructed in detail in close dialogue with content creators. Few such studies have been carried out in the field of music research to date, but there are signs of such research approaches emerging. This is necessary in order to empirically validate hypotheses about supposed platform effects and streaming-friendly music. In doing so, it is crucial to reflect on the functioning of those platforms whose influences on processes of cultural production are to be examined. In the context of the present study, it is first necessary to elucidate in detail the specific platform logics that characterize TikTok. This will inform the development of a concrete research design, which will then be employed to empirically analyze the representation of jazz on the platform, investigating the contexts of production of cultural workers in the field of jazz on TikTok.