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Reconfiguring the field of professional music: New doxa and known capital forms on digital platforms

Abstract

Digital platforms are reshaping how career success is understood in the music industry. Existing research has mainly focused on the effects of platforms on music production, visibility, and professional practices, yet it has seldom explored how career success and capital are configured in platform environments. This conceptual article uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework to discuss how digital indicators become taken for granted makers of career success in the digital music field. It also outlines which forms of capital are performed within this context. This study argues that no new forms of capital have emerged in the digital music field and that existing forms are instead reinterpreted through digital practices. This conceptual clarification provides a foundation for applying Bourdieusian theory to research on digital cultural production.

Keywords: musicians' career success, digital platform, field of music, cultural production, doxa

1. Introduction

The rise of twenty-first-century digital technologies has changed how music is produced, distributed, and consumed. The spread of streaming services and social media platforms has created an alternative route for musicians to enter the industry (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Woods & Davis, 2024). Music creation and promotion no longer rely entirely on record labels, traditional broadcast media, or live performance institutions (Cayari, 2011). Musicians can create and record music at home, release their music online, and reach global audiences through digital platforms (Bröndum, 2019; Chen & Wang, 2025; Hracs, 2012; Tessler & Flynn, 2015) such as Spotify, TikTok or SoundCloud. This shift has expanded the ways in which musicians access markets and audiences, and it has also reshaped their musical practices and career development. The music industry's understanding of career success has changed as well. In the traditional recording era, album sales, awards, and the scale and revenue of live performances served as the core indicators of a musicians' career success (Baym, 2013; Gourévitch, 2023; Hughes et al., 2013; Perrin, 2020; Sutton, 2020). However, today, digital success indicators, such as platform visibility, online fan bases, engagement levels, and playlist placements (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025; Woods & Davis, 2024) have become decisive. Digital platforms have become both the main channel for distributing music and the central place for musicians to carry out their professional practices and pursue their career development.

Existing studies have explored the impact of digital platforms on the music industry from several perspectives. Prior research shows that digitalization has lowered entry

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barriers. This gives musicians more autonomy and opportunities to produce and distribute their work (Bartleet et al., 2019). Scholars have also discussed the process of "disintermediation". The term refers to removing traditional intermediaries (e.g., record labels) from the distribution chain. With digital technologies, musicians can bypass these gatekeepers (Rogers, 2013b, 139). At the same time, these developments have led to "reintermediation". This means that while some intermediaries disappear from the field (Chircu & Kauffman, 1999, 110), new ones (digital platforms) have emerged and now influence music industry (Bernardo & Martins, 2014, 23). Another line of research explores the changes in revenue models. Under streaming, musicians are paid per listen. This differs from the earlier system, where income came from selling physical recordings or digital copies (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; van Kan, 2025). However, although some studies consider parts of the discussion on career success (e.g., Raffa, 2025; Woods & Davis, 2024), none of them treat it as their central concern. Digital indicators of career success are often mentioned as if they were simply part of the digital platform environment. They appear natural and taken for granted. However, few studies explain why these indicators come to be treated as self-evident measures of success, how they guide musicians' practical choices, or how they are reproduced and stabilized over time. A systematic explanation of these processes is still missing.

Similarly, although most studies recognize that the standards of success within platforms environments are changing, the value structures and capital logics behind these standards remain insufficiently explored. Existing research always focuses on describing platforms phenomena, such as the opacity of algorithms and the ways algorithmic systems influence musicians' creative and professional practices (Bucher, 2018; Karizat et al., 2021; O'Dair & Fry, 2019). Although Bourdieu's theory remains influential in digital research, few studies discuss which forms of capital are regarded as effective within digital platforms. Most work treats digital platforms as digital fields and focuses on capital conversion within specific platform contexts. For example, Schmitz (2017) viewed online dating as a digital social space and analyzed the structure of social space, habitus, and capital within it. However, the forms of capital that shape partner selection differ from those that shape musicians' careers. In addition, musicians' digital environments still involve other sources of capital and power, such as traditional gatekeepers and the platforms themselves (Järvekülg & Wikström, 2022; O'Dair & Fry, 2019; Raffa, 2025). We argue that those mechanisms active in and around digital platforms have not completely replaced those capital structures that existed in the traditional recording era. A system has emerged in which those forms of capital known through Bourdieusian theory comprise new and digital skills. Some studies proclaim the rise of new forms of capital, such as digital cultural capital and digital capital (Julien, 2015; Paino &Renzulli, 2013). In particular, digital capital is often presented as a new form of capital in research on the digital divide and digital inequalities (Ragnedda, 2018).

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These developments have resulted in some conceptual ambiguity in latter attempts to extend Bourdieu's capital framework.

To address these research gaps, this article draws on Bourdieu's theory to explore how the doxa of career success is constructed within digital platform environments. It discusses how digital indicators such as visibility, exposure, and audience scale become self-evident logics in musicians' evaluation systems and therefore constitute the doxa of career success on digital platforms. This doxa also incorporates elements of earlier doxa from the traditional recording era. In addition, the article reviews Bourdieu's capital concepts and brings together existing research to explain how different forms of capital operate or extend within the digital field. It also considers whether new forms of capital have emerged. More specifically, the article focuses on two research questions.

(1) What taken for granted assumptions about career success constitute the new doxa in the emerging digital field of professional music?

(2) What forms of capital structure career opportunities on digital platforms?

Through this analysis, the study provides a theoretical basis for understanding how platforms organize musicians' professional practices and competitive relations. It also offers directions for future empirical observation. In addition, the discussion expands the theoretical perspectives on career success in the digital era. It also offers a way to think about how platform intervention reshapes cultural production.

2. Overview: Changing field of professional music

2.1 The traditional music industry and its success conventions

In the traditional music industry dominated by the recording sector, musicians' career development was closely tied to industry organizations. Their access to distribution, public exposure, and resources usually depended on support from record labels, traditional media, and live performance institutions (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Hirsch, 1972). In this system, musicians typically carried out their professional activities through specific organizations. For example, musicians signed to record labels were required to follow company arrangements for all aspects of their musical work (Maudonnet et al., 2019; O'Dair & Fry, 2019). Musicians employed by orchestras or ensemble structures had to comply with internal routines, rehearsal schedules, performance arrangements, and organizational evaluation practices (Westby, 1960). Musicians who worked under contracts with record labels faced clear institutional constraints on their creative work and career development. Those affiliated with performance institutions encountered similar limitations. Some independent musicians operated outside these organizational structures. They appeared to be free from institutional control, yet the traditional commercial model created substantial barriers for them. High recording costs and limited distribution channels made entry into the industry extremely difficult (Ogden et al., 2011).

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As a result, within the structure of the traditional music industry, a small number of organizations held significant power by controlling the main marketing and distribution channels.

Among these organizations, major record labels held the most dominant position (Österblom et al., 2015; Sen, 2010). Some studies describe the industry as a vertically integrated economic sector. A small group of labels owned recording technology and built global distribution and marketing networks. These labels controlled every stage of the music production process (Eiriz & Leite, 2017). They also established A&R (Artists and Repertoire) departments to identify and acquire music suitable for recording and release (Marrington, 2024). At the same time, media such as television, radio, and print outlets played a central role in promoting and exposing music. Radio stations largely determined which music the public listened to (Laor & Galily, 2020). A common practice in the industry was that major record labels used third-party intermediaries to influence radio stations. They relied on their financial leverage to encourage stations to play the music of their artists during regular programming (Messitte, 2014). Print media were also important for helping musicians gain wider recognition within mainstream music (Järvekülg & Wikström, 2022). In addition, professional award systems further reinforced the industry's internal standards of evaluation. Winning major competitions often created cumulative advantages for emerging musicians, and early winners were more likely to attract attention from industry insiders (Menger, 2014, 230; Merton, 1968). National level awards were usually decided by juries composed of industry professionals. Receiving such awards was not only seen as professional recognition but also shaped musicians' career opportunities and market positions (Malcomson, 2013; Schmutz, 2016).

Although these institutions controlled key stages of production, distribution, and evaluation, decisions were not made by organizations as a whole. Instead, agents in the music industry were assigned specific professional roles which allowed them to carry out the tasks of selection and judgment. In general, intermediary roles were fulfilled by record labels, A&R people, managers, distributors, and others (Barna, 2019). Some studies describe these decision makers as gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002), or creative managers (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 2006). They determined which musicians received attention, contracts, and market opportunities (Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009).

Musicians' success requires multiple forms of understanding. On the one hand, some studies approach success from an artistic perspective and emphasize aesthetic achievement. For example, musicians' works may be included in musical reference books or receive evaluations from experts and critics (Kozbelt, 2005; Simonton, 1986). On the other hand, some studies focus on musicians' reputations. Cultural intermediaries (e.g., A&R managers) rely on evaluation standards to assess artists' reputations and treat them as indicators of artistic quality (Podolny, 2005). They

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use these assessments to rank musicians in the market (Aspers, 2009; Bielby & Bielby, 1994). In this hierarchical order, cultural intermediaries who hold evaluative power can push higher status musicians toward larger markets. They enable these musicians to convert reputation into greater rewards or opportunities (Aspers, 2011). These two approaches both show that musicians' success depends on experts or other intermediaries in the industry. They are the gatekeepers mentioned above. This study also agrees with Zwaan et al. (2009), who argue that these understanding of success are more suitable for well-known musicians than for ordinary or emerging ones. Ordinary musicians lack visibility, and emerging musicians have not yet accumulated sufficient reputation. Therefore, in this article, we consider success from the standpoint of ordinary musicians in order to provide a broader understanding and wider applicability for the music industry.

Research on how musicians' career success is measured and evaluated remains limited. Generally, existing studies distinguish between subjective and objective career success. Subjective success reflects musicians' own perceptions of their career situations. It includes satisfaction with creative or performance activities (Sutton, 2020), satisfaction with career development (da Silva Henrique et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2013), and positive feedback from audiences (Toval-Gajardo et al., 2025). Several studies, particularly those conducted in Australia, show that musicians rarely view financial independence or long-term sustainable careers as their ultimate goals (Rogers, 2013a). They tend to prefer moderate levels of success and value the sense of achievement they gain throughout the process (Hughes et al, 2013). In some interviews, musicians also highlight the satisfaction they experience when creating music. This sense of satisfaction becomes especially strong when they realize that their music helps others understand and process emotions (Toval-Gajardo et al., 2025). These studies collectively show that musicians' subjective success does not rely solely on material rewards or recognition from professional institutions.

This article focuses more on objective career success. Many studies point out that album sales have long been regarded as the main indicator of musicians' success (Brooks, 2004; Liebowitz, 2004; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Zwaan et al., 2009). Gourévitch (2023, 2) describes album sales as a "sacrosanct reference point" of the music industry. In the recording era, album sales were one of the main sources of profit for record companies. Zwaan and ter Bogt (2009) also note that success means earning sufficient income and becoming a professional musician who could generate profit for a record label. This shows that musicians' career success depended on economic outcomes. However, some studies point out that most musicians earn very little from recorded music, including releases and sales. They receive most of their income from concert ticket sales rather than actual recorded (Aspray, 2008). For musicians who are active in live performance circuits, audience reception, attendance levels, and being perceived as a worthwhile live act also form part of the evaluation system (Baym, 2013; Marrington, 2024; Negus, 2011; Nørholm Lundin, 2022; Perrin, 2020; Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). In addition, the total score

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on the U.S. Billboard charts, the number of charted albums, the length of chart presence, and whether an album reached the top position have all been treated as important indicators of commercial success (Gourévitch, 2023). For example, James Brown's Live at the Apollo (1963) remained on the U.S. charts for 66 weeks, which has been regarded as a major achievement (Perrin, 2020). Some studies also point out that, until the 1990s, Billboard's rankings were not fully based on actual sales. The industry standard relied on a sampling of record store personnel rather than direct measures of sales. The chart visibility largely came through radio airplay (Baym, 2013). Similarly, exposure through traditional media, such as television and radio play counts (Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009), and evaluations in print media, such as Rolling Stone (Perrin, 2020), were also treated as key indicators of career success. These practices reflected the power of traditional media in defining what counted as success. In addition, for musicians who work in the symphony orchestras, the central criteria for evaluating success are salary levels and the length of the performance season. For some musicians, becoming an orchestra player at a certain point in their career was seen as a marker of success (Westby, 1960). For composers, commercial publications, victories in major competitions, and media reviews are important indicators of success (Menger, 2014; Sutton, 2020). Although these indicators are often treated as objective standards, they are not emerging on their own. Instead, they reflect rules shaped by the power structure in the industry. They key actors behind these indicators are usually gatekeepers, such as A&R staff, media managers, juries and critics. They decide whether a work is released, broadcast, included in charts, or circulated through musical networks and resources (Giuffre, 1999; Jones, 1997; Peterson & Berger, 1975). Therefore, musicians' objective career success depends on recognition from industry. Musicians are regarded as successful only when they meet the standards defined by the industry and pass through gamekeepers' selection.

Although many studies have discussed many indicators of musicians' career success in the traditional recording era, such as those mentioned earlier, they tend to analyse each indicator separately. These studies show the importance of album sales, exposure through traditional media, live performances, and professional awards (Menger, 2014; Perrin, 2020; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). Some research also explains how gatekeepers use these indicators to influence musicians (e.g., Laor & Galily, 2020; Marrington, 2024; Sen, 2010; Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). However, these studies approach individual indicators from separate angles. For instance, Gourévitch (2023) and Perrin (2020) focus on the U.S. charts, while Malcomson (2013) emphasizes the role of professional awards. Few studies address the broader question of what dimensions constitute musicians' career success. In other words, most research has not developed an integrated analytical framework or evaluation system. In addition, almost all studies emphasize album sales and profitability, yet none of them specify concrete quantitative standards. For example, they do not explain how many albums must be sold for an artist to be considered successful,

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or what level of ticket sales or audience attendance in concerts and music festivals counts as influential. These questions remain unanswered in the existing literature. Although the scale proposed by Zwaan and ter Bogt (2009) is one of the few attempts to quantify these indicators, it provides limited clarification of how the scoring levels are defined. They used a Likert-type scale to assign scores to media exposure, CD sales, and performance frequency over the past twelve months. However, the scale does not explain the basis for its scoring ranges. Overall, most studies focus on single dimensions and do not consolidate them into a unified scale or present the relationships among these indicators from a broader perspective.

2.2 Platformization and new success logics

With the development of digital technologies, the music industry underwent significant transformation after entering the twenty-first century. The rise of digital music followed a major shift from analog formats (e.g., vinyl records and cassette tapes) to CDs in the 1980s. The establishment of the MP3 format came next and eventually contributed to the widespread adoption of the iPod, which lead people to abandon older physical formats rapidly (Chen & Wang, 2025; De Notaris & Savonardo, 2022; Leyshon, 2009; Sen, 2010). Building on these developments, digital music services enabled the large scale spread of illegal file sharing, such as Nasper and Pirate Bay. Subsequent legal models for music downloads and streaming (e.g., iTunes and Spotify) gradually replaced the earlier piracy ecosystem. They made listening to music simpler, cheaper, and more convenient (Bröndum, 2019). Since the 2010s, internet-based media platforms have also reshaped several sectors of the music industry, especially the domain of music consumption (Wikström, 2019). Physical album sales have continued to decline, and on-demand streaming services have taken their place. Music consumption has shifted from traditional models, which relied on record labels, signed artists, radio, and physical formats, toward a digital music economy (Ng & Gamble, 2024). At the same time, streaming platforms (e.g., Apple Music and Spotify) and social media platforms (e.g., TikTok and Instagram) have become major channels. They help musicians reach global audiences and interact directly with listeners (Choi, 2016; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Watson et al., 2022). These platforms also allow musicians to build closer relationships with their audiences. They can also monetize these connections and thereby create the possibility of a more sustainable career (Baym, 2011; Breen, 2004). Musicians' everyday practices on digital platforms extend far beyond the creative work that defined the traditional recording era. Negus (2019, 369) notes that musicians increasingly find themselves redefined as "content providers" rather than creative producers. Most participants in Ng and Gamble (2024) study strongly agree with this observation. Compared with the conventional recording process, this shift reduces the need for collaboration with other specialists (e.g., marketing strategists) and increase musicians' individual workloads. They not only have to compose, produce, and record music but also take on multiple additional respon-

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sibilities, such as distribution, promotion, communication, and event planning (Eiriz & Leite, 2017; Hracs, 2016; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Zhang et al., 2024). Meanwhile, musicians commonly promote their work across multiple platforms, such as homepages, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Myspace (Spilker, 2012). They use these spaces to showcase their work, maintain their artistic brand, and attract attention (Meier, 2017; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). Some musicians release short subtitled clips through Stitch and invite audiences or other users to sing along or create responses. They also encourage forms of remixing or reinterpretation (Tintiangko et al., 2023). These strategies strengthen audience participation and expand the visibility of their work. Some musicians prefer to interact with their audiences through livestreaming, for example by using TikTok Live (Tintiangko et al., 2023). Others, such as Yung Skrrt, stream their creative process on platforms like Twitch (Ng & Gamble, 2024). Although independent musicians in the traditional recording era also undertook self-promotion and marketing work beyond creative production, digital platforms have intensified the need to maintain visibility (Burgess, 2021). These tasks are no longer limited to independent musicians. They have become necessary activities for all musicians who seek to build and sustain their careers.

The early waves of digitalization sparked discussions about digital disintermediation (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017; Rogers, 2013b; Wikström, 2019). Scholars widely argue that the internet weakened the control traditionally exercised by gatekeepers in the music industry (Hracs, 2012; Leyshon, 2009; Pras et al., 2013). McLeod (2005, 530–531) even describes this shift as having "broken the music monopoly that has existed for a century." Many studies also highlight that these developments created a more democratic space for musicians to express themselves (Woods & Davis, 2024).

However, in practice, disintermediation has not been fully realized. Instead, a process of reintermediation has emerged (Bernardo & Martins, 2014; Wang & de Kloet, 2016). Digital platforms have become new gatekeepers. In the case of streaming services, "platform gatekeepers" refer to all employees involved in the operation of the platform (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, 3). Twitter represents a form of "networked gatekeeping" (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, 141). Algorithms, understood as computational processes used to make decisions, are also deployed as gatekeepers (Tufekci, 2015, 206). In this study, these forms are collectively referred to as gatekeepers. In addition, digital platforms function as inhuman intermediaries that shape musicians' activities on these platforms (Woods & Davis, 2024). Streaming services (e.g., Spotify) use machine learning and large-scale data analysis to manage and interpret music and user behaviour. That enables the delivery of highly personalized experiences (Bonini & Magaudda, 2024; Fry, 2019). Algorithms also influence listeners' choices through the curation of playlists (Kjus, 2016; Morris, 2015; Prey, 2020a). As a result, playlist placement has become highly significant for musicians (Charles, 2020; Fry, 2019; Ng & Gamble, 2024). However, algorith-

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mic recommendation systems are often described as opaque black box. Musicians struggle to understand what actually influences the visibility or recognition of their music on streaming platforms (Hodgson, 2021; O'Dair & Fry, 2019) or on social media (Bucher, 2012; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Even successful musicians and industry marketers know very little about how these algorithms operate internally (Rauh, 2024). This lack of transparency creates what Bucher (2018, 84) calls a "threat of invisibility." It means that when algorithms overlook a musicians' work. When this happens and the work is not recommended, displayed, or exposed, the musician's chances of being seen on the platform are greatly reduced. Musicians are therefore forced to adjust their creative and promotional strategies based on what they believe about how algorithms operate. For example, to align with streaming metrics and playlist dynamics, musicians shorten songs and intros. They also add memorable hooks or choruses that can be used in short videos (Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). These practices are often described as part of "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2016, 31) or "algorithmic folk theories" (Karizat et al., 2021, 5).

Although digital platforms have had a profound impact on musicians, the older market structures have not disappeared (Schwetter, 2019). Traditional music gatekeepers continue to play important roles in the industry (Barna, 2019). Record labels still control access to global mass media (Leenders et al., 2015). Even musicians who gain initial visibility through the internet often rely on record labels for further promotion and marketing (Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). Additionally, power in the music industry continues to be shaped by access to capital, financing, and marketing support. These resources are still concentrated in the hands of major companies (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2014). Record labels provide musicians with the infrastructure and networks needed to maximize revenue (Brown, 2012). Major record labels also maintain close relationships with music streaming platforms (Qu et al., 2021; Tintiangko et al., 2023). They have acquired equity stakes in several companies and platforms that provide access to streaming music (Negus, 2019). They also use their copyright holdings to exert market dominance over digital streaming service providers (Carter, 2024). Some interviewed curators also note that new releases from major record labels can be promoted on the front pages of streaming platforms through paid arrangements. This can increase their musicians' exposure (Barna, 2019). This effort to secure visibility resembles earlier practices in the traditional music economy, such as paying for radio airplay (Messitte, 2014). Record labels also enter agreements with streaming companies to monetize their music catalogues (Perrin, 2020). Overall, digital platforms have indeed introduced new forms of gatekeeping. At the same time, traditional industry intermediaries have quickly adapted and incorporated digital logics. They create a hybrid and opaque gatekeeping system (Maasø & Spilker, 2022). The rise of digital platform has changed how musicians' career success is measured. Unlike in the past, success is now linked to numerical indicators. These metrics are visible and easily accessible

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on platforms interfaces. They appear to signal transparent levels of popularity and engagement (Baym, 2013). The higher numerical values are widely interpreted as evidence of greater visibility and influence (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Raffa, 2025). They are also taken to indicate stronger economic potential (Baym, 2013). Following this trend, studies have gradually begun to examine the composition of digital indicators. Researchers focus on various engagement metric, such as likes, follower counts, engagement rate, comments, and shares (Baym, 2013; Carter, 2024; Florina & Andreea, 2012; Hughes et al, 2013; Jones, 2021; Morgan, 2019; Raffa, 2025; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). In particular, Hughes et al (2013) argue that the number of likes or followers is crucial for subsequent industry success.

However, in the digital era, platform metrics are not the only indicators of career success. In practice, digital and traditional indicators often coexist and are assessed together. Digital metrics have also become a prerequisite for traditional gatekeepers when considering new signings. Record labels expect musicians to demonstrate quantifiable market potential on digital platforms, such as viral reach or engagement rates. As a result, a strong social media fan base has become a necessary condition for securing a record deal (Arditi, 2020; Carter, 2024; Galuszka & Wyrzykowska, 2017; Maasø & Hagen, 2019; Prey, 2020b; Raffa, 2025). A&R assessments are not limited to digital metrics. They also incorporate qualitative elements such as audience sentiment, algorithmic momentum on TikTok, and long-term patterns of fan retention (Raffa, 2025). Woods (2023) interviewed industry professionals who stated that it is foolish to base decisions solely on likes or streaming numbers. They still value the potential of a song or an artist to sell. Therefore, evaluating musicians' success today requires a complex equation. It involves not only popularity across singles, concert tickers, albums, streaming data, and social media platforms (deWaard, 2021). Evaluating musicians' success also involves their commercial income. Many established musicians earn income from their current commercial success. They also earn revenue from compilations, touring, and catalogue resales (Gourévitch, 2023).

Existing research shows a clear shift in the indicators used to evaluate career success. Overall, these studies describe a transition in the professional music field from the traditional industry toward digital platforms (Carter, 2024; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025). Resource allocation has moved away from traditional gatekeepers and toward algorithm-driven platform systems (Fry, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Karakayali et al., 2018; Prey, 2018, 2020b; Qu et al., 2021; Woods & Davis, 2024). Career evaluation has shifted from offline sales to online sales and visibility (Baym, 2013; Gourévitch, 2023; Ng & Gamble, 2024). A hybrid structure has also emerged, and traditional and digital indicators operate together (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Morgan, 2019; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025). However, these discussions still remain largely descriptive. They do not provider a systematic analysis of how traditional and digital indicators work together in industry practice Most studies only explain that digitalization has changed how career success is mea-

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sured. But they do not address the structural logic behind this shift, how different indicators jointly shape industry norms, or how this hybrid structure forms and operates in the music field.

These shifts show that the value system and professional norms in the music field are being reshaped. Evaluation standards and resource allocation are on longer dominated by a single system. They are shaped by both traditional and digital logics. As platform governance and data-driven practices intervene in the field, musicians' career success is being redefined. The power relations within the industry are changing as well. To understand this structural logic behind this transformation, the following sections introduce Bourdieu's field-doxa-capital framework. This framework helps explain how digital platforms restructure the field of professional music, how they legitimize new principles pf evaluation, and how these changes influence capital structures ad career development.

3. Theoretical framework: A bourdieusian perspective

This study does not propose a new theoretical framework. It uses Bourdieu's conceptual tools to understand how digital platforms reshape the field of professional music, especially the standards of career success and the related structures of resources. To explain these structural changes, this study adopts Bourdieu's field-doxa-capital perspective. It discusses the logic of career success (doxa) and the forms of capital in the digital field of professional music. The goal is to understand how these dynamics influence musicians' career development.

3.1 Digital platforms as a new field

Digital platforms have created new spaces for musical production and distribution. Musicians now develop their careers both within the traditional recording industry and digital platforms. In digital research, several studies treat platforms as new social fields (Airoldi, 2018; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Levina & Arriaga, 2014; Verwiebe & Hagemann, 2024). Therefore, this article sees digital platforms as a new field of professional music. It discusses the relationship between this digital field and the traditional music field.

From Bourdieu's perspective, the field is a social space structured by specific rules, competitive logics, and systems of resource distribution (Bourdieu, 1989, 16; Lueg et al., 2023, 458). A social field provides the structural frame in which field members (here: musicians) compete in order to reach or preserve favorable positions (Graf & Lueg 2025). Digital platforms display these characteristics. They establish what participants can and cannot do through account registration requirements, content posting rules, and community governance policies. For example, musicians on Facebook must follow the platform's community standards and monetization policies to become eligible for content monetization. These requirements restrict many cover musicians who work with copyrighted material (Anacin, 2023). Plat-

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form preferences also shape which music is more likely to be promoted. Musicians shorten music and add hooks to increase the chances that their music will be used in social media (Polak & Schaap, 2025; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Musicians' visibility varies according to their position within the platform. They receive different levels of exposure depending on how they perform in recommendation systems. This creates distinctions between central and peripheral positions (Deldjoo et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2024; Hesmondhalgh & Sun, 2024; Maasø & Hagen, 2019). Digital platforms act not only as distribution channels like radio station but also as environments shaped by rules, algorithms, and user feedback. These elements influence how musicians present themselves and attract audiences.

Compared with the traditional recording field, digital platforms do not replace it. They create a new space for activity outside the existing system. In the traditional field, resources are mainly controlled by record labels, traditional media and live performance institutions (Barna, 2019; Perrin, 2020; Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). These organizations allocate resources through signing, production, promotion, and touring. They determine whether musicians can debut, how they are positioned, and how much exposure they receive (Cannizzo et al., 2023; Kwon et al., 2018; Netherton, 2017). In the digital field, algorithms and classification tags become key mechanisms that shape visibility (Fry, 2019; Raffa, 2025). Musicians do not need to rely only on record label or traditional media. They can gain attention through short videos, livestreaming, and interactions with fans (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). As a result, most musicians operate in two coexisting fields. They may still gain professional recognition through traditional routes, such as touring (Everts, 2023; Gourévitch, 2023). Meanwhile, they must compete for visibility on digital platforms to maintain audience relationships and market presence (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). Because this dual structure is highly complex, this article only focuses on digital platforms as a digital field.

3.2 New doxa: redefinition of success

Bourdieu (1977, 164) describe "doxa" as the way the social world is experienced, by agents in a certain social field, as a "natural world" and accepted as self-evident. It is through misrecognition that the underlying power relations are concealed and come to appear natural. Doxa is treated as something taken for granted (ibid., 165–166), a set of unquestioned beliefs through which people understand the world and their own position in it. These beliefs make social divisions, practices, and one's own circumstances appear "natural" (s. also Charlesworth, 2000, 30; Vakalopoulos, 2023, 262).

In the digital music field, career success is no longer determined only by traditional industry criteria. As music production and distribution move into platform environments, musicians increasingly organize their practices around what they believe

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makes a musical career in the digital age. This article discusses its formation across three aspects.

First, the distribution structure of digital platforms shapes musicians' choices. Platforms control content distribution and exposure mechanisms. This determines the visibility of musicians and their work at the structural level. Platforms do not explicitly require musicians to increase streams or engagement. However, recommendation systems, playlist curation, and ranking mechanisms all operate through measurable indicators (Morgan, 2019; Prey, 2020a; Qu et al., 2021). Musicians realize that they need to follow the platform's algorithmic preferences if they want their work to be shown to more listeners (Woods & Davis, 2024; van Kan, 2025). Bucher (2018, 84) describes this novel orientation by musicians towards algorithmic indicators as a "threat of invisibility." For musicians, their income from performances and fan services depends heavily on their visibility on streaming platforms (O'Dair & Fry, 2019). If they do not stay active, their work may struggle to reach new listeners (Prey & Lee, 2024; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). In this process, platforms control the thresholds through which content enters the audience's field of view. This gives them the power to distribute career possibilities for musicians. As a result, digital indicators become the guidelines, and digital visibility the new doxical belief, musicians feel obliged to follow. These indicators appear natural within the industry because platform structures embed them in daily practice. Pursuing streams, engagement rates, and similar metrics is treated as a legitimate action that requires no justification. By controlling visibility and the flow of resources, algorithmic structures cause these indicators to be internalized as the default rules of career success.

Second, market and industry practices give these platform indicators their legitimacy. Algorithms alone cannot turn digital metrics into shared industry norms. When the industry begins to use these indicators for talent selection and investment decisions, the metrics gain further legitimacy. Record labels, A&R managers, and commercial brands always rely on streams, follower numbers, and engagement data to consider a musicians' market potential and commercial value (Baym, 2013, 2018; Carter, 2024; Raffa, 2025; Rauh, 2024; Scott, 2012; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). Therefore, digital indicators not only reflect audience behavior but also guide how industry resources are allocated. In this structure, success is no longer determined mainly by artistic qualities or professional evaluators (e.g., critics). It depends on market-oriented data performance (Baym, 2013; Cayari, 2011; Evans & Baym, 2022; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Prey, 2018). Higher numbers signal greater commercial potential and a more stable audience base. They can directly shape whether musicians receive performance opportunities, collaboration requests, or recording contracts (Baym, 2013, 2018; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Watson et al., 2022). These metrics also help industry actors assess whether a musician is likely to attract attention before committing resources. The institutionalized use of these metrics within the industry means that digital indicators are no longer treated as simple

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numbers. They are viewed as objective and legitimate standards of career success. With such broad acceptance, musicians also tend to treat them as benchmarks for assessing their own career status. They follow these indicators as the basis for their actions. In the end, industry institutions legitimize these metrics through their reliance on them. This process stabilizes digital indicators as natural rules within the music field.

Third, beyond platform structures and market institutions, musicians' practices also push digital indicators to become unavoidable industry norms. On platforms, the visibility of a work often depends on systematic feedback. Content that performs well is more likely to be promoted (Hesmondhalgh & Sun, 2024; Jerasa & Burriss, 2024; Pilati et al., 2024; Raffa, 2025; van Kan, 2025; Watson et al., 2022; Woods & Davis, 2024). To gain more visibility and career opportunities, musicians adjust their creative and promotional strategies to fit platform logics (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Prey & Lee, 2024; Rauh, 2024; Toval-Gajardo et al., 2025). They must act as skilled content creators. They go beyond making music, recordings, and performances and update their social media presence on a regular basis (Everts et al., 2021; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Thomson, 2013; Tintiangko et al., 2023). They also need to learn digital tools and follow platform trends as part of their daily work (Bröndum, 2019; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Although digital platforms operate as black boxes to their users, musicians still try to develop their own strategies in practice (Bucher, 2016; Karizat et al., 2021). Jerasa & Burriss (2024, 124) note that some musicians rely on "TikTok lore" or rumored tips. They combine these tips with their own experiences of past content that either failed or went viral. Some musicians believe that posting on Monday, Thursday, or Tuesday around 4 p.m. produces the best results. They also believe that videos using trending audio are more likely to succeed. In addition, musicians sometimes adjust their creative work to match popular TikTok audio, even if the audience will not hear that audio in the final product. These practices reflect musicians' attempts to work with the (assumed) platform's algorithmic logics. Musicians adjust their creative work to fit recommendation systems and visibility demands (Morris, 2020; Raffa, 2025; Polak & Schaap, 2025; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). They also design musical elements and metadata to match platform logics, similar to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) (Seaver, 2022). Some musicians even over-produce large numbers of tracks with similar sonic features in the hope that one of them will perform well (Polak & Schaap, 2025). These practices and platform feedback strengthen the link between digital performance and career opportunities. Research has also noted that "data-literate actors are the winners" (Hagen, 2021, 197). As a result, musicians no longer treat digital indicators only as tools to meet visibility demands. They regard the pursuit of these indicators as a reasonable and necessary practices. At these practices are repeated and shared, their legitimacy no longer requires justification. They eventually become taken for granted bases for defining career success.

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In light of these three aspects, this study treats the standards of career success on digital platforms as doxa. These standards do not come from formal regulations or unified criteria. They emerge through the combined reinforcement of platform distribution, industry judgements, and musicians' practices and experiences. Through this process, career success becomes accepted as "taken for granted" (Bourdieu, 1977, 164). It is important to note that these standards do not constitute nomos. Bourdieu argues that every social field has a set of fundamental rules. What he calls nomos (Bourdieu, 2000, 96) functions as a legitimate principle of classification (Bourdieu, 2000, 97). Nomos refers to structural, institutional, and classifying principles within a field (Lueg et al., 2023, 458). Digital indicators on platforms are not formal or institutional rules, and they do not play this structural role. Although these indicators are widely discussed, no clear thresholds exist. For example, the industry cannot define what level of streams or follower counts qualifies as success. These indicators operate more like informal reference points formed through collective practice, not explicit principles that actors must follow. More specifically, the doxa of career success on digital platforms does not replace the traditional standards from the recording era. It shows a mix of traditional and digital indicators. Traditional indicators such as sales, awards, and offline performances still serve as reference points for evaluating musicians' success (e.g., Everts, 2023; Perrin, 2020; Reitsamer, 2011; Woods & Davis, 2024). Digital indicators such as playlist placement, online visibility, and follower counts have also become essential for gaining industry resources and platform visibility (e.g., Baym, 2013; Carter, 2024; Gourévitch, 2023; Morgan, 2019; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025; Watson et al., 2022). This dual track forms the taken for granted doxa of career success in the digital era.

3.3 Capital in the digital field

After clarifying the doxa of career success on digital platforms, it is necessary to discuss the capital structures that support this logic. This study does not propose new form of capital. It uses Bourdieu's capital framework as the basic theoretical foundation. It returns to research on the structure of the music industry and discusses how different forms of capital are translated and expressed in the digital platform environment.

Bourdieu views capital as a key resource that allows social actors to gain advantages in the field. He first identifies three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights (Bourdieu, 1986, 243). Cultural capital includes educational background, forms of knowledge, aesthetic preferences, and symbolic appreciation (Bourdieu, 1986, 243–248). Social capital consists of social ties embedded in networks and reflects an individual's ability to access resources through relationships (Bourdieu, 1986, 248). Bourdieu (1986, 255) adds symbolic capital in the notes. It refers to

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the recognition that economic, cultural, or social capital can acquire once they are converted into symbolic forms.

In the traditional recording era, the music industry was highly centralized and controlled by record labels, traditional media, and live performance organizations. Since the industry relied on album sales, live performance income, and copyright revenue, record labels controlled recording costs, promotional resources, and distribution channels (Murphy & Hume, 2023; O'Dair & Fry, 2019; Perrin, 2020; Sen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2024). Musicians with economic capital, especially those signed to major labels, gained easier access to exposure, performance opportunities and commercial returns. Therefore, economic capital held a clear structural advantage during this period. It directly shaped musicians' career development and social position. Cultural capital appeared mainly in musical skills, formal training, artistic judgement, and educational background musicians needed professional training to enter the mainstream industry. Those with strong musical education held advantages in professional evaluation systems (Bataille & Perrenoud, 2021; Smith & Thwaites, 2019; Sutton, 2020). In the traditional recording era, social capital appeared in musicians' ties with industry organizations. Musicians depended on industry networks and organizational recognition to access career opportunities (Everts, 2023; Everts et al., 2022; Woods & Davis, 2024; Zwaan et al., 2009). Symbolic capital came from industry institutions, such as mainstream media and professional awards. Musicians who received industrial recognition were more easily able to gain commercial opportunities and resources (Carter, 2024; Connell et al., 2020; Reitsamer, 2011; Sutton, 2020).

With the development of digital communication technologies, the music industry has moved to a digital platform system centered on social media and streaming services. Capital operates differently in this new field. Digital platforms reduce the cost of releasing music. Musicians can publish and circulate their work on their own (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Hracs, 2012; Spilker, 2012; Thomson, 2013; Woods & Davis, 2024). However, economic capital still plays an important role in promotion, content production, and brand collaborations (Järvekülg & Wikström, 2022; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Schwetter, 2019; Woods & Davis, 2024). Major record labels also work with digital platforms to increase the visibility of their musicians (Barna, 2019; Fry, 2019; Tintiangko et al., 2023; van Kan, 2025). The digital era has not reduced the importance of economic capital. It has only shifted it into a new competitive logic. Musicians face competition from offline performance opportunities, and they also need to secure digital visibility on platforms. Verwiebe and Hagemann (2024, 1863–1864) propose the concept of "digital economic capital." This concept refers to the economic aspects that operate in digital environments. Its theoretical logic does not change the original idea of economic capital. It still can be seen as an explanation of economic capital in a digital context.

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Cultural capital is still the core source of musical creativity and artistic value. But its components have changed in meaningful ways. In the digital era, cultural capital is not only about musical skills or formal training. It also includes an understanding of platform mechanisms and the ability to create content for online environments. Musicians need to understand platform preferences and the hidden rules behind algorithmic opacity. They have to integrate these elements into their creative work (Jerasa & Burriss, 2024; Polak & Schaap, 2025; Raffa, 2025; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). In this context, cultural capital highlights the combination of musical creativity and media literacy. In Bourdieu's later work, he noted that the technological revolution of the computer age might require an extension of this capital framework to include a new form of technological capital (Bourdieu, 2005, 80). He described technological capital refers to a set of knowledge, skills, and know-how that can increase effectiveness when engaging with technology (Bourdieu, 2005, 75). For musicians who work on digital platforms, this form of technological capital refers to their ability to understand and use digital platforms. It overlaps with cultural capital. Therefore, it can be seen as a specific form of cultural capital. Later, Brock et al. (2010) discuss online activities that are similar to those examined in this article. They also argue that these activities related to digital skills and abilities. They can be seen as a new expression of cultural capital. Additionally, Ollier-Malaterre et al. (2019, 432) introduce the term digital cultural capital. They define it as the awareness, motivation, and skills needed to manage technology in digital environments. This concept reflects Bourdieu's cultural capital in digital contexts rather than a new form of capital.

Social capital has expanded from traditional professional networks to platform-based networks. Fan communities, user interactions, and community circulation serve as key sources of social capital on digital platforms. Musicians build online communities, maintain relationships with fans, and interact with other creators to access resources (Cayari, 2011; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Prey & Lee, 2024; Sutton, 2020; Watson et al., 2022). Research on digital social capital suggests that social activities in digital environments follow logics similar to those of traditional social capital (Chen, 2013). Digital social capital is accumulated through digital social connections and takes shape on social media platforms and in virtual worlds (de Zúñiga et al., 2018; Villanueva-Mansilla et al., 2015). Here, it refers to integrated digital skills and the ability to convert them into other forms of capital. Smith et al. (2017) also argue that digital social capital is particularly important in creative industries. In addition, social practices are becoming central to professional self-identity and brand formation (Gandini, 2016). For musicians working on digital platforms, their activities and practices can be understood as digital social capital. This represents a new dimension of social capital.

It is worth noting that Julien (2015, 365) describes online interaction as a new form of capital. He argues that digital social capital deviates from Bourdieu's original concept in several ways. However, this study views these differences as a result

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of Juline's research focus and research subjects rather than a structural or ontological change in social capital on digital platforms. First, in terms of competence, Julien (2015) argues that this ability has shifted toward understanding online culture and internet memes that seems different from Bourdieu's focus on professional or cultural skills. But musicians who work on digital platforms also need to understand trending topics and follow online trends. They often integrate these elements into their creative work. For musicians, this is a digital expression of maintaining social capital and a means through which they sustain relationships as actors. Second, Julien (2015) argues that the purpose of exchange in digital social capital differs from Bourdieu's view. He claims that online interaction aims more at confirming online identity and gaining online cultural recognition, rather than at securing access to resources. However, musicians' online interactions remain closely tied to resource access and opportunity conversion. Their interactions with fans, other musicians, and media actors help them expand audiences, gain commercial collaborations, and increase visibility through livestreams, short videos, and community engagement. These outcomes can be converted into economic or cultural capital. In this sense, online identity and online recognition are themselves important parts of social capital accumulation, not departures from the purpose of social capital. Third, Julien (2015) considers that digital social capital is difficult to convert into offline forms and therefore has weak convertibility. However, musicians' cases show a different pattern. Their online social capital does not circulate only within digital spaces. It can turn into offline income (Cho et al., 2018; Hansen & Bickford, 2023; Morgan, 2019; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2022). In practice, the digital field of professional music allows a two-way conversion between online and offline domains. This dynamic matches Bourdieu's view that social capital is convertible into other forms of capital. Finally, as for maintenance, Julien (2015) proposes that digital social capital depends more on immediate content creation and interaction. Musicians do rely on frequent content output and constant audience engagement. However, we suggest that these practices do not replace long-term relationships. They function as strategies to maintain and expand them. Content helps musicians sustain their existing fan base, and it also attracts new audiences. Audience practices, such as reposting or producing derivative work, further extend this reach. These differences do not change the nature of social capital. Content production is simply the digital form of maintaining social ties. It does not conflict with Bourdieu's emphasis on long-term relationships. Instead, the digital field expands how musicians build and preserve their social capital. Therefore, this study views musicians' digital social capital as a continuation of Bourdieu's original concept rather than a departure from it. In addition, de Zúñiga et al. (2018) show that online and offline social capital take different forms. This point aligns with the present study. Musicians still rely on traditional forms of social capital in offline setting or in activities linked to the recording era, such as industry networks. These practices remain consistent with Bourdieu's concept of social capital. For this

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reason, the term social capital is used throughout the following discussion. Social capital in digital contexts also shows a degree of decentralization. Here, decentralization refers to the broader sources of relational resources. Industry recognition and access to key professional networks remain important. At the same time, wider user networks on platforms can also generate career opportunities for musicians. Platforms recommendation systems partly recentralize these resources by making visibility a key form of social capital.

Symbolic capital on digital platforms comes from platform mechanisms and user interactions, such as the visibility, follower counts, monthly listeners on playlists, video views, and likes (Baym, 2013; Carter, 2024; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025). Digital platforms add new layers of recognition. In the past, symbolic capital mainly came from industry validation. Public recognition also existed, but it appeared through album sales or tickets sales. Today, public recognition also takes the form of platform followers and engagement metrics, and these indicators are easier to quantify. Platform approval has also become a source of symbolic capital. A musician who is frequently recommended or appears on trending pages is seen as being endorsed by the platform. Although symbolic capital appears more decentralized on platforms, it is still recentralized through algorithmic logic. Platforms decide who receives visibility and control the production of symbolic capital. Platform-based forms of validation, such as trending tags or highlighted content, operated as new mechanisms for granting symbolic capital. They increasingly function alongside traditional awards and industry-based evaluations.

Additionally, researchers have suggested further concepts pertaining to the digital environment. These are e-capital (electronic capital) and digital capital. Merisalo (2016, 31) defines e-capital as a form of intangible capital. "It emerges from the possibilities, capabilities and willingness of individuals, organizations and societies to invest in, utilize, and reap benefits from digitalization." Another frequently discussed concept is digital capital. Ragnedda (2018, 2367) defines this as "the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving), and digital technology." Ragnedda (2018, 2020) treats digital capital as the accumulation of digital access and skill. He argues that it is an independent form of capital (Ragnedda, 2018, 2366). However, other scholars do not regard digital capital as a separate capital, but see it as an extension of cultural capital. For example, Emmison and Frow (1998) reject the idea that digital skills construct a new form of capital, but instead argue that information technology can be read as a form of cultural capital. Paino and Renzulli (2013) hold a similar view and consider digital skills and knowledge to resemble cultural competence. Leguina and Downey (2021) argue that analysis should focus on the key features of capital. From their perspective, digital capital is always as a secondary form that connects the major capital (economic, cultural, and social) and supports conversion across them. Most work that treats digital capital as an independent form comes from research on the digital divide and digital inequalities. Such a focus differs from

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our research and conceptual approach. This article considers digital capital within the context of musician's digital practices. If following Ragnedda (2018), musicians possess digital access and skills when they upload content, interact with audiences, navigate platform tools and adjust their creative strategies, and these abilities belong to the cultural domain. Therefore, we consider these digital strategies, skills and knowledge as belonging to cultural capital.

Furthermore, Sadowski (2019) introduces the concept of data capital. He defines it as "discrete bits of information that are digitally recorded, machine processable, easily agglomerated, and highly mobile" (ibid., 4). However, musicians do not hold data capital. Digital platforms control it. They collect and process user-behaviour data and institutionalize these data as a form of capital. In practice, this gives platforms the power to shape how other forms of capital circulate in the digital environment. This role is close to Bourdieu's idea of meta-capital. In Bourdieu's formulation, meta-capital "allows the state to wield a power over the different fields and over the various forms of capital that circulate in them" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 114). Platforms exercise a similar type of power within the digital music field. A similar form of platform-controlled capital is algorithmic meta-capital (Lundahl, 2020, 1447). It is a type of symbolic power that shapes what counts as symbolic capital through algorithmic operations. It also influences habitus. On the platforms, musicians are affected by algorithms. These systems remain opaque (e.g., O'Dair & Fry, 2019; Woods & Davis, 2024). They also shape musicians' habits through their effects on digital visibility. They include how musicians create, release, and promote their work (e.g., Polak & Schaap, 2025; Raffa, 2025; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Therefore, algorithmic meta-capital can be understood as an extension of symbolic capital. However, both data capital and algorithmic meta-capital are held by platforms rather than by musicians. Bourdieu's concept of capital refers to resources that actors can possess. These two forms operate as structural resources at the platform level. They are not new types of capital within Bourdieu's framework. This research does not discuss them in depth.

In the era of social media and expanding visual culture, physical attractiveness has become increasingly important. A pleasing appearance is treated as a requirement in many forms of work (van den Berg & Arts, 2019). Andreoni and Petrie (2008) also show that appearance is often understood as attractiveness and is linked to economic and social returns. That also includes higher income. In a media environment that shows idealized beauty, the social impact of appearance becomes even more visible (Holla & Kuipers, 2016). Anderson et al. (2010, 566) define aesthetic capital as "traits of beauty that are perceived as assets capable of yielding privilege, opportunity and wealth." Aesthetic capital can be seen as symbolic form of cultural capital, because beauty holds intrinsic value within social evaluation (Anderson et al., 2010). Musicians' appearance includes their face, body shape, clothing, style and accessories. They can be understood as a form of aesthetic capital. At present, no studies specifically explore aesthetic capital or its potential inequalities among

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musicians on digital platforms. This article follows findings from research on attractiveness in labour markets (e.g., Kukkonen et al., 2024) and aesthetic capital (e.g., Sarpila et al., 2021) to assume that musicians with more aesthetic capital are more likely to attract audiences on platforms. In line with Anderson et al. (2010) and Sarpila et al. (2021), aesthetic capital is treated as part of cultural capital in this study. In addition, a related concept is attention capital. It refers to the ability to mobilise individual attention and is difficult to quantify (Maliński, 2017, 5). Maliński (2017) shows that income in media industries is unevenly distributed and that a small number of starts accumulate most of the rewards. This pattern resembles the winner-takes-all dynamics observed in digital music markets (e.g., Pilati et al., 2024; Raffa, 2025). Therefore, attention capital is treated here as an element of economic capital.

Overall, this study argues that the digital music field has not generated new forms of capital beyond Bourdieu's original formulation. Although the literature introduces concepts such as digital capital, aesthetic capital and attention capital, these ideas mainly extend forms of capital to digital contexts. They do not constitute independent capital categories. Based on the above discussion, economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital remain the main resources in the digital music field. E-capital and digital capital are expressed mostly through musicians' creative processes and can be understood as part of cultural capital. Aesthetic capital also falls within cultural capital. Attention capital highlights commercial and economic dynamics, and it is treated as a component of economic capital. By contrast, data capital and algorithmic meta-capital are controlled by platforms. These forms shape musicians' experiences and opportunities on digital platforms, but they are structural resources at the platform level rather than new forms of capital held by individual actors.

Given the complexity of Bourdieu's capital concepts and later extensions, Table 1 summarizes the main forms of capital in the digital music field. It lists their key manifestations, primary holders, and this study's classification of each type to support clearer understanding.

Table 1. Capital structure and classification in the digital music field

Capital type	Key manifestations on digital platforms	Primary holders	Classification (Bourdieu lens)	Author's position in this study
Economic capital	Production budget; brand collaboration	Major labels; established musicians	Original capital	Retains economic capital
Cultural capital	Musical skills; digital literacy; content creation	Musicians	Original capital	Retains cultural capital
Social capital	Industry networks; fan communities; platform networks	Musicians; networks	Original capital	Retains social capital
Symbolic capital	Visibility; playlist placements; follower counts	Musicians (platform and audience)	Original capital	Retains symbolic capital

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Capital type	Key manifestations on digital platforms	Primary holders	Classification (Bourdieu lens)	Author's position in this study
Aesthetic capital	Appearance; style; visual branding	Musicians	Cultural subtype	Classified as cultural capital
Attention capital	Ability to attract attention; viral potential	Musicians	Viewed as economic manifestation	Treated as economic capital
Digital capital	Digital skills; content production; platform operation	Musicians	Viewed as cultural extension	Classified as cultural capital
Data capital	Ownership/processing of user data	Platforms	Platform-level resource	Not musician capital
Algorithmic capital	Algorithmic influence on visibility	Platforms	Platform meta-capital	Not musician capital

As a conceptual article, this study provides a conceptual synthesis of existing theories and empirical research. Its aim is to define the doxa of career success in the digital music field and to outline the relevant capital structure. Because this article does not analyse empirical data, the discussion cannot extend to further propositions or hypotheses. Therefore, the mechanisms through which doxa and capital may shift within the digital field are not examined in detail. Future research can build on empirical evidence to explore how different forms of capital are converted, accumulated, and reproduced through practice in the digital field.

4. Discussion: Towards a research agenda

Digital platforms have reshaped musicians' career development and evaluation systems. This article conducts a conceptual synthesis and theoretical deduction. This argues that career success on digital platforms can be seen as the new form of doxa. It also operates together with pre-existing doxa in the music field. Existing forms of capital are reinterpreted within the digital filed as well. However, current research still lacks systematic empirical evidence on how these mechanisms are constructed, legitimized, and reproduced in practices. Therefore, this section outlines an agenda for future research and identifies several directions for further investigation.

4.1 Promising directions for future studies

Future research can first examine how digital platforms shape new logics of career success It can clarify how platform doxa emerges, spreads, and becomes taken for granted. Researchers can study how musicians learn platform preferences in practice and how they interpret playlist placement, follower growth, and fluctuations in visibility. These indicators gradually become shared markers of success. Future work can also compare differences in doxa across genres, audience structures, or market size, and examine how these differences influence musicians' strategies and access to resources.

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Second, future research can examine how capital operates and converts within digital platforms. Economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital take on new forms of conversion in platform environments. For example, aesthetic presentation, content production, and platform literacy have become important parts of cultural capital. Symbolic capital includes indicators such as visibility, playlist position, or viral content. Future studies can explore how digital skills and aesthetic presentation help musicians gain symbolic and economic capital through concrete practices. They can also analyse how data and algorithms act as structural forces that reshape the thresholds, speed, and direction of capital conversion.

Moreover, future research can explore musicians' strategic practices and the formation of their habitus. Musicians adjust their strategies across creation, release, interaction, and platform operation. Their repeated attempts and corrections shape new professional dispositions. This process is central to understanding the dynamics of the digital field. It is also important to study relational labour. Fan community maintenance and livestream interactions can strengthen social capital in structural ways.

Finally, the rise of digital platforms has not eliminated inequality. Research on the digital divide shows that differences in digital skills and resources create new forms of stratification (e.g., Brock et al., 2010; Chen, 2013; Villanueva-Mansilla et al., 2015). These differences appear across generations and regions. Platform algorithms can also produce new forms of invisibility and exclusion because of their opaque and preference-driven mechanisms. Future research can explore how musicians understand their position within these structural constraints and how they adapt or resist in the different ways.

4.2 Implication for research design

Future studies should adopt a mechanism-oriented approach to understand how digital platforms shape doxa (beliefs about musical career success) and capital conversion. Studies can focus on the processes and conditions through which these mechanisms unfold. Researchers can focus on how musicians learn platform rules, form their strategies, and gain or lose capital. They can also explore how new habitus emerges through repeated practice. Attention to these processes can help researchers identify how doxa becomes naturalized and how capital conversion operates in the digital field.

In addition, future studies can combine qualitative and quantitative methods to identify and verify key mechanisms. Qualitative studies can take the lead in the early stage. They can show how individuals understand platform logics, what strategies they use, and under which structural conditions they gain specific forms of capital. Quantitative studies can then test whether the relationships between doxa and different forms of capital are stable and generalizable. For example, quantitative

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analysis can help clarify which conditions enable symbolic capital to turn into economic capital.

This study also suggests that future research should pay attention to events and timing. Digital platform mechanisms often operated around key moments. Examples include new releases, playlist placement, collaboration exposure, and offline tours. These moments can strongly influence musicians' strategic adjustments and their positions in the digital field. A longitudinal design or event sequence approach is suitable for analysing such dynamics. By comparing behaviours before and after these events, researchers can better understand how capital is accumulated, transformed, or becomes ineffective under platform logics.

Finally, this article also suggests that future research design should consider structural factors. Digital platforms act as structural forces. They operate as agents that combine human and algorithmic decisions. Research should treat online visibility and playlist curation as structural variables. These variables are set by the platform. They influence the doxa (career success) and the ways capital is converted. Furthermore, future work also needs to observe how these structural variables shape capital conversion and career in concrete situations. For instance, Spotify announced in 2024 that track with fewer than 1000 annual streams would be demonetized (Spotify for Artists, 2023). This policy creates a threshold for capital conversion. If symbolic capital reflected by streams is too low, economic capital cannot be generated. Musicians the adjust their practices in response. Reaching 1000 stream becomes a new element of career success doxa. This would provide clearer explanatory paths for the digital field.

4.3 Potential samples and settings

This article considers that future work can use multi-level sampling to capture differences across groups. One approach is to distinguish musicians who work only online, only offline, or across both spaces. Another approach is to compare signed musicians with independent musicians. This can show how different capital structure shape career opportunities. Researchers can also group musicians by fan size and visibility into high, medium, and low levels. This helps reveal how the scale of symbolic capital affects strategy choices and the efficiency of capital conversion.

Sample heterogeneity can also be examined through age groups. This would allow researchers to see how generational differences shape platform adaptation, digital skill development, and learning patterns. Musical style and audience structure offer another angle. Future studies can compare mainstream and niche genres to see how their career success doxa differ. Cross national comparison is also a possible direction. This is especially useful when platforms operate with similar features and indicators, such as TikTok and Douyin. This can help control contextual factors and identity how cultural differences influence platform preferences and audiences' responses.

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Small sample, in-depth studies and analyses of key events are also important in this research context. Events such as new releases, awards, or shifts in musical style may mark turning points in musicians' strategies and practices. Openness or restriction of fan group, and the interaction in comment sections can also provide useful clues. These situations can help researchers observe how social support networks are organized and maintained.

4.4 Data collection and analytical possibilities

To understand how doxa and capital operate, and convert in digital filed, future studies need to collect multiple types of data and build a dynamic, multi-level observational framework.

This article suggests that future research should systematically collect trajectory data from digital platforms. This can track how musicians' accounts change over time. It may include the frequency and timing of content uploads, the types and formats of work, the tags they use, and the levels of engagement and views. With time-series data, researchers can reconstruct musicians' practices on the platform. They can also analyse how changes in platform rules or recommendation mechanisms affect visibility and financial outcomes in the short and medium term. This needs to choose appropriate time windows and define what counts as short-term and medium-term periods. In addition, platform data can be combined with in-depth interviews. Interviews can show how musicians understand platform logic and how they experience it. They can reveal the concrete strategies musicians use to adjust their practices. Interviews can help researchers see how musicians adapt to, internalize, and respond to the doxa of career success. They also capture musicians' experiences with fan interaction, platform image management, and other forms of work. On the other hand, researchers can also interview platforms employees (e.g., human curators) and traditional gatekeepers (e.g., A&R managers). These interviews can clarify the human judgment and negotiation that shape algorithmic outcomes. They can also show how the platform, as a hybrid agency that mixes human and algorithmic elements, participates in forming digital doxa. Also, future research can consider to use digital ethnography or participant observation. These methods allow them to stay close to platform interactions. By entering open or restricted fan groups and comment sections, researchers can observe how symbolic capital is assigned and redistributed in communities. They can also identity how musicians or key fans shape social capital through mobilization, content circulation, and emotional labour. Close observation can further show that visibility is not produced by algorithms alone. It is created through the joint actions of musicians and their audiences.

These data can support several analytical strategies. Qualitative analysis can use thematic analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, or process tracing to explore how musicians adjust their creation and release strategies. It can also show how they

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interpret success and failure, and how their repeated adjustments form new digital career habitus. Quantitative analysis can treat platform data as structured data for regression or social network analysis. These methods can reveal the relationships between visibility (as symbolic or cultural capital) and income (as economic capital). That shows the role of collaboration networks in capital accumulation. This helps future studies examine causal relations within Bourdieu's capital, habitus, and field framework. Moreover, it is also possible to develop measurement tools based on qualitative research (e.g., interviews and online observation/digital ethnography). These tools can update the concept of career success for musicians, and they combine traditional indicators with digital indicators. Statistical validation and later adjustments can support the reliability of these tools. This can help to understand the career conditions of musicians in the digital age. It can also offer a reference for evaluating the careers of other digital artists in the wider creative industries. Lastly, this study agrees with Kopf's (2025) argument about the four common analytical approaches used in research on digital platforms. The directions proposed in this article align with these approaches. For example, using social media as data repositories for discourse-analytical examinations is consistent with the suggestion to collect platform trajectory data and tack musicians' accounts over time. Digital ethnography and participant observation also fall under this approach. The second approach, discourse-analytical contextualisation and theorisation of social media, is also reflected in this study. The recommendation to build a dynamic and multi-layered analytical framework and to examine the effects of platform governance represents efforts to theorise social media as a new mode of communication and a new field. Third, the analysis of discourse produced by social media providers appears in this study through the suggestion to interview platform employees and traditional gatekeepers. Future research can pay more attention to how platform providers formulate rules and curate content. This perspective can fill an important gap in the current literature. The analysis of discourse(s) about social media can be advanced by combining platform data with in-depth interviews. This combination can show how musicians understand platform logics, how they experience them, and how they adjust their strategies. This perspective is still limited in existing research. Comparing musicians' interviews with the views of platform employees and traditional gatekeepers can provide a more complete picture of the discourses surrounding social media. It can also help identify points of convergence and tension between these groups. Overall, these data sources and analytical approaches do not aim to build a single causal chain. Digital platforms act as intermediaries in which multiple indicators work together to shape outcomes. Using diverse forms of data can give future researchers several points of entry into the digital field. It also allows them to explore doxa, power, capital, and capital conversion from different disciplinary perspectives. This study also emphasizes that doxa (career success) in the digital era is not static. It is shaped through the interaction between musicians and digital platforms (platform itself and its users).

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4.5 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides a new way to apply Bourdieu's field theory to digital contexts. It argues that digital platforms have not replaced traditional forms of capital or created entirely new ones. Capital on digital platforms appears in both online and offline forms. Platform data and algorithms give platform owners a structural power that is similar to meta-capital. This power can shape how musicians' capital is converted, under what conditions it is converted, and which musicians are able to convert it. For example, it can influence which types of musicians are more likely to turn online audiences into actual income. In addition, the doxa (career success) does not come from a single perspective. It develops gradually through the interaction between platform distribution systems, market digitalization, and musicians' practices. This mechanism provides a theoretical basis for understanding how doxa is produced in digital settings.

Moreover, although this study does not discuss habitus, habitus remains connected to field and capital in Bourdieu's framework. The literature reviewed here suggests that musicians' habitus do not follow a linear path. Their habitus takes shape gradually through repeated engagement with platform environments and ongoing adjustments. Their positions in the field change over time as algorithms and social relations (e.g., fan communities) influence their visibility and opportunities. These positional shifts offer an important lens for understanding career development in the digital field.

5. Conclusion

This article uses Bourdieu's field-doxa-capital framework to reconsider the influence of digital platforms on the field of professional music. By integrating existing literature and reviewing key theoretical discussions, this study argues that digital platforms function as structured social spaces. Algorithms, data indicators, and visibility mechanisms shape how musicians understand and pursue career success. Digital metrics such as streams, follower counts, engagement levels, and playlist placement operate together with traditional standards. They form a new doxa of career success. This doxa is not created by formal rules. It emerges through the interaction of platform logics, industry practices, and musicians' practices.

At the same time, this study argues that digital platforms have not brought to light new forms of capital with a view to the Bourdieusian capital structure. By reviewing Bourdieu's capital concepts and later development, this article shows how economic capital still shapes production and promotion. Cultural capital now includes digital skills and media literacy. Later concepts such as technological capital (Bourdieu, 2005, 80) and digital cultural capital (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2019, 432) are often described as new forms of capital. This research sees them as digital versions of cultural capital rather than new forms of capital. Aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010) can also be understood as part of cultural capital. Social capital expands

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from industry networks to online relationships and community interactions in the digital environment. Several studies propose the idea of digital social capital (e.g., Julien, 2015) argues that digital social capital departs from Bourdieu's concept in several ways. This study looks at it from the perspective of musicians in digital fields and sees it as a continuation of Bourdieu's social capital. Symbolic capital is redistributed through algorithmic visibility and platform recognition. Public recognition now includes digital indicators. This study also discusses other digital capital concepts, such as e-capital (electronic capital) (Merisalo, 2016, 31) and digital capital (Ragnedda 2018, 2367). It concludes that these concepts mainly relate to cultural elements. This study consider they should be understood as forms of cultural capital. It is important to note the debate on whether digital capital should be treated as a new form of capital. This study focuses on musicians in digital field and understands digital capital as an extension of cultural capital. However, when viewed from Ragnedda (2018) perspective and from digital divide research, digital capital can be seen as a new form of capital. There are other digital-related concepts. They are data capital (Sadowski, 2019, 4) and algorithmic meta-capital (Lundahl, 2020, 1447). Both forms are controlled by platforms rather than musicians. They belong to the structural power of platforms. Therefore, this study does not treat them as new capital. In sum, no new forms of capital emerge for musicians working in digital fields.

Theoretically, this article provides implications for three research areas. First, in career success research, it shows how digital platforms naturalize algorithmic logics and turn digital indicators into widely accepted evaluation standards. Second, regarding Bourdieusian theory, it demonstrates how capital can adapt and extend within digital contexts. This provides an analytical path for understanding the restructuring of cultural production in the digital era. Third, for platform studies, this article argues that digital platforms are not only technical intermediaries. They also operate as structural forces that shape social meanings and professional norms. This mixed agency view helps clarify the social role of platforms in organizing cultural production.

Future research can develop along several directions. First, researchers can examine different types of musicians, such as independent and contracted musicians. Then, research can aim at comparing how musicians respond to and co-construct platform doxa in their daily practices. Future studies can combine qualitative data (e.g., interviews and digital ethnography) and quantitative data (platform data) to identify how capital transforms in digital platforms. Last, researchers can also explore differences in the field of (digitalized) music across regions and analyse whether the logics of career success converge or diverge.

Finally, this article argues that digital platforms have not only changed how the music industry operates but also reshaped the evaluation of career success. We conclude that no new forms of capital have emerged in the digital production field

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of music. Instead, existing forms of capital are both reinterpreted and reproduced through digital mechanisms. This shift shows that digitalization is a process of continuous reconfiguration in which known power logics take on new expressions within an equally new media structure. Understanding this process is essential for examining how digital platforms continue to shape inequalities and opportunities in cultural production.

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