



The University of  
**Nottingham**

**"What happened? I played three notes and had 600,000 likes":**

**Rising Internet celebrities in China's digital music industry**

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## Abstract

This thesis delves into an in-depth exploration of the transformative impact that Douyin, China's counterpart to TikTok, has had on the careers of musicians within the Chinese music industry. The central focus of this study revolves around *wanghong* (internet celebrity) music streamers on Douyin who have risen to prominence in the realm of Chinese social media. Through extensive ethnographic research, encompassing interviews, participant observations, and digital walkthroughs, this study provides detailed insights into how the lives and careers of *wanghong* musicians have evolved within the Douyin platform. It uncovers the strategies employed by these musicians in navigating Douyin's digital environment and underscores the significance of creativity, various monetization methods, and social connections in achieving both economic success and career growth within the digital market. Furthermore, this research unveils the distinctive digital ecosystem where musicians can leverage diverse monetization channels to sustain their digital careers within a democratic social media landscape of mass users' engagement. This thesis also sheds light on the phenomenon of digital collectivism in music consumption on comprehensive social media platforms like Douyin, where mass users organically contribute to the sustainability of the streamers' work. These insights within the digital ecosystem on the Douyin platform reveal new dynamics in cultural economics, challenging traditional notions that prioritize copyright protection within the digital music industry. While this study acknowledges certain limitations, it serves as a valuable resource to comprehend the profound influence that influential digital platforms exert on the broader cultural and creative industries.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 The *Wanghong* Phenomenon in China

In an interview, a music streamer with a fan base of 310,000 on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, recounted an exciting moment when his work went viral: "What happened? I played three notes and had 600,000 likes." Reflecting on his experience managing a Douyin account, he devised a formula for online popularity. He observed that achieving viral status doesn't necessarily require extensive effort; sometimes, the more one strives, the fewer results they attain. This phenomenon prompts reflection on whether today's social media platforms emphasize spectacularism over genuine content for digital popularity and if they are clueless about it. Does personal effort diminish in significance compared to the unpredictable digital market? What implications does this have for individuals' careers and lives after attaining internet stardom? These initial questions led me to investigate contemporary internet celebrities across various social media platforms and explore how their digital experiences shape their identities and futures.

The global popularity of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook has enabled individuals from diverse backgrounds to become internet celebrities and influencers by attracting large online audiences. These internet celebrities can be found in various roles, primarily as live streamers and content creators who engage with their audiences and monetise their online presence across different niches. Within the Chinese context, the name of internet celebrities is referred

to as "*wanghong*." Chinese *wanghong* have garnered significant attention in recent years. The Chinese public has been captivated by their rapid rise to online popularity and substantial wealth<sup>1</sup>. However, *wanghong* in China have also made headlines for their sudden downfall, often due to violations of platform rules, laws, public interest, and political reasons<sup>2</sup>. In the music industry, emerging musicians gaining prominent popularity on social platforms like Douyin have secured prestigious performing opportunities alongside established superstars. This success can be attributed to *wanghong* musicians' high online visibility, boasting millions of followers on digital platforms. Undoubtedly, *wanghong*'s rise phenomenon in China can be attributed to their individual traits and efforts including but not limited to talent, humour, beauty, or unique personalities. Nevertheless, to gain a deeper understanding of the *wanghong* phenomenon in today's China, it's essential to consider the distinct social context and the historical background of China's music industry.

### 1.1.1 Polarised media coverages on Chinese social media

Fundamentally, the rapid rise of *wanghong* streamers on digital platforms can be attributed to the shift of public attention from elite, political, or capitalised media

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<sup>1</sup> See the link about a *wanghong* streamer called 'crazy little Yang brother' (疯狂小杨哥) on Douyin spent 100 million to buy a science and technology building for developing his e-commerce live streaming business.

[https://www.sohu.com/a/604831255\\_99937558](https://www.sohu.com/a/604831255_99937558)

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the link, a female *wanghong* named Wei Ya (薇娅) was severely fined for tax evasion, with a total of 1.341 billion yuan imposed in late payment fees and fines. You can find more information about this at the following link: [Link to the article: http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1220/c223228-32312735.html](http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1220/c223228-32312735.html)

In another instance, a *wanghong* known as Jiaqi Li has been absent from livestreams for three consecutive days. It appears he crossed one of China's most sensitive political red lines while promoting an ice cream. You can read more about this situation here: [Link to the BBC article: https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-61704544](https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-61704544)

coverage to the marginalised and undeveloped aspects of Chinese society. The polarised highlights of social platforms, focusing on these previously overlooked social representatives and cultural forms, form the foundation of *wanghong*'s huge public awareness and audience base. The traditional Chinese journalism has been criticised for its uneven media coverage and lack of representativeness of political and capital powers (Yin, 2020). Elite production tends to focus on the 'mainstream melody' of Chinese journalism, often neglecting the underclass and marginalised populations, such as hard laborers and women in rural areas (Yin, 2020, Hou and Zhang, 2022). These social groups and phenomena have been overlooked by Chinese media for decades, which could explain why the Chinese public is attracted to and impressed by the media coverage provided by various *wanghong* fields (Craig et al., 2021b). Compared to other nationwide social media platforms in China, such as TenCent QQ, Weibo, and WeChat, which require basic literacy in sending text messages, the Douyin platform has a much lower barrier to entry, only requiring a basic knowledge of mobile technology. This ease of use makes Douyin naturally attractive to a larger user base, contributing to its popularity. The creative mass users on these digital platforms, not limited to Douyin, have been producing distinct digital content that differs from the official and capitalised presses, creating a new market online. The cultural and creative market on digital platforms has expanded due to the platforms' operations in consolidating popular streamers and encouraging user participation through sophisticated algorithms (Zhao, 2021), further enhancing the growth of the *wanghong* class.

### 1.1.2 Stimulated entrepreneurialism during the Covid-19 pandemic

The current *wanghong* landscape in China is influenced by multiple factors at different levels, including the efforts of individuals, platforms, and capital in digital entrepreneurialism, as well as the governmental commitment to the political economy during the pandemic. The *wanghong* population has become a creative capital for digital platforms, driving the development of various business modes, such as contract employment or reciprocal partnerships based on commission rates. Today's digital platforms foster a supportive environment and entrepreneurial culture online, encouraging users to explore digital entrepreneurship. The global Covid-19 pandemic has played a significant role in pushing creative workers to spontaneously engage in the digital market for financial and career sustainability. The Chinese government implemented policies to support the establishment of small and micro businesses (SMBs) online during the financial crisis and unemployment caused by lockdown measures (SAMR.gov.cn, 2020). This worldwide trend of turning to digital platforms was observed in the cultural and creative industries, where individuals sought performing opportunities in addition to their other income streams, such as music royalties from physical and digital music sales. However, the Chinese cultural industry has suffered from persistent copyright infringement issues since the digitalization of music, leading to reduced copyright fees for musicians due to battles over ownership (iResearch, 2019, Su, 2022, Zhang, 2020a). Chinese musicians have faced financial insecurity and have sought income from multiple channels over the past two decades, with popular social platforms undoubtedly a prominent avenue for developing their digital careers. With entrepreneurial practises from cultural and creative workers within an expanded market base during the pandemic, the social influence and economic growth of the *wanghong* class has become increasingly evident. In addition, the post-

pandemic world has witnessed the rising influx of capital into the online market, which has resulted in fierce competition and less fruitful entrepreneurial outcomes.

### 1.1.3 Political censorship for legal, ideological, and moral concerns

Political concerns are an essential aspect in understanding Chinese social content. The Chinese government holds an absolute authority that impacts people's moral values, business interests, and national-level strategies. Political censorship for digital content has developed over the decades since digitalization and has permeated into the detection system for digital content infringement. The major internet detection system, called Sword Net (*Jianwang xingdong*), has two primary goals: detecting and suppressing illegal businesses, such as pornography and copyright infringement (Baidu.com, 2022). During the same period, another internet censorship system, named the Great Firewall (*fanghuo qiang*), was developed to cordon off the Chinese media ecosystem from the international one, resulting in a flourishing of the shanzhai (copycat) economy under cross-border protection (Kaye et al., 2022). The two major Chinese internet campaigns have multiple purposes for political, economic, and cultural use, and this practise has existed for decades and now permeates into the social platform on *wanghong* streamer. The Chinese government works with internet celebrities and key opinion leaders in promoting Chinese socialism through digital campaigns, such as patriotism and the core values of socialism (Xu and Yang, 2021). The government also collaborates with digital platforms to encode sensitive keywords into the algorithm detection, filtering political and illegal digital accounts and content away from the internet (Ryan et al., 2020, Keane, 2016). However, there are some grey areas when the content is transmitted in a veiled way to escape from content

censorship for political or legal reasons (Craig et al., 2021a). This includes sensitive identities such as LGBT and sexual performances in the music field. These presences are related to social morality, with distinctive Chinese ideals and practises, and these political potentials underpin the economic sustainability of the *wanghong* class. As Craig et al. (2021a) suggest, that these sensitive fields have been providing Chinese *wanghong* with potential voice and career opportunities, albeit accompanying unsustainability and opportunism.

## **1.2 Rising musician celebrities on TikTok and Douyin**

This thesis explores the working conditions and career development of online musician celebrities within the Chinese video streaming platform context, with a specific focus on Douyin, that a social platform for short videos which have another international version known as TikTok. Both platforms are owned by ByteDance, which is a Chinese innovative tech company that launched content-driven mobile application featured with sophisticated algorithms that facilitating of the distribution and consumption of digital content on the social platform. During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, online music activities saw a significant growth in popularity, and these platforms demonstrated their ability to propel music to viral<sup>3</sup> status rapidly (Rendell, 2020). TikTok alone witnessed over 176 songs surpassing 1 billion video views in 2020, with some achieving this milestone within a matter of days or weeks (TikTok,

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'viral' refers to a phenomenon in which digital content, such as music videos, spreads rapidly and widely across online platforms. This rapid dissemination is often driven by content sharing and online interactions, leading to a quick proliferation of the content, increased online exposure, and heightened popularity.

2020). Similarly, the Chinese music market produced over 200 viral songs in 2019, some of which even surpassed the popularity of established superstars on the platform (Ma, 2019). Notably, these viral hits originated from diverse sources, including both well-known and emerging artists from various genres and backgrounds, as well as unexpected trends, memes, or songs created on TikTok that quickly spread from niche communities to a nationwide phenomenon (TikTok, 2020). As these viral songs gained momentum on TikTok, their streaming numbers experienced a remarkable surge, with popular tracks witnessing growth rates exceeding 1,000% once they became hits in 2022 (Stutz, 2022). Recognizing the potential for substantial financial gains from music copyright, major labels, top music streaming services, and video streaming platforms have implemented strategies to compete for musicians and their creations. These strategies include attracting talented musicians, negotiating copyright agreements, and promoting original music on popular video streaming platforms such as Douyin (TechExpress, 2022; iResearch, 2019). Regardless of whether these companies engage in competition or cooperation, video streaming platforms have attained significant influence in China's digital music industry, particularly since the 2019 pandemic.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has led to a surge in the popularity of music on video streaming platforms like Douyin and TikTok. Lockdown measures in many countries forced live music performances to transition online, utilizing platforms such as Twitch, Yoop, and Restream to facilitate virtual music experiences (Bruner, 2021). The pandemic has also created a larger audience for online music, as people seek entertainment and social engagement in the virtual realm (Rendell, 2020). In China, strict restrictions on social events have resulted in the prolonged closure of physical



venues, depriving musicians of their primary source of income from live performances. In response to financial challenges and job losses, and encouraged by government policies promoting online self-employment (SAMR.gov.cn, 2020), there has been a surge of entrepreneurial musicians on video streaming platforms. Many musicians have turned to these platforms and online live streaming services to sustain their careers and/or generate additional income. Su (2022) indicates that Chinese musicians saw a significant increase in their participation on short video streaming platforms, with 54.08% uploading short music videos in 2020 and 64.75% in 2021. Furthermore, 61.67% of Chinese musicians gained experience in online live streaming during the same period (Su, 2022). Musicians worldwide have increasingly embraced video streaming platforms as alternative or complementary avenues for their careers, securing their livelihoods during the pandemic. Even in the post-pandemic era, the music market and musicians are likely to undergo significant transformation through their continued engagement with online activities, particularly for those musicians who gain popularity primarily on platforms like Douyin.

The following sections provide a brief overview of the evolution of the Chinese music industry over the past two decades, considering the career situations of musicians from a historical and industrial perspective. This section is structured into three distinct periods within the Chinese context, unveiling the evolution of China's digital music industry. The categorization of these three periods is primarily based on key copyright laws implemented in China in 2000, 2006, and 2015 in response to technological advancements and increasing infringements on various digital platforms, including free music downloading websites, file-sharing platforms, and various social platforms

for user-generated content. Reviewing the past will help us understand the role that social platforms have played in the music industry's development and how musicians have navigated within the related economic, legal, and political framework for a deeper understanding. The following list provides a concise summary of the main periods of China's digital music industry before delving into the details of each period:

- Prior to the Digital Music Industry: Internet Singers on Websites (2000-2006)
- The Long Struggles with Infringement: Seeking Income from Other Fields (2006-2014)
- The Era of Live Streaming: *Wanghong* Singers and New Music IP (2015-2022)

### **1.3 Prior to the Digital Music Industry: Internet Singers on Website**

The first generation of online musicians emerged with the advent of internet technologies in the early 2000s, before which recording labels had dominated the music industry for a hundred years. The 1900s witnessed the rise of music recording labels with the advancement of the recording industry. Prior to the new millennium, the four major recording labels, namely Universal, Sony, Warner, and EMI, held considerable market share in the music industry, benefiting from their extensive marketing and network resources (Analysys, 2006). These music labels exerted strict control over musicians' work and creativity in catering to the market, while also investing substantially in packaging the musicians and marketing the music. Many talented musicians during this period were scouted by professionals in the music industry, while others had to find support in other ways to sustain their music career. Therefore, internet has become a online venue in that age where independent

musicians marketed themselves while seeking more freedom in their music (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). These independent musicians tended to rely more on themselves in every aspect of music production. For example, they may seek support from secondary music labels for a flexible cooperation in recording equipment, meanwhile they uploaded their work on the internet to be shared freely. Nevertheless, the first generation of online singers could be considered amateurs compared to the offline music professionals. For example, the first Chinese internet singer of national popularity called Xue Cun (雪村), who uploaded his music online in 2001 and soon became popular when someone else made a flash animation to present the music (SouthernWeekend, 2001). The internet primarily attracted those musicians who had early access to the new technologies, at a time when the digital music had not yet formed for a profit for most of musicians.

Since 2001, there have been more internet musicians and songs that have emerged and become popular on the internet. This can be primarily attributed to the increasing popularity of PCs and music devices such as MP3 players. A report shows that the internet penetration rate in China reached 7.2% in 2004, and MP3 sales surpassed 4 million units, experiencing a 141.62% increase compared to the previous year (Du, 2018). This large user base and online music market triggered the establishment of various music websites for online music playing and downloading. Typically, peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing services like Napster and MP3.com catered to the global market, while major search engines like Baidu and Sohu served the Chinese market (Tong and Lu, 2015). These music websites provided low-cost or free music listening and downloading services, thus creating a wide online music market due to increased

accessibility. Additionally, these websites featured a variety of music genres, artists, and types, with all information categorised and ranked on a daily, monthly, or yearly basis. This benefited independent musicians as they had the opportunity to be ranked and displayed though less supported by agencies. Notably, this bottom-to-top ranking system based on the frequency of music listening, downloading, and sharing by online users reflected music taste differed to the gatekeepers. The internet songs showcased a grassroots feature and was criticised by those elite as unprofessional production in 'vulgar' styles <sup>4</sup>(Yang, 2014). Despite the criticism from the music industry, some internet songs shared a national wide popularity. The popular internet singers received commercial cooperation offline due to their online popularity, which generated considerable income for the musicians. However, there were no copyright fees paid to the musicians for their internet songs that time in China, as the music royalty was only available to a physical music production than digital work before 2005.

#### **1.4 The Long Struggles with Infringement: Seeking Income from Other Fields**

The clarification of copyright on digital works resulted in a phenomenal growth of digital music platforms in China, meanwhile, it triggered a larger hacker market providing unlicensed digital music. In comparison to the global North, which regulates online

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<sup>4</sup> Vulgar style, known as '三俗歌曲' (triple vulgar) in Chinese, refers to music productions characterised by low-quality music production, themes with low taste, and singers with poor level of performing skills. For instance, certain internet songs have been criticised as 'vulgar songs,' including examples like 'Love Sale' (《爱情买卖》), 'Perfume is Toxic' (《香水有毒》), and 'That Night' (《那一夜》).

music infringement through the *Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)* enacted in 1998 impacted by the Napster music infringement (CopyrightOffice, 1998), the Chinese copyright law on digital music came seven years later. Following the revision of the *Copyright Law* in China in 2005 and the implementation of *Several Opinions on the Development and Management of Online Music* in 2006 (MCT, 2006), the digital music industry in China was established and experienced rapid growth. Although several major IT companies entered the music field earlier than others - Baidu Mp3, founded in 2002, and KuGou, founded in 2003 by Tencent - the number of online music services reached over a thousand in 2006 (Analysys, 2006). However, only 20 of those online services provided copyrighted music, which indicates a significant portion of music listening and downloading involved copyright infringement. The new copyright policies might benefit those big labels who has legal power for a copyright dispute, as they could reclaim the economic lost from considerable unlicensed music infringed on the internet. However, the individual singers for original music were less likely to claim for their copyright on digital music, as there were powerless in initialing a lawsuit, let alone they were intrinsically sought for free online exposure for their music. In addition, the compensation for the economic loss caused by the infringement can be lower than the investment in rights protection, regardless of the time and energy put into the process, that made many musicians abandoned in acclaiming their copyrights.

The popularity of 3G technologies and portable devices opened a larger digital market for the Chinese music industry accompanying a dramatic shrank in the physical music sales. The widespread use of portable devices allowed more people to consume digital

music, and audiences could typically download digital music by accessing the 3G network on their mobile phones, providing an alternative to listening and downloading music on a PC. This shift in music consumption led to a much larger audience base for promoting the digital music industry. The total revenue for the digital music market reached CNY 44.07 billion, which is equivalent to 4.7 billion U.S. dollars, in 2013 (SINA.COM, 2014). The majority of the income in the digital industry was attributed to wireless music<sup>5</sup> (*wuxian yinyue*), which accounted for 99% of the income with CNY 39.71 billion in the same year (ibid). Wireless music, also known as mobile music, includes music services transmitted to mobile devices through mobile applications, serving as a parallel version of online music services. Another component of wireless music consumption was value-added services provided by major mobile operators such as China Mobile, China Unicom, and China Telecom, which included services like ring tones and music subscriptions (ibid). These three state-owned network operators held a monopoly on network services in China, giving them significant negotiating power in the wireless music market and higher income. Specifically, telecom operators' revenue related to wireless music reached CNY 12.6 billion in 2013, which was four times the revenue of the remaining service providers (CNY 3.05 billion) (ibid). In contrast to the flourishing digital music industry, the income from physical record sales in mainland China accounted for a mere 1.5% of the size of the digital industry, amounting to approximately 650 million yuan in the same year. This reflects the challenges faced by traditional offline music consumption in China (ibid).

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<sup>5</sup> Wireless music (无线音乐 or "wuxian yinyue" in Chinese) refers to digital music services delivered through mobile communication networks and the mobile Internet. These services encompass features like ringtones, on-demand music streaming via mobile, and music listening and downloads through network protocols like WAP.

Although there has been a gradual increase in the size of the digital music market in China, its economic potential remains largely untapped due to rampant copyright infringement. Despite the Chinese government's efforts to curb online music infringement since 2005, copyright violations have deeply entrenched themselves in market practices. In 2009, the government issued the Notice on Strengthening and Improving the Review of Online Music Content to strengthen regulations in the realm of internet music (MCT, 2009). This policy reshuffled the digital music services industry, leading to the shutdown of unlicensed music providers and the survival of those operating lawfully. However, the reduced accessibility to free digital music services online gave rise to private peer-to-peer (P2P) channels<sup>6</sup> in the digital music field, presenting a new form of music infringement that was harder to detect (Tong and Lu, 2015). Typically, people shared links to access free music stored in cloud drives, enabling the download of extensive music databases at minimal or no cost. The decline in the audience base subsequently led to the closure of online music services as their business models, which relied on advertising to an audience base seeking free music, became threatened. Therefore, the released audiences sought new ways to access free music, with some turning to music hackers and others benefiting from the intense competition among major music streaming services for attracting audience with free music.

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<sup>6</sup> The scale of P2P file-sharing networks in China can be extensive due to various sharing channels among digital users. These channels include sharing content among friends and family and making content available to the broader online public. For instance, users might share private links on social platforms, granting access through a provided access code. Alternatively, users can pay a minimal fee for access to a collective database, often facilitated through private payment methods like WeChat payment.

The intense competition among IT giants such as Tencent, Baidu, and NetEase, vying for dominance in the music streaming services market, also contributed to the prevalence of digital music market. These live streaming platforms offered copyrighted music at minimal or no cost, and this trend persisted for years, with a high rate of unpaid users reaching 96.5% in 2013 (Tencent, 2015). The easy access to free digital music online, whether through lawful music streaming platforms or infringed P2P services, had a significant promotion of the digital music industry in China. This phenomenon of free music online, even on lawful platforms, was particularly prominent in the Chinese market compared to the rest of the world. In contrast, CD sales in the United States had declined since the early 2000s with the rise of the internet, but its physical music still maintained an equal market share with digital music in 2013, a decade later (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021). In the Chinese context, where physical music sales were dwindling while digital music infringement was rampant, the revenue models for music labels differed from global practises. The table 1 below illustrates the main sources of music copyright revenue in both the U.S. and China, as reported by IFPI (U.S.) and iResearch (China).

Table 1 The main copyright revenue for music industry in the two countries in 2013<sup>7</sup>

U.S case	Chinese case
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<sup>7</sup> The statistics in the table are a combination of information from two reports:

1. GLOBAL MUSIC REPORT 2023 - Link to report: [https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Global\\_Music\\_Report\\_2023\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Industry.pdf](https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Global_Music_Report_2023_State_of_the_Industry.pdf)
2. The Renaissance of Commercialisation: A Research Report on China's Digital Music Industry 2019 - (商业化的复兴：中国数字音乐产业研究报告 2019) - Link to report: [http://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3\\_AP201904081316768860\\_1.pdf](http://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3_AP201904081316768860_1.pdf)



Physical (46.2%)	Music variety shows (40%)
Downloads & Other Digital (29.6%)	Telecom operators (30%)
Performance Rights (11.7%)	Digital music platforms (20%)
Streaming (9.6%)	Film and television (10%)

As we can observe, the revenue structure of the global music industry, represented by the situation in the U.S., primarily relied on the sales of both physical and digital music, which are considered the core products of the music industry. In contrast, the Chinese music industry had a distinct revenue structure with a significant absence of revenue from physical music sales. Instead, a large portion of the Chinese music industry's copyright revenue was derived from peripheral sources such as licensing music for variety shows and telecom operators, which accounted for 70% of the income.

Despite the relatively low contribution of digital music platforms to overall music revenue, the role of online music platforms in promoting popular musicians and their works is evident. Several independent musicians emerged from music streaming platforms and social media and gained nationwide popularity in China. However, most of these musicians experienced only brief periods of exposure and popularity before they disappeared from the spotlight, with only a small fraction successfully progressing and earning a living as professionals or celebrities in the music industry. In essence, Chinese musicians faced challenges in making a livelihood solely from their music

work, as being a musician did not generate sufficient income from music. Instead, those musicians who achieved online popularity often sought revenue from other industries such as film, television, and variety show for complementary incomes (Du, 2018). The same condition that the Chinese music industry faced in the process of developing copyright laws and cultivating the market for copyrighted music.

### **1.5 The Era of Live Streaming: *Wanghong* Streamers and New Music IP**

The major music streaming services in China have developed a new revenue stream through copyright operations, including the distribution of music copyrights and incubation of music intellectual property (IP). The Chinese government has been combating online infringement and piracy since the adaptation of copyright law into the digital field in 2005. In 2015, the strictest "copyright order" came into effect, resulting in the crackdown of 2.2 million cases of infringement and piracy overnight (iResearch, 2019). This enforcement led to a reshuffle in the digital music industry due to the increased unsustainable advertising revenue to cover copyright cost, with mergers and acquisitions of digital music providers by the three IT giants: Tencent Entertainment Group, Ali Music, and Baidu Music (analysys.cn, 2022). These companies gained access to music copyrights, musicians, and other resources, along with their ample funds, advanced technology, and managerial expertise, enabling them to compete in the market. In the first year after the mergers, the revenue from copyright operations accounted for 9.4% of the total revenue (iResearch, 2019). This proportion doubled in 2018 when the Chinese government promoted the mutual licensing of music copyrights among digital platforms. The shared music copyrights

across multiple platforms allowed music works to be used in different fields and for various purposes, generating essential revenue for the music business. Furthermore, the major streaming companies have been investing in supporting original musicians as an exploration of new copyrights. For instance, NetEase started fostering independent musicians in 2016, and Tencent launched the Musician Program in 2017 (ibid).

Live video streaming platforms have witnessed the rise of *wanghong* singers who are not necessarily music professionals but with diversified identities and extensive capabilities. These individual attributes can be appearance, personality, online social skills, or a pleasing voice, as well as other social, commercial, or marketing skills. The term "*wanghong*" emphasises the online popularity of those individual streamers, distinguishing them from "independent musicians" who prioritise their identity as musicians. The boom of live video streaming platforms in the Chinese digital market occurred around 2016, several years after the establishment of 4G networks, which enabled data-intensive applications on mobile devices. Over 300 video streaming platforms emerged in the digital content industry in the year of 2016, involving music industry and a wider range of creative and entertaining industries (Du, 2018). These video platforms have attracted many musicians to perform online, providing career opportunities and additional income for creative streamers. The platforms vary in terms of backgrounds, user base, content styles, monetization channels, and digital facilities and so on, and has impact largely on the content style, earning potential, audience base of online streamers. Specifically, long-form video platforms like YouTube primarily rely on advertising revenue generated by showcasing products and

services. Other video platforms operate similarly to artist companies, hiring musicians to work for them and establishing partnerships with popular streamers for mutual benefits. Comprehensive social media platforms like Douyin, specializing in short videos and live performances, serve as intermediaries for streamers, enabling online collaborations through diverse monetization methods while earning commissions. Latest live video streaming platforms tend to offer real-time information and interaction during online performances, complementing recorded videos and providing musicians with multiple avenues to develop their digital careers.

Recognizing the economic potential of video streaming for short videos, music companies and investors have started pouring more investment into this market, leading to gradually intensifying competition. The phenomenal social media platforms for short videos, namely Kuaishou and Douyin<sup>8</sup>, have seen the emergence of grassroots streamers and independent musicians since gaining national popularity around 2018. These social media platforms for short videos feature digital content that can quickly become a trend and go viral, gaining sweeping online popularity within weeks or even overnight. The music industry has recognised the power of these social platforms in promoting digital music and independent musicians, with hundreds of songs becoming popular and topping major music streaming platforms. The popularity of digital content on these social media platforms is driven by the mass user base, and

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<sup>8</sup> Both Kuaishou and Douyin compete for the top two spots among Chinese social media platforms for user-generated short videos. Both platforms allow their content creators to monetise their accounts through features such as virtual gifts, brand collaborations, and advertising. However, the user base of the two platforms exhibits different demographics, with Kuaishou attracting users from smaller cities and rural areas, while Douyin has a more urban and younger user demographic. Additionally, Kuaishou's algorithm places a high value on engagement and personal connections, while Douyin emphasises the spread of trending content across its user base."

the algorithm amplifies the accumulation of online popularity. For example, the Douyin platform tends to feed a larger user base with trending content, accelerating the proliferation of popular content after several attempts. Unlike traditional marketing practises that emphasise the financial cost for a larger online exposure, the Douyin platform highlights market feedback from a specific audience base with a similar background. The Douyin platform has attracted independent musicians from different backgrounds to promote their work to a target market, enabled by its individualised content feed system. The music market on Douyin further expanded during the 2019 pandemic as more people turned to social media for entertainment. Since then, the popularity of short music videos on Douyin has had an increasingly obvious effect on streaming media, as viral songs on this mega social media platform can significantly increase music playtimes linked to royalty revenue. Nevertheless, the increasing influx of new streamers and capital has led to fierce competition in capturing market attention and securing higher investments in post-pandemic time (Lv, 2022). As a result, there may be less room for individual musicians today who lack strong backing from a music company.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

Musicians in China have faced significant challenges over the past two decades due to online copyright infringement, dating back to the early 2000s when the internet era began. Many have endured a tough livelihood while striving to supplement their income beyond music royalties. This struggle is particularly pronounced among independent musicians who take on more responsibilities themselves, including

handling legal matters, music production, and marketing, rather than relying on music agencies. Since the emergence of the internet, followed by the era of audio streaming, video streaming services, and social media for live short videos, digital music platforms have become vital for sustaining musicians' careers and income. However, due to the low public awareness of digital copyright and the fierce competition among IT giants for copyright ownership, musicians are often underpaid for their music royalties. As a result, nearly 70% of musicians in China work part-time outside the music field to supplement their income, and half of the musicians earn a monthly income of less than 2,000 Chinese *yuan*, equivalent to USD \$282 (Zhang, 2020). Full-time musicians in China account for less than 10% of the total, and nearly 30% of musicians had no income from music in 2019 (ibid). However, a subsequent report conducted by the same researcher in 2021 highlighted the contribution of video streaming platforms for short videos to musicians' income (Su, 2021). In 2021, over 40% of musicians earned a monthly income of more than 8,000 yuan, which is four times higher than just two years prior. The report claims that short video social media platforms have become a phenomenon among musicians throughout China, with 65% of musicians uploading music on these platforms (ibid).

This research sheds light on the global phenomenon of internet celebrities, specifically *wanghong* musicians, on the Chinese social media platform known as Douyin. Today's internet celebrities often enjoy widespread recognition from the digital public due to their high commercial potential, leading to dramatic improvements in their financial and career situations. This era of social media has brought these internet musicians into the spotlight, empowering them with the ability to influence a large digital audience

and specific communities. It's not uncommon for fame and fortune to come quickly and dramatically for many *wanghong* streamers, leading to significant changes in their professional and personal lives once they become *wanghong* musicians. This is why our research focuses on *wanghong* musicians and explores changes in their career situations, financial gains, career sustainability, and lifestyles, as they seem to have achieved what most musicians aspire to. There are numerous intriguing aspects to consider when studying *wanghong* musicians, such as the nature of their work, the experience of being an internet celebrity, their earnings, and the strategies they employ to attain online popularity. We also delve into whether there are specific tips that other musicians can learn from them to achieve similar fame. We may also wonder how long would online fame last and what happens if *wanghong* musicians lose their popularity?

To gain insights into the career and life situations of *wanghong* musicians, this study primarily employs digital ethnography on online musicians on Douyin and conducts 30 interviews with popular musicians from diverse backgrounds (see Appendix 1). These musicians vary in terms of their identities, styles, locations, account types, fan bases, gender, and class. Digital ethnography provides essential background information and initial assumptions about the targeted musicians. Following this, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the musicians' situations. Each interview lasted from forty-five minutes to one and a half hours, covering a range of topics (see Appendix 2) when unfolding of musicians' careers and life experiences related to their current digital music careers on Douyin. The fieldwork spanned six months, from 2021 to 2022, with interviewees providing data that extends beyond the outbreak of the 2019 pandemic. These thirty musician interviews resulted in a

substantial amount of audio recordings totalling approximately 31 hours. These recordings were transcribed into textual data for further analysis. Specifically, I used Nvivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, to thematically analyse the interview transcriptions.

This Chapter 1 provides an overview of the global phenomenon of internet celebrities and *wanghong* musicians in China. It contextualises the Chinese social, economic, and political landscape and offers a retrospective view of China's digital music industry and the situation of musicians since the 2000s. This introduction also rationalises the specific research focus on *wanghong* musicians on the Douyin platform and provides an overview of the methodology used to investigate online musicians.

Chapter 2 is a literature review in this interdisciplinary research that discusses debates in related fields. These fields include the worldwide music industry and music economy, IT technologies and digital media platforms, the working conditions of creative laborers, and the economic geography of the digital music industry. The debates in these hybrid fields reflected on intertwined interests, interplay, negotiations, and battles among technological social platform, major companies in the music industry, and cultural and creative workers in the related field. This chapter aims to deepen the understanding of the complexity of *wanghong* musicians' status within a broader social, economic, and political context.



Chapter 3 is a methodology chapter that details the data generated mainly through digital ethnography and online interviews in addition to the digital walkthrough method. It highlights the data collection process for each method, including interviewee recruitment, interview preparation and arrangement, data evaluation and data analysis. The interview data generated three research themes, each explored in Chapter 4, 5, and 6 respectively.

The three analytical chapters are organized as follows: Chapter 4 serves as a descriptive overview of the career trajectories of online streamers, addressing five essential aspects of being a digital creator on today's social platforms. This chapter provides an insight into the portrayal of digital creative workers within the universal social platforms, outlining the critical career aspects that most of them encounter. While being an online streamer may not necessarily entail entrepreneurship in practice, streamers can be found at various career stages, ranging from self-entertained accounts to popular digital figures. Chapter 4 focuses on the general conditions faced by creative workers on social media platforms, yet it also delves into specific or rare cases to demonstrate various possibilities and exceptions. In contrast, Chapter 5 highlights the entrepreneurial practices and entrepreneurship of online streamers. This chapter emphasizes the strong motivation, strategies, and positive outcomes resulting from their efforts, whether in terms of career growth or financial increase. The aim of Chapter 5 is to discern the factors contributing to digital popularity and career development, supplementing empirical evidence gained from interviews that indicate the gains derived from digital platforms. Moving beyond individual digital workers, Chapter 6 sheds light on the digital platforms themselves. It provides an analytical

framework to capture the types of platforms and their potential in fuelling creative exchange and productivity online. In this sense, Chapter 6 is more theoretical, interpreting the impact of specific social media platforms on their digital markets and practitioners. It illuminates the platform as a new economic structure and creative production system, indicating the code for creative flourishing on platforms such as TikTok and Douyin.

Specifically, Chapter 4 sheds light on the evolving working and living conditions experienced by online musicians on Douyin, providing fresh insights into this emerging job environment of being a Douyin (TikTok) music influencer. It delves into the real-life conditions of online musicians' digital careers, examining aspects such as musicians' identities, career operations, work-life balance, ambivalence, and fan relationships. This chapter can be likened to job specifications and guidance for all today's digital users aspiring to become *wanghong* musicians.

Chapter 5 delves into the second theme, which centres on the entrepreneurial practises adopted by musicians to maximise their potentials and gainings for their online career. This research explores the musicians' entrepreneurship on Douyin, investigating their motivations, development strategies, and the detail results of their effort that an increased income or other non-monetary benefits. This chapter further generalise three distinct social groups of *wanghong* music streamers on Douyin, reflecting their long-term career development and financial income in terms of their professional competitiveness, and changing social, economic, and political competence.

Chapter 6 focuses on the third theme, delving into the characteristics of the digital music market that have witnessed the proliferation of *wanghong* streamers on Douyin. This theme serves as a theoretical exploration based on the empirical findings of the Douyin platform. It first uncovers insights into the digital affordance and market potential for developing a digital music career and then zooms in on the dynamics of music production and consumption in the market. Finally, it indicates the emerging economic spaces of digital music industries through integration into the broader industries on Douyin, while also proposing digital collectivism in music consumption as a new form of cultural economy that sustains various creative streamers from different backgrounds and career stages. These aspects address why the Douyin platform has become an incubator for innovative *wanghong* streamers.

Chapter 7 serves as the conclusion, where the research questions (as shown below) are revisited, and the findings are synthesised. It also includes a reflection on the limitations and areas where further research is needed.

Research Questions:

- How have musicians' working and living conditions changed since they started their digital career on Douyin, especially those *wanghong* musicians?
- How do popular musicians pursue entrepreneurship for their digital careers, and how have *wanghong* musicians earned and benefited from their entrepreneurial efforts on Douyin?

- How does this platform's context facilitate a digital music market distinct from others, in terms of such as digital infrastructure, platform atmosphere, and algorithm.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

My PhD research is innovative and interdisciplinary, drawing insights from three main fields: cultural and creative industries (CCIs), technological platforms, and economic geography. My interest in CCIs stems from my master's background, while I have absorbed perspectives from media studies and economic geography through the expertise of my supervisors during my PhD at the University of Nottingham. Initially, my PhD topic focused on an international music festival in Shanghai, exploring cross-national industrial clustering, knowledge networking, and innovative production within the festival as a temporary knowledge hub. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, I shifted to my current research topic on TikTok, as conducting offline fieldwork became unfeasible. My interest quickly grew in this new study as I discovered new layers of significance and relevance, particularly related to the outbreak of the 2019 pandemic. Researching the creative industries on social media platforms also allows me to continue my investigation into the creative music industries on Douyin/TikTok, the influential Chinese social media platform under ByteDance. This practical reason, in addition to the significance of this interdisciplinary research, forms the foundation of my PhD studies.

However, practical considerations in research design do not diminish the significance of my interdisciplinary research. On the contrary, academia has increasingly focused on the social media industries, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital users and leisure activities flourished online due to frequent lockdowns. The surge of social platforms such as TikTok and Douyin during the pandemic has notably

fuelled the cultural and creative economy online, leading to numerous cultural and commercial events shifting to digital platforms. Therefore, this research examining how the creative economy thrived and was catalysed on these influential platforms. Moreover, this research sheds light on the emergence of new business models and production systems tailored for online creativity and cultural productions. From this perspective, we can delve deep into experimental and empirical evidence to enhance creative production and amplify positive economic outcomes for the industry. My research analyses media from various perspectives, including digital infrastructures, platform culture, and the collective effects of online public engagement, all of which contribute to our understanding of the thriving digital market. In summary, this research represents a breakthrough in combining interdisciplinary perspectives into case studies, offering new insights into the creative economy, innovative media platforms, and the experiences of cultural and creative workers in the social media age. The Douyin platform in this research serves as a valuable case in the Chinese context, especially when compared to its international counterpart, TikTok. Through this potential reference and comparison, we can discern the social, economic, and political impacts on the digital creative industries and economic practices.

## **2.1 Introduction**

The music industry has attracted attention from researchers across various interdisciplinary fields, including cultural and creative industries, digital media studies, and economic geography. Scholars have emphasised the democratization of technology, which has led to reduced music production costs and a change of music

landscape. Andrew Leyshon (2009) illustrated the transformation of the physical recording industry due to the rise of the digital music industry since the late 1990s. McLeod (2005) illustrated those factors such as software use in music production, the popularity of MP3 devices, and internet distribution have made it possible to disseminate music digitally at lower prices compared to physical CDs. Walzer (2017) suggested that affordable technology has benefited independent recording labels, enabling them to develop new business models to compete with major recording companies. However, researchers have also examined the downsides of internet technology. Leyshon (2003) highlighted the challenges posed by P2P file-sharing networks, which challenge copyright reproduction and the music economy in the long term. Similarly, Alexander (2002) raised concerns about "free-riding," (p.151) where individuals benefit from free access to shared resources without contributing to music production costs. This free-riding can undermine the sustainability of the music industry as it results in reduced revenue from music sales due to copyright infringement of digital copies (ibid). The widespread distribution of music on the internet has led to a decline in physical music sales, with a larger portion of music sales now attributed to emerging IT companies as more music is distributed and consumed online (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). Consequently, albeit reluctantly (Leyshon et al., 2005), record labels have adapted to the digital market by partnering with online music services while still retaining their roles as gatekeepers in copyright operations and music licensing (Watson and Leyshon, 2022).

Other researchers approached the digital music industry from a socioeconomic perspective, highlighting the internet space as a social network. Pratt et al. (2007) introduced the concept of an 'e-society,' which fosters social relations within cultural

production and consumption, sensitive to the digital context's 'institutional and regulatory contexts.' (P.936). Rendell (2020) characterises online activities as 'parasocial relations,' (p.1105) emphasizing user interaction, socialization, and scenes. Grabher et al. (2008) points out that the internet enables 'ephemeral geography,' where knowledge is encountered and interacted with, nurturing knowledge ecologies. Pratt (2000) critically views the internet as a social-spatial network, a digital social construct or and 'economic units,' enabling social interaction and economic activities within social networks. Latour, (2007) indicates these digital networks consist of both human resources and technological creativities, fostering mobility and interaction among all available resources within the digital network. As Potts et al. (2008) suggest, these digital networks assemble in novel ways with uncertainty, their economic value may not be immediately evident but can eventually manifest under certain conditions or at specific stages. Insights from the social-economic field provide a deeper understanding of online society and creative networks, illustrating how the digital environment benefits the digital economy by facilitating social connections for online creative production.

Previous literature has explored the global trend of the creative industry merging with digital media, and in this context, I will specifically address the conditions in China. The concept of the 'digital nomad,'<sup>9</sup> introduced by Beverly Yuen in 2020, refers to the online pursuits of digital entrepreneurs in response to reduced job security during economic crises. Despite the challenging financial circumstances faced by musicians,

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<sup>9</sup> A digital nomad is an individual who uses digital technology to work remotely and live a location-independent lifestyle. The key feature of a digital nomad's lifestyle is the ability to maintain their work while having the flexibility to explore different places and cultures. Musicians are one of the typical.



many creative professionals are flexible gig workers dealing with precarious career situations and unstable income (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). Ross (2009) has pointed out that the creative class often receives low pay due to potential exploitation in unguaranteed work arrangements. Additionally, the gap of income inequality between established artists and emerging musicians has widened. Consequently, social media has emerged as an alternative platform for musicians to self-promote, discover work opportunities, and generate additional income through online networks. Young creative individuals who prioritise a free and flexible lifestyle while passionately pursuing their careers tend to accept precarious work arrangements. They often view non-monetary benefits, such as pursuing their musical dreams, as compensation for low pay (McRobbie, 2018; Frenette, 2016). In East Asian countries like China, where digital commoditization and pan-entertainment platforms<sup>10</sup> are prevalent, gaining online popularity can be a path to self-realization and even a shortcut to online fame (Qu et al., 2021). This phenomenon can be partly attributed to the historical disparity in communication resources between urban and rural populations in China, resulting in a 'severely uneven distribution' of public attention, as noted by Yin (2020). Consequently, Chinese social media has gained immense popularity by amplifying the voices of marginalised social groups who typically received limited coverage in traditional media (ibid). In the Chinese music industry, grassroots or independent musicians with niche followings receive greater public attention on digital platforms compared to traditional media outlets, which rarely feature them.

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<sup>10</sup> Pan-entertainment platforms, such as Douyin/TikTok as a typical and YouTube and other social media as relevant types, are online services that offer a diverse range of entertainment content and experiences, spanning movies, music, gaming, e-commerce, live events, user-generated content, and more. They aim to provide users with a comprehensive and immersive entertainment ecosystem, combining various forms of media and interactive features. These platforms often prioritise personalization, user engagement, and interactivity, making them popular choices for accessing entertainment in the digital age.

A significant body of literature focused on various aspects of creative workers' careers, with some researchers emphasizing the sustainability of musicians' careers and their creative endeavors. For instance, Bechmann and Lomborg (2013) proposed that social media platforms exhibited a 'user-centric' nature (p. 765), which was distinct from the traditional industry-driven approach to value creation. These inherent disparities in value creation and market orientation helped explain why many individuals, initially not targeting music careers, turned to social media to explore career opportunities. Stahl (2010) claimed that creative workers were subject to the free use of copyright on platforms like Douyin, which served as a prerequisite for musicians embarking on their online careers. However, the subsequent development of digital music careers often necessitated compliance with platform rules and algorithmic trends. Banks (2010) delved into the fundamental concept of cultural autonomy, emphasizing that it was a prerequisite for the profitable commodification of cultural and creative work. Consequently, capital interests did not lie in completely erasing cultural autonomy from artists, as doing so could undermine the basis of their profitability (ibid). Banks (2021) further suggested that the political and economic circumstances of creative users could be negotiated and transformed under variable conditions during musicians' online career development, especially when streamers' backgrounds aligned with platform development strategies. Alacovska (2018) acknowledged that creative workers might not necessarily have benefited from informal payment; however, interpersonal relationships could have been rewarded in subtle ways, such as through cash-in-hand work or favor-swapping. These 'hidden economics' (p. 1583) bolstered the resilience and sustainability of creative careers. When examining studies of musicians, whether related to the intersection of arts and

commerce, music production and reproduction, or other facets, one often encountered ambivalent conditions. As Pratt (2016) suggested, the ambivalence faced by musicians was more nuanced than a mere distinction and required a meticulous examination within specific contexts, whether they were legal, technical, or artistic.

Based on the literature discussed earlier, this chapter focuses on three key aspects of the digital music industry: the evolution of the music economy, the transformation of the music industry, and the production and reproduction of musicians' work, life, and creativity. The first part (section 2.2) details the historical transformation of the music economy over the past two decades, in conjunction with advancements in information technology and the digitization of music work. The second part (section 2.3) delves into the interactions among various emerging stakeholders in the music industry within social platforms. These stakeholders encompass digital platforms facilitating online markets and providing digital infrastructure for profit, capital investments in the music industry, and the regulatory and political influence exerted by the Chinese government. These economic and political factors converge on social platforms, creating a complex digital network and industrial environment for creative workers online. The third part (section 2.4) highlights platform capitalism and the business strategies of today's popular social platforms. It reviews creative capital and social capital as emerging elements on social media platforms for capitalization, in addition to the existing copyright capital and technological capital taken by such as music streaming services. Consequently, the fourth part (section 2.5) explores how social platforms impact the career situations of creative workers, addressing various aspects such as career precarity, arts-commerce ambivalence, the *wanghong* economy, monetization, and

copyright concerns on social platforms. This chapter serves as a theoretical framework offering a historical account of the music economy in the Chinese context, complemented by empirical insights concerning musicians on digital platforms. In the subsequent section, relevant debates are discussed, drawing on existing interdisciplinary research.

## **2.2 The Music Economy in the Age of Digitalization**

### **2.2.1 The technological disruption in recording landscape**

The musical economy has been reshaped in almost every aspect of music creation, reproduction, distribution, and consumption through the embrace of digital technologies (Leyshon, 2001). The music industry was attracting the attention of researchers in economic geography since the late 1960s (Carney, 1990). Researchers have studied the geographical landscape of recording labels, which tend to be more concentrated in big cities due to economic and artistic advantages in larger markets such as frequent cultural activities (Florida and Jackson, 2010). Florida et al. (2010) examine how the concentration of music talents and industrial resources in big cities, on a huge scale of economies, nourishes local cultural and creative activities. These economic advantages, in turn, increase employment opportunities for musicians and enhance the creative capital of metropolitan areas (ibid). However, smaller cities may experience unique benefits in the recording industry, primarily derived from reduced expenditures on human capital, local assets, and other costs related to music production (Florida and Jackson, 2010). The lower costs were crucial for the survival of smaller music businesses, particularly independent labels, during the 1970s. This

was a time when the democratization of recording technologies in the music industry led to the closure of many music studios and increased underemployment among related workers (Leyshon, 2009). As a result, the music recording industry underwent a transformation. Smaller companies merged together to achieve larger business scales in order to navigate the challenges of the changing market and ensure their survival. The digitalization of the music industry was further prompted by the software formats of music and the internet distribution online in the 2000s, which has led to a new music landscape.

The emergence of internet distribution platforms, such as music websites, file-sharing systems, and peer-to-peer networks, enabled free or minimally priced music online, posing a threat to the monopoly of physical music held by major labels (McLeod, 2005). The file-sharing system nourished an "underground" (p. 533) musical gift economy, which eroded copyright protection system rooted in the physical music industry (Leyshon, 2003). The widespread availability of copyrighted music on the internet challenged the dominance of copyright capitalism by major labels, leading to legal efforts to suppress unlicensed music distributed online (Alexander, 2002, Leyshon, 2003). The consumption of digital music expanded with the proliferation of personal devices and information technologies in the first decade of the millennium, accompanied by a further decline in physical music sales (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). However, the music industry was reluctant to adopt internet distribution as it could result in significant loss of income from CD sales (Leyshon et al., 2005). They preferred to preserve the current economic order of the music industry that generated substantial revenues through their monopoly status (ibid). Nevertheless, the digital

music industry inevitably entered the era of music streaming services, with new business models based on constant subscription to music databases (Arditi, 2018). While music labels retain primary control over music copyright and authorise music streaming for distribution, major music labels still act as gatekeepers in the current cultural economy of the music industry (Pratt, 2008).

### 2.2.2 The economic embeddedness of social network

Scholarly literature has emphasised the situated nature and the important role of social connectivity in creative production and consumption (Alacovska, 2018, Pepler and Solomou, 2011, Pratt et al., 2007). Potts et al. (2008) argue that the concept of creative industries is better understood as a type of social network market rather than a traditional industry with clear boundaries. To be specific, creative industries are a dynamic network of creative collaboration, which creates distinct products from a variety of fluid practitioners. This interconnected production ecosystem of transferable actors and activities is what distinguishes creative industries as social network markets. Creative value emerges from complex networks of social interactions that are initially "novel and uncertain" (ibid, p. 167), and commercial value is eventually achieved within the market, whether through visible or invisible cultural products. Similarly, Grabher et al. (2008) acknowledge the social embeddedness in knowledge creation and suggest that encounters and interactions within digital networks would benefit the ecology of creative production. Some researchers mentioned the benefits of physical industrial clustering and agglomeration in promoting creative efficiency and providing political advantages in the music industry (Keane, 2011). For example, Jansson (2016) emphasises the benefits of temporary clustering in music festivals for

musicians' creativity and non-creative activities. Jansson (2016) observes that traditional musicians engage less in temporary and external practises, indicating that digital social networks may facilitate innovative digital practises in diverse times and spaces. Despite some insights into general creative clusters, Pratt (2004) advocates more attention to the locality and dynamics of creative production systems situated in diverse spatial and temporal venues such as various social platforms.

Social platforms encourage a participatory culture by providing a user-friendly environment and online incentives such as feedback mechanisms, which has fostered a networked public online (Burgess, 2013, Giaccardi, 2012, Burgess and Green, 2009). Users on social platforms are not just consumers but also producers of digital content on the platform (Bruns, 2009). For example, people can easily refer to, like, comment on, and collaborate with others' works on social media. Additionally, some users serve as data providers, occupying a "volatile position" in the digital labour market (van Dijck, 2009, p. 41). Social media has also extended the reach of musicians' physical performances, as digital technology allows local musicians to attract wider online audiences (Johansson et al., 2016). Banks and Deuze (2009) argue that social media provides a venue for content co-creation, where diverse participants create, negotiate, and coordinate (p. 419) to explore multiple possibilities of cultural and economic value. Within this context, the music economy has embraced the "context model" that goes beyond the traditional "ownership model" (Wikström, 2012, p. 18). Specifically, access-based music services on social platforms have developed transferable ways to monetise music that transcend the definitions and boundaries of traditional music entities (ibid). Musicians typically receive income from e-commerce sales or brand

advertising on their media accounts on platforms like Douyin, while their creative music content remains free for access and sharing on the platform.

While researchers have highlighted the potential self-exploitation for creative workers in maintaining relationship on social platforms, musicians receive hidden benefits from interpersonal connections, including informal paid and unpaid labour practises (p. 1563). Musicians have been advocating for themselves on social media as a means of marketing their music and personal brand, allowing them to seek creative autonomy in free work environments (Umney and Kretsos, 2013). Many musicians have turned to online entrepreneurship to explore business opportunities, and digital social networks have become valuable tools to support their business intentions (Shabbir et al., 2016, p. 203). Scolere (2019) observes that online streamers engage in "portfolio-building" or "self-branding" (p. 1891) on social platforms, which should be understood as a process of creative labour aimed at distinguishing themselves on diverse social platforms. These streamers monetise their digital portfolios and themselves through methods such as online advertising for brands and maintaining connections with their audiences is crucial for their online business (ibid). This transformation has fundamentally changed the employment relationship between musicians and the industry, as Banks and Humphreys (2008) describe it as a form of "creative destruction" (p. 401) in labour relations within the creative industry. Social media has created new forms of music business and autonomous operations for musicians (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2014), but it has also introduced new dependencies on investments and stakeholders such as fans and sponsors, the streaming platform, and



brand partnerships. The labour relationships between social platforms, musicians, and investors are reciprocal, with commitment levels varying in relation to mutual benefits.

### 2.2.3 A extended account of digital music economy

Digital platforms have facilitated industrial clustering online for the music industry, which has offered multiple advantages with less geographical restriction and higher accessibility for participants. Social platforms play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining the online infrastructure for various cultural industries. They set rules for distributing cultural works online and provide business communities where industries can network and collaborate with others (Langley and Leyshon, 2017, Keane, 2011). Joining digital clusters is relatively accessible due to the low threshold associated with most social platforms. They are typically free to join, automatically distribute content through algorithms, and offer multiple channels for communication and networking among participants. This lower-cost participation and increased opportunities on social networks are particularly important for creative workers, as it enables them to pursue music entrepreneurship online without significant upfront investments (Shabbir et al., 2016). Consequently, many musicians are engaging with social platforms and seeking benefits from digital networks, utilizing the various resources available.

Freelancers in the creative industry have been increasingly visible on social media, forming what is known as the gig economy (Haynes and Marshall, 2018). Social media has created a new economic framework for the creative industry, offering new entrepreneurial opportunities for various types of creative labour. This includes people

living in rural areas and smaller social groups who have often been marginalised by traditional media coverage in China but have found success as popular streamers on social platforms (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, Guo, 2022, Liao, 2021). The contingent but significant popularity of digital content by grassroots creators has increased their bargaining power within social platforms (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). For instance, influential streamers with high e-commerce sales on social platforms have leveraged their impact in digital communities to gain such as higher commissions and online traffic (Lu and Wang, 2022). In recent years, social platforms in China have witnessed the rise of the pan-entertainment economy driven by creative streamers and internet influencers, also known as *wanghong*. These popular online streamers have significant influence over consumer behavior and maintain close reciprocal relationships with business brands (Zhang et al., 2020). While some *wanghong* figures have faced criticism for being value commercial interests over artistic insistence, Haynes and Marshall (2018) counter this argument. They contend that musicians achieve business success but not necessarily at the expense of cultural integrity (p. 459). Instead, they indicate popular streamers on social platforms tend to achieve both economic success and recognition.

Multiple channel networks (MCNs) are another thriving segment of the music economy that supports users' creative production on social media (Gardner and Lehnert, 2016). Given the need for frequent updates of creative content on social media to maintain audience attention, MCNs have rapidly developed to assist with administration and content generation. Typically, MCNs hire artists to generate creative content for social media users, who then showcase the final works to the online public. Zhao (2019b)

suggests that a secondary market may emerge to support the primary creative market in cultural production, wherein publishers collude with authors to extract surplus creative value without proper credit. This phenomenon highlights a problematic aspect of the creative economy related to false authority, where creativity is commodified and can be acquired from other musicians who have less negotiating power due to their lower popularity or investment in themselves. Consequently, creative work becomes an exchangeable commodity, and capital continues to exert control over music production through the exploitation of secondary creative labour, despite claims by some researchers about cultural autonomy regained by popular musicians on social media (Qu et al., 2021).

## **2.3 Technological Platforms with Economic and Political Aspects**

### **2.3.1 Technological affordance and market capacity**

Digital platforms facilitate the development of social networks, and the digital infrastructures for social and emotional connectivity are vital for nurturing the cultural and creative industry online (Bataille et al., 2020). Bataille et al. (2020) point out that performing arts are emotional, interactive, and expressive in nature. Although social platforms have created a social digital environment for their users, many creative workers have actively maintained the social nature of their performances or have developed new ways of connecting with their audience (ibid). For example, popular digital content on Douyin during the pandemic has been observed to show intimacy and relatability to the audience, along with positive emotions such as playfulness and humor (Southerton 2021). Creative workers also encouraged to learn to interact and

communicate with their fans to receive advantages from a positive public relationship, such as replying to fans' comments and meeting fans via live streaming will enhance fan loyalty. However, negative interactions can have a reverse influence on streamers' popularity and fan relationships, such as mindset disputes and verbal conflicts. Creative workers should also avoid offensive expressions that go against the platform's general rules, such as aggressive expression and violent behaviour (Chen et al., 2020). As these may trigger user complaints and keyword detection systems on Douyin, resulting in punishment such as deactivation of the user account for a period of time (ibid).

With the platform algorithm allows personalised content feeds and the viral transmission of digital content online, many digital contents may become popular online without significant marketing costs. As a result, this overnight fame has attracted even more creative workers to try their luck on social platforms. Today's social media tend to feature sophisticated algorithms in content distribution systems to achieve personalised and targeted content feeds for their users (Zhao, 2021). For example, Douyin and TikTok have been criticised for their addictive user experience brought about by their self-learning algorithms, which analyse and deliver content based on users' preferences (ibid). Specifically, the Douyin algorithm labels and rates digital content based on the analysis of likes, comments, audience watching time, and other unpublished criteria for content rating, matching them with targeted users with similar labels or groups (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, Wang, 2021). This content distribution system differs from traditional marketing practises that focus more on public exposure related to marketing budgets. The Douyin algorithm also promotes highly performing

or popular content to go viral among a larger user base, leading to nationwide popularity of the content on the platform (Zhao, 2021). Additionally, the Douyin platform has developed paid services for marketing digital content online through a marketing function called Dou+, which widens the exposure of users' content to the online public (Douyin, 2021). All these technological affordances have distinct the social platform from the offline market, and lead to a differed market practise of digital music industries.

Social media provides incentives for creative users' entrepreneurship, from producing to commercializing through its platform strategies for an activated digital market. Social platforms seek to promote potential creative workers and encourage users to produce digital content for the platform, in order to sustain the platform's ecosystem of content production (Kaye et al., 2022). This continuous production of creative work attracts users to stay active on the platform, consuming and providing data feedback, which may be closely related to the business model and platform capitalism (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). Therefore, social platforms have implemented incentives to attract creative workers, either part-time or full-time, to start their online careers as amateur or professional musicians. The loose and informal relationship between the platform and users allows for more flexibility and autonomous operation of musicians' accounts, while exposing musicians to the resources in digital communities. As the risks decrease and the advantages increase, musicians have used these social platforms to benefit from the digital environment, where there are fewer restrictions on the geographical location of cultural activities (Pratt, 2000). Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, the closure of offline physical venues has led more creative workers to

engage themselves on social media, seeking career sustainability by commercializing their accounts and content in multiple ways such as live streaming, e-commerce, advertising, and more (Bataille et al., 2020).

### 2.3.2 Capital and political power on China's social platform

The Chinese government has played a vital role in reshaping platform rules, market regulations, and creative workers' ideologies. van Dijck (2013) highlights that everything related to social aspects in a technological platform can also be political and ideological, especially when it comes to information control among the digital public. The Chinese government has specifically implemented the Great Firewall policy for content censorship, filtering, and banning material from the internet (van Dijck, 2013). This policy primarily impacts the music industry by detecting copyright infringement, but it may also function as a means of political censorship concerning musicians' backgrounds (Ryan et al., 2020). Over time, political sensitive and patriotism have become unspoken rules for creative workers to survive on their Douyin accounts and boost online traffic (ibid). Chinese social media platforms like Douyin, being subject to political surveillance by ruling parties, shape their economic structures in alignment with political considerations. In this case, popular social platforms like Douyin have supported the government in implementing cultural policies and fostering a preferred cultural atmosphere in the digital creative market. Typically, content promoting "positive energy" aligns with the core values of a communist society (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, local governments have developed business partnerships with social media platforms for purposes such as propaganda, city branding, and tourism (Zhang, 2020). Taking on the dual roles of regulator and stakeholder within

the social platform landscape, the Chinese government has faced criticism for the perceived potential for bribery. This criticism stems from concerns that preferential policies for digital platforms may be granted in exchange for commercial or political favors. For instance, Zhang (2020) has uncovered instances of commercial cooperation between local governments and popular social platforms, often involving the extended use of user data by the platform for commercial needs.

Platform capitalism does not guarantee that customers' needs for music with cultural significance; instead, they will likely prioritise business value and act as technological gatekeepers (Van Dijck et al., 2018, Natalie and Caroline, 2020). The social platform has remodeled the music industry operations and empowered musicians who are less emphasised in the traditional market. However, the platform's emphasis is more on business interests rather than musicians' interests. Social platforms have introduced new forms of dependence for musicians. They rely on these platforms to retain their existing fan base on the specific platform while benefiting from a favourable digital market that aids the rise of their digital popularity (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2014). Along with the operation of social media, digital platforms are rapidly creating fast-rising stars for a concentrated market and generating monopoly profits (Haijen, 2016). These social platforms, like other streaming services, do not highlight the aesthetic value of artistic works but rather prioritise to capitalise on the cultural market. As Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) indicated, the tendency of capitalism in these social platforms may not prioritise consumer preferences over public demands related to cultural meaning within the work. Similarly, capitalist social platforms may not promise meaningful music production but rather ensure limited development for less popular

musicians with limited market value (Duffy et al., 2021). As Caplan and Gillespie (2020) explicates the power relationship between social platforms and their content creators; Individuals is powerless in pressuring the social platform, and what secures the platform is that the collective action contributed by unpaid labour to sustain the online market (ibid).

The competitive digital market may lead to higher sunk costs of momentary or creative capital investment from smaller investors competing for the digital market. In the complexity of the digital market on social media, musicians and the creative industry have struggled to secure their position and compete for limited public attention. Political power, capital investment, and natural popularity on social media are intertwined, and the intermediary platform has to balance the interests of all actors for survival and growth. The literature on power struggles among multiple actors on popular social media platforms is scarce, and the detailed game carried out by platform algorithms to balance interest groups and influential streamers remains unknown (Duffy et al., 2021). Some musicians have observed that the competition for online traffic on Douyin has become fiercer today compared to years ago when the platform was growing rapidly but had not attracted significant capital investment (Lv, 2022). The capital battle may lead to higher investments for advertising results; however, creative content from ordinary users may still occupy online traffic for a better user experience. Adhering to creative principles on the Douyin platform may increase the efficiency of advertising input, but there can be a 'burning rate' when it comes to capitalizing on creative content for a 'winner takes all' approach (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). Nevertheless, the economic returns from copyrighted work on social media



may be gained outside the platform. This has led streamers to continue contributing to their digital careers, sometimes disregarding the cost and return on investment within the platform.

## **2.4 Creative Capital for Platform Capitalism**

Today's digital platforms have placed increasing importance on creative competence and social skills, while decreasing concerns about copyright issues for its users in gaining further economic and political advantages. Emerging digital platforms like Douyin allow creative streamers to freely perform and remix copyrighted works online, which has, to some extent, alleviated the restrictions on using cultural works due to copyright protection on most other social platforms. For instance, some user-generated content platforms like YouTube may require their users to obtain copyright licenses before using or remixing copyrighted works on the platform. Consequently, users may be discouraged from using copyrighted music due to the cost of licensing or the risk of punishment from the digital platform if copyright infringement is detected. However, social media platforms like Douyin have been negotiating with major record labels and music streaming services to reach agreements on the use of music copyrights. This effort has reassured most ordinary users, allowing them to freely transmit, use, and remix music on the platform. Nevertheless, it has faced criticism for incorrect music attribution and giving credit to the wrong musicians. The social platform has pushed the boundaries of copyright use while encouraging users' creativity in presenting digital content on the platform and rating content through social interactions. For example, a calculation of the likes, comments, fans interactive, and

so on. Consequently, this has introduced new elements of capital that are streamers' creativities and social skills, with a lower emphasis on upfront investment in copyright and legal support.

The worldwide digital music industry has developed various business model that relies differently on copyright revenue, user subscriptions, and advertising on digital platforms (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021). Major labels primarily rely on income from copyright loyalty, while music streaming services tend to depend on both user subscriptions and advertising income. Most social media, on the other hand, has developed various ways for their streamers to monetise their digital account. For example, merging social media platforms like Douyin have facilitated diverse monetizing channels for account holders, including but not limited to advertising, e-commerce sales, fan donations in live performances online, and paid services for traffic boost on the platform. Instead of solely relying on income from advertisers, the multiple monetizing channels (Douyin model) allow the market to initiate commercial cooperation within the digital market (Ryan, 2022). The business model of the Douyin platform bases its revenue on agenting cooperation and gaining commissions from business deals on it, with the precondition that unlicensed advertising will be detected and eliminated through algorithm filters and manual review. Led by this business model, social platforms like Douyin aim to attract and trigger more creative production and commercial cooperation online, developing supportive digital infrastructures and incentives for online entrepreneurship, and encouraging a participatory culture (Burgess, 2013, van Dijck, 2009). In addition to the business model, other platform strategies such as user experience, industrial competition, and political relationships

matter considerably regarding the platform ecology of the digital creative market and the platform's sustainability. Specifically, despite complying with the Chinese government's policies in political censorship and cultural ideology, popular *wanghong* musicians in the digital music industry tend to contribute to both the platform's financial income and user maintenance. Importantly, pan-entertainment social platforms like Douyin have been strategically deployed emerging music ownership (Douyin, 2022) that generates both creative and economic capital on the platform for long-term economic return.

There are distinct types of digital platform with differed abilities in attracting creative groups and nourishing a *wanghong* economy. The first type is those professional digital service providers such as Spotify and TenCent emphasis on committing the music product to its audiences in a way of digital streaming. The primary focus of these mainstream music streaming services tends to be on those copyrighted worked form established musicians, as IT companies features with large capital and a copyright license from major labels. The second type of digital platform born as social platforms in nature, highlighting the user-generated content than copyrighted work in various field, meanwhile allowing users to monetise their digital account mainly through advertising or fan donations. The types of digital platform such as YouTube featured with internet celebrities with their creative work become popular on social media. The third types are mass social media with a democracy nature of online expression and distinct pattern of information dissemination that highlight the mass voice, which the literature indicated the prosumers (García-Galera and Valdivia, 2014) nature of the platform users. Specifically, the abilities for the mass media Douyin to nourish a great

number of *wanghong* groups can attribute to its supportive digital facilities in content generating, personalised distribution, and various consumption in addition to the free copyright solution for its users. The Douyin platform has also developed a viral method for content dissemination that consistently captures public attention with rapidly trending content on a daily basis. These platform designs undeniably align with the platform's business model, which involves creating new internet intellectual property (IP) by nurturing various internet celebrities. This strategy also aims to capitalise on the heightened commercial value resulting from the popularity of *wanghong* individuals within their digital communities.

My study highlights the situation in China, where the digital music industry and its practitioners have struggled with deteriorating financial conditions due to rampant copyright infringement over the past two decades, despite policies aimed at alleviating the situation (Pang, 2012; Zhang, 2020a). Social platforms in China have become essential for musicians, especially independent ones with fewer income streams compared to superstars. Mass cultural and creative workers have spontaneously gathered on digital platforms to seek online exposure and promotion, leading to the emergence of the so-called 'gig economy' in the industry (Thompson, 2020; Mathers, 2005). In recent years, more popular streamers have emerged on video streaming platforms, achieving both online fame and a decent income. These creative streamers and their accounts have attracted broader audiences and capital investments to the digital platform, granting them significant bargaining power with advertisers and economic potential. Notably, pan-entertainment social media platforms like Douyin have become renowned for the viral transmission of digital content online and the cultivation of creative celebrities. Additionally, popular platforms like Douyin have

gained political advantages in terms of usage statistics and economic policies, collaborating with local governments in online promotion and cultural tourism initiatives due to their high publicity and social influence (Zhang, 2020b).

It can be observed that today's social platforms have based their capitalism on the creative capital within them, particularly the creative streamers and their content, by building a stimulating social network on the platform to boost the rise of internet celebrities. In comparison to major music streaming services, which mainly rely on copyright capitalism, emerging social media platforms have achieved creative capitalism based on innovative technologies and the creativity of their users, thus driving the platform economy. Significantly, in the Chinese context, where the industry is still striving for higher copyright revenue to compete at the global standard, creative social media platforms like TikTok and Douyin have demonstrated an alternative yet efficient way for platform capitalism that both benefit itself and the cultural and creative industry.

## **2.5 Music *Wanghong* as Precarious Workers**

### 2.5.1 Precarity and ambivalence of creative work

Literature highlighted the precarious career situation of creative labour and the ambivalence they face in balancing cultural value with commercial value in the music business. Creative labour shares a precarious working condition characterised by insecure jobs and unstable income due to flexible working hours and lack of job

security. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) point out that many musicians struggle to sustain their music careers due to lower pay, aging, and a potential reduction in creativity, and failure to keep up with the music market. Another group of musicians who sign with agencies face ambivalence in negotiating and adapting their music for higher market performance, often sacrificing artistic value for business purposes (Frenette, 2016). In this context, many creative workers are turning to social platforms for various reasons, such as gaining exposure for their work, accessing extra job opportunities and income, and having more control over their music (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). Most social platforms establish an informal labour relationship with online streamers, which involves mechanisms like commissions deducted from the streamers' online income (Alacovska, 2018). This arrangement enables musicians to operate autonomously, pursuing their creative work independently while also reaping additional benefits through monetizing their content within the platform market. Especially during the 2019 pandemic when the offline job market shrank and shut down, many creative workers started engaging with social platforms online for digital career continuity (Leyshon and Watson, 2021). The flourishing digital market during the lockdown period in the pandemic fostered the formation of the digital music business to meet the increasing demands of music consumption online, such as live video streaming and music listening (ibid). As a result, new musicians who fit the digital music market stand out and become new superstars in the field. However, these popular musicians often take on the responsibility of self-censorship to comply with platform rules for sustainability in their digital careers, in addition to reidentifying themselves as online musicians and attracting a wider market (Scolere et al., 2018), which tend to be the work of music agencies.

Literature has extensively engaged with creative labour's self-exploitation or being exploited due to fierce competition on capitalised platforms. Beverungen et al. (2015) point out that today's social media has seen the emergence of free labour captured from the overall society, as unpaid labour is mobilised by the platform to encourage creative production through data analysis and data incentives. Mathers (2005) attributes the increase in free labour to job instability and unfairness, resulting in the prevalence of the gig economy on social media. They also indicate that women, migrants, and young people are more likely to be affected and struggle to work extra part-time jobs (ibid). Social media platforms have been attracting gig workers and ordinary individuals to become prosumers, play laborers on social platforms, whom has been commodifying their 'disposable time' (Fuchs, 2014, p. 97) or spare time either for monetary or non-monetary reasons. Ross (2009) claims that flexible work may lead to flexible exploitation, highlighting the emerging creative class in insecure digital career situations. Specially, the speculative distribution of online wealth that led to an uncertain and uneven income. In addition to the increasing number of new entrants leading to oversupplied labour and fierce competition in the digital creative market, social media platforms like Douyin encourage entrepreneurship for online creative workers (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017, Beverly Yuen, 2020). With a strong entrepreneurial spirit, online musicians have shown a heightened commitment by investing more money and energy into their digital accounts, enabling them to compete more effectively in the digital market.

Literature tended to emphasise the emotional labouring such as relationship maintaining between fans as a precarious work and life situation of creative workers

(Duffy and Wissinger, 2017, Zhang and Wu, 2022). However, some forms of emotional labour on social media may be designed strategies for digital creative workers to foster their digital enterprises (Guo, 2022). Researchers highlighted that maintaining intensive social connections with the online public may burden creative workers and lead to emotional exhaustion (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). Therefore, many creative workers maintain an emotional distance to reduce the emotional workload and affectation brought about by their creative careers. Nevertheless, a positive relationship with the audience can bring musicians multiple advantages such as fan loyalty, high popularity, and increased income (ibid). Duffy and Hund (2015) studied the strategies used by fashion bloggers to mobilise their fashion, femininity, and influence within the online community to monetise their accounts through advertising targeted products. These female microcelebrities tend to build their branded personas as commercial subjects and foster their businesses by strengthening emotional connections within digital communities (Scolere et al., 2018). Close emotional relationships between *wanghong* streamers and their audiences are essential in boosting trust for establishing e-commerce, facilitating online promotion, and increasing sales. In the music field, emotional labour can also bring advantages for musicians, particularly in live streaming performances, which can trigger fan donations and higher income.

### 2.5.2 The explored but deprived economic potentials of musicians

Creative workers benefit from various monetizing channels on social platform, while their online popularity and fame may contribute in subtle ways than direct economic return. Social media platforms base their business models on mediating advertisers



and online streamers for marketing and promotion, allowing the platform to earn commissions from these business collaborations. The platform also implements incentives to stimulate online consumption and commercial cooperation, thereby boosting its own income. Specifically, platforms like Douyin have developed digital features such as Star Map (Juliang Xingtū) to facilitate online commercial cooperation, while also acting as neutral arbiters in business disputes and negotiations (Ran, 2021). Douyin has live streaming services that employ digital incentives for both streamers and audiences, using rankings, competitions, and hints to encourage online consumption. In addition to the direct payments received on the platform, many musicians may increase their financial income outside the platform due to their broader exposure and online popularity, leading to work opportunities and increased music loyalty. Alacovska (2018) highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in boosting informal income and career development. The research notes that both paid and unpaid work may be related to reciprocity between actors, which is essential for musicians' career sustainability. Therefore, researchers should critically review the labour practises of creative workers, whether formal or informal, paid or voluntary, on the platform or offline, as all of these creative practises may indicate economic potential within the network of 'favour-swapping' (p. 1583) that supports the dynamics of musicians' careers.

Recent literature has highlighted the entrepreneurial practises and celebrity economy, known as the *wanghong* economy in the Chinese context. Craig et al. (2021) propose a classification of influencer creators based on three different emphases within cultural fields: cultural influencers, creative influencers, and social influencers. Cultural

influencers are well-educated and highly literate, often serving as cultural elites and opinion leaders such as experts, professors, and writers. The second group consists of individuals recognised for their creative capabilities or work in creative industries, such as artists and performers, and makeup streamers. The third category focuses on social influencers who capitalise on their social abilities, building intimacy and providing social services to their audiences. However, the boundaries between each category may be blurred. For many online streamers, especially those who engage in live performances on social platforms, their roles may combine aspects of both creative and social influence. In the case of musicians, performance skills, creative design, and social relationships may all play essential roles in practise. For example, the main contributors to a music live streamer are likely those who develop a closer relationship or strong loyalty to the streamers. In addition, social capital can have subtle gender-related or sexual-related implications, as Xu and Zhao (2019) indicate; gendered performance has become a phenomenon in China's internet culture, which can be both social and political. The celebrity economy, or *wanghong* economy, represents a hybrid of entrepreneurial, creative, social, and political capitalism, which deserves scrutiny for its typical types and distinctions.

The music industry lives heavily on the copyright revenue, whereas its practitioners have kept losing music loyalty and credit without formal compensation on social platform like Douyin. China's creative industries have been criticised for copyright infringement and the production of *shanzhai* products, which are imitation or counterfeit copies of original works (Pang, 2012). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the Chinese music industry, where music piracy has persisted despite

multiple policies aimed at suppression. Musicians in China struggle with low pay from music loyalty and have sought additional revenue streams from other music-related creative industries such as film and television industry (Zhang, 2019). The Chinese IT company Tencent has maintained its dominant and exclusive position in music copyright, and this concentrated landscape has prompted music labels to foster new musicians and popular music through their market operations (Zhao, 2019a). For example, some music labels may sign musicians who have become popular online, while others recruit music talents offline and promote them in the music market (iResearch, 2019). Popular social media platforms like Douyin have emphasised their strategic role in scouting and promoting emerging musicians, evident in the rapid rise of superstars through viral transitions of digital content. The viral spread of digital content is facilitated by the Terms of Service (ToS) of Douyin and TikTok, which include agreements on freely using copyright material on the platform, thereby facilitating digital communities for the free proliferation of digital content. However, although these platforms have a music attribution system to trace back the original music track, the accuracy is often low, with only one-third of musicians being correctly credited (Valdovinos Kaye et al., 2020).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In summary, the music economy underwent significant evolution over the past two decades due to technological advancements, including recording technologies, digital music formats, live music streaming, and comprehensive social media platforms. These technological shifts transformed the economic landscape of the music industry,

with capitalistic IT companies largely dominating digital music distribution, while major labels retained control over music copyright. The digital society evolved alongside the technological evolution and has spontaneously reshaped the industry through mass participation within the digital sphere. Today's digital music industry on social media operates on a context-based model of music value creation, in addition to the ownership model based on copyright capitalism (Wikström, 2012). The diverse digital scene on social platforms has empowered the digital music industry by combining diverse creative resources absorbed from the digital social network, resulting in an expanded presence of music and a creative economy. With the increasing influence of digital platforms on society, various economic, capital, and political powers are engaged as regulators, stakeholders, and practitioners. These diverse powers intersect and interact in the concentrated digital market of popular social platforms, reshaping the platform into an intricate and complex sphere. Today's social media platforms, such as Douyin, have developed their business models around the monetization of creative capital. This includes advanced technological infrastructures for creative individuals to gather, sophisticated algorithms for personalised content recommendations, and highly interactive social networks for promoting creative content. These creative users and their digital content on the platform have become the new sources of capital for platform profitability and growth. Musicians and other creative workers have actively participated in the competitive digital market, often striving to reach a broader audience through their unpaid labour. While some creative workers may find favor with platform algorithms and the digital market on social platforms, ultimately achieving fame and financial success as compensation for their precarious digital careers and unpaid efforts, many others experience low income, copyright infringements, or struggle to navigate the thriving yet challenging digital

creative market. The Chinese government and the Douyin platform have actively promoted digital entrepreneurship for both economic and political reasons. They have been encouraging increased entrepreneurial activities on social platforms like Douyin where individuals seek for monetary revenues from expanded entrepreneurial endeavours and symbolic rewards through enhanced data.

My research holds significant importance by focusing on the widely popular social media platform, Douyin, and conducting a thorough examination of the digital music industry and the challenges faced by musicians. This approach distinguishes itself from previous scholarly work in several key ways. Firstly, I employ a meticulous approach that involves digital ethnography and in-depth interviews with thirty musicians from diverse backgrounds. This methodology allows me to delve deeply into the complex career and life situations musicians encounter upon engaging with the Douyin platform. The insights gathered encompass a wide range of aspects, including legal, technical, and aesthetic dimensions, as well as empirical evidence related to entrepreneurial, economic, social, and political facets. Specifically, I explore musicians' experiences in the production and reproduction of their creativity and self-identity. This includes investigating topics such as career development, account management, creative ambivalence, economic and non-monetary rewards, fan relationships, and other relevant experiences on Douyin. The empirical data gathered almost every facet of musicians' work, life, and career, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the latest spotlighted musicians as internet celebrities (*wanghong* musicians). While my primary focus is on *wanghong* musicians

on the Douyin platform, this study also sheds light on the broader challenges faced by creative workers within the digital cultural and creative industries.

Secondly, I establish a theoretical framework that examines musicians' digital career conditions at various levels, ranging from micro-level insights into musicians' experiences to meso-level perspectives on platform dynamics and strategies, and finally, macro-level investigations into the socio-economic interactions impacting the digital creative industries. This research, commencing with theoretical insights in Chapter 3, followed by empirical findings and interpretations in Chapters 4 and 5, and culminating with the theoretical implications in Chapter 6. This epistemological approach serves as a foundational for a critical understanding of the conditions faced by creative labour within the broader digital creative industry.

Thirdly, this research addresses its objectives from comprehensive perspectives that encompass personal, political, social, and economic dimensions, in addition to considering technological features. For instance, Chapter 4 primarily focuses on musicians' personal work and life, with a dedicated section exploring their social lives, including their interactions with fans. In Chapter 5, I delve into musicians' digital entrepreneurship, highlighting the social-economic consequences through an examination of musicians' extended social networks and the resulting financial implications. Furthermore, it sheds light on the political-economic aspects of platform governance and engagement, particularly in relation to its *wanghong* streamers and ordinary users, illustrating their symbiotic relationship and mutual development. Chapter 6 places emphasis on the social-economic interplay between mass platform

users and their activities in the technological online market. It analyses the digital affordances for social interaction and economic activities online, which have led to a reshaped online market with distinct characteristics in creative production and consumption. This chapter also unveils the practises of mass users in reshaping the digital market. For example, it discusses copycat streamers seeking higher online popularity and the challenge of user loyalty due to the homogenised content with easy accessibility. This is especially notable on the Douyin platform, characterised by loose copyright restrictions.

The intertwined knowledge gained from this study offers insights into the situation of individual workers and the creative industry within the complexity of today's national popular technological social platforms, particularly the Chinese social media named Douyin.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to improve the validity of the qualitative results of research into the life and working conditions of musicians with a focus on the implications of their engagement with social media. The study aims to interpret the situation of musicians within both online and offline music communities in China, with digital ethnography employed as the primary framework, alongside open-ended online interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of each interviewee. Participant observation of musicians' behaviours on social media is also used to provide more comprehensive data (Murthy, 2008, p.849). Digital ethnography on social media generates a vast amount of multimedia information, including texts, music, videos, and live streaming, requiring researchers to frequently employ digital walkthrough method in interpreting the musicians' background information. Thus, digital ethnography is complemented by digital walkthrough method during the online observation to better capture the interviewees' digital identities on social media. The following section provides an overview of the research methods and data collected, which will be elaborated in this section.

The textual, visual, sonic, and observational information collected was used to create fieldnotes for each interviewee before their interviews, which data aids in the comprehension of the musicians' behaviour and expression. Semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, focused on topics based on the



background information gathered through prior digital ethnographic investigation. Table 2 illustrates the research methods employed in this thesis, the data sources utilised, and the specific data types generated from each data channel. These channels include news and reports about the musicians, videos, live streaming records on Douyin, as well as other information obtained from open-access social media platforms like Weibo. Additionally, the "moments" feature on WeChat has been an essential channel for accessing musicians' private information, as musicians post their daily work and lives on this private Short Message Service (SMS) in China. Digital walkthrough has played a vital role in researching the visual, sonic, and cultural, and contextual materials on the musicians' Douyin accounts. The visual data, or multimedia data of the musicians' Douyin accounts, has contributed to a better understanding of the musicians and helped determine whether they are potential interviewees for my research. Doing ethnographic research in this way with digital walkthrough the Douyin platform familiarised me with the musicians' overall career and life status, which can be later discussed in one-to-one interviews with them. I participated in some musicians' live streaming sessions to deepen my observations and engage in online interactions by accessing the data from musicians' digital accounts and posting questions to be answered occasionally by the streamers. I gained additional data either answered by the musicians or shown in statistic data on the platform. The 30 interviewees were from a variety of backgrounds, with distinct identities, age, gender, styles, locations, account types, fan bases, class, race, ethnicity, and disability and so on. With these combined research methods, my research aims to provide a comprehensive interpretation of online musicians in the data analysis.

Table 2 Research methods and data collection in this research

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Data sources</b>	<b>Account</b>	<b>Data type</b>
Semi-structured interviews	One-to-one online interview via WeChat call	30 interview transcriptions (Approximately 31 hours audios)	textual
Digital ethnography	Ethnographic fieldwork on internet	Fieldnotes on Musicians' background: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News and reports</li> <li>• Douyin videos &amp; live streaming</li> <li>• major music streaming services (i.e., Tencent music)</li> <li>• Open-for-access social media</li> <li>• "moments" on WeChat</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	textual, visual, and video
Digital walkthrough	Multimedia content posted on musicians' Douyin account	Fieldnotes on musicians' digital account and music content on Douyin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music genre &amp; style,</li> <li>• Video types &amp; design,</li> <li>• Speech design,</li> <li>• Content organization,</li> <li>• Personal appearance,</li> <li>• Body movement &amp; indication</li> </ul>	comprehensive observation

	<p>The observation on the live streamers on Douyin</p>	<p>Statistic data in real-time live streaming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the number of audiences in the live room,</li> <li>• the names of donators in the ranking list,</li> <li>• real-time comments and likes</li> <li>• the amount of donations</li> </ul> <p>Observational online interaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• musicians' online interaction with fans,</li> <li>• personalities,</li> <li>• live streaming style,</li> <li>• appearance and movement</li> <li>• online speech</li> <li>• indicative expressions</li> </ul>	<p>comprehensive observation</p>
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In the upcoming sections, I will delve into the methodologies and theories relevant to my research, focusing on the combined methods employed. Section 3.2 will outline the specific data collected through digital ethnography, encompassing online observation, interviews, and a digital walkthrough of the Douyin platform. I will also explain the significance of these data in my study. Moving on to Section 3.3, I will

provide insights into the interview methods used, offering context for the interview process, which includes stages such as recruiting, preparation, and the conducting interviews. Throughout this section, I will share my empirical experiences and personal reflections at each phase of the interviews. In Section 3.4, I will emphasise the data analysis process, which includes both thematic and ethnographic analyses. Employing a combined approach, I aim to conduct an impartial analysis that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the collected thematic, ethnographic, and observational data. This approach allows for the interpretation of the musicians' backgrounds and responses within their social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the data analysis will extend to participant and observational notes within the Douyin community, particularly focusing on the technological and social features of the Douyin platform. This analysis aims to provide insights into musicians and the digital music market on Douyin.

## **3.2 Digital ethnography**

### **3.2.1 Ethnographical fieldwork**

This research project adapted existing research methods, such as ethnography, to be more focused on digital research. Ethnographical methods emphasised immersive participation in the subjects' community for a well-rounded understanding of their social and cultural circumstances (Heyl, 2001, p.369). Ethnography is often embedded with consistent observation of the subjects, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the communities the interviewees live in. Interviews are another common method in ethnography, requiring a certain time and energy commitment

from the interviewees. My research conducted thirty semi-structured interviews online, which largely reduced geographical restrictions (Bampton and Cowton, 2002, p.12), making it more flexible and available to access musicians, especially during the repetitive lockdowns and social panic during the Covid-19 pandemic. My fieldwork also showed immersive and participatory aspects. I utilised the Douyin software (both mobile and website versions) extensively during my research, dedicating approximately a year to observing and recruiting musicians on the platform. Immersing myself into the online community is my approach to conducting digital ethnography, and I even signed up to be a music streamer on Douyin to "think like a music streamer." The visual analysis of the musicians' digital accounts includes familiarizing and categorizing their video design and presentation, verbal and body language, and other symbolic or indicative information (Lobinger, 2016). All of the connections and engagement with the research subject work together to produce valid qualitative research that can provide a reasoning of why and how musicians engage with social platforms. Next, I will discuss each research method in detail.

The digital ethnography collects any available background about the research subjects, and the internet-based searching benefits the efficiency of data collection. All the open-for-access information on the internet mainly depicts the public work and career status of the musicians, which tends to portray a formal, rational, and exterior image of the musician. The online musicians I targeted are all based on digital accounts on Douyin. Although not all were music professionals before they joined the platform, most popular musicians on Douyin have established personal profiles or have a record of prior experience and other digital traces on the internet. For example, digital

portfolios were typically found on Chinese Wikipedia (Baidu Zhidao) or other social media. Especially those professional musicians who tend to brand and promote themselves online through multiple channels. Some popular musicians have been featured in mass media reports or interviews, providing valuable information for my ethnographic investigation by offering comprehensive insights into their backgrounds, experiences, and opinions. Musicians may have a record of music work on major live streaming services in China, such as Tencent Music and NetEase. This production history and statistics will indicate the career status of the musicians and their potential income level. Despite several superstar musicians or internet celebrities, the main body of musicians is found to have a flat performance in their music work. The unremarkable music played on mainstream services potentially indicates the musicians' low popularity in the field as a musician, therefore generating a lower income from music royalty. I also referred to the musicians' other social media accounts and see the history of content posted to gain an overview of the musicians' career timeline and activities.

Digital ethnography benefits from the retrospective feature of internet data, as all posts are recorded in a readable form. This helps researchers to better understand and portray their research subjects. The most crucial private information about musicians can be obtained from the "moments" feature on WeChat. However, this information can only be accessed by the musician's WeChat friends, due to the privacy settings of this Chinese SMS social media platform. Therefore, I only gained access to a musician's WeChat account if they permit me to add them for further contact or interviews. The information musicians post on WeChat can be very personal and

private, as WeChat Moments<sup>11</sup> are primarily used for non-work-related aspects of their lives. This part of their background reveals the musician's life as an ordinary person rather than as a professional, regardless of how popular they may be online. These aspects indicate the routines and lifestyles of the interviewees. However, the personal data I can obtain may depend on the musician's different emphasis in the use of Moments feature. For example, some musicians may focus more on their work and frequently update their any accomplishments, while others may focus more on their personal life experiences and expressions. WeChat Moments are featured with a timeline and can be traced back for years, allowing me to review the musician's entire history of posts. I take notes on their career history and status, lifestyle, critical events, and personal expressions indicating their traits, life stories, and philosophy. Reading the musician's past helps me to resonate with them and increases the possibility of developing a deep conversation in the interview.

### 3.2.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation is essential part to the ethnographic approach as it enhances the quality of the data collected during fieldwork (Musante and DeWalt, 2010, p19). I intensely engaged with the Douyin platform during my half-year fieldwork from October 2021 to April 2022 to observe musicians' activities on the platform, especially for those who live stream. Despite that video works are easier to access and observe, most of the musicians' live streaming is only available during live shows. The live streamers

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<sup>11</sup> WeChat Moments is a feature within the widely used Chinese social media and messaging application, WeChat (or Weixin in Chinese). This function operates much like a typical social media feed, allowing users to share a variety of content with their WeChat contacts. By adding musicians to my WeChat contacts, I gained access to their personal updates, daily posts, location information, and a timeline showcasing their previous posts and so on.

have a distinct style of live streaming, and the data such as traffic data and donation rankings are hard to trace after the live show, which is why I had to participate in the live shows to access live data. The Douyin system shows real-time data of the musicians' live streaming, such as the size of the audience in the live room, the names of donators in the ranking list, real-time comments, and likes, etc. I also monitored the donations that live streamers received during their live shows by making contributions myself to reach a certain level, unlocking access to the donation statistics in the ranking list. For example, if my donation was sufficient to rank me as one of the top ten donors, I would typically check the donation rankings to see how much the leading contributors had donated to that specific live show. The total amount of my donations varied considerably, ranging from a few UK pounds to several dozen pounds sterling. However, several factors influenced these real-time donation figures, including the presence of major donors during the session, the duration of the live stream, and my willingness regarding the costs associated with achieving a higher ranking. This information allowed me to estimate the streamers' earnings and anticipate their income levels, although it did not always yield effectively in every practise of income predictions.

The digital ethnography approach inspires researchers to benefit from the real-time and active nature of digital research, rather than being passive towards past-oriented and static data (Costello et al., 2017, p9). The dynamic statistics and data in musicians' live shows, together with the multimedia and interactive data observed in the live room, gradually build a closer and cleaner portrait of musicians' characteristics and career status on Douyin. It is also an essential part of participant observation to capture



otherwise unmeasurable and unobtrusive data (Griffin and Andrew Bengry-Howell, 2008, p24), such as live performance design and interactions with fans, musicians' appearance and movement, online speech, and other indicative expressions. Musicians will interact with their audiences and comment on audiences' messages during the music break, and some of these interactions include extra information provided by the live streamers. I usually play the role of observer and only occasionally ask quick and short questions of the live streamer, as the public nature of the digital live room restricts the level of information communication compared to a fully explanatory conversation in interview. Therefore, I mainly took this observation as an additional method to digital ethnography even if I have opportunity to ask questions in when musicians are on live.

### 3.2.3 Digital walkthrough

The digital walkthrough method entails a thorough examination of digital media components, user interactions, and experiences. Its objective is to gain insights into various aspects, such as how platform settings and functions are utilised by platform users, and how they convey cultural meanings within their specific digital context (Light et al., 2018). Digital walkthrough plays an important role in evaluating the musicians' overall shape and distinct features of their digital music career on Douyin, based on which I decided to send them an interview invitation. My interviewees needed to encompass a diverse array of musician types, encompassing various identities, personalities, music styles, account designs, career statuses, financial situations, and other relevant factors. Therefore, an evaluation of the musicians' background before inviting them to be interviewed is essential to the interviewee sample of the research.

The digital walkthrough can involve a compositional interpretation of the music created by Douyin musicians, assessed by researchers' judgment. Given my background in professional music training, I can conduct a musical or sonic analysis of music content from a compositional, professional, and aesthetic perspective. This analysis may include evaluating the composition and presentation of the music, differentiating between genres and styles such as pop, classical, folk, and drama, including their various sub-genres. Additionally, it can help determine whether the musicians exhibit advanced training or are more amateur in their approach. The musicians' identities may be highly related to their field, music skills, and video-making skills, making it a comprehensive evaluation of the overall musician's development and abilities.

The visual information gained from digital walkthrough on the platform can provide information that is often difficult to verbalise but vital for capturing the real situation of research objectives (Lobinger, 2016, p.293). Another method I used when walkthroughing the musicians' digital account is for this study is content analysis. This involves tracing the entire timeline of a musician's work and calculating the number of videos posted, the themes of videos, the post frequency, the number of comments, the first super popular video, overall statistics of the videos, and any critical or special videos posted by the musicians. Content analysis focuses on the overall repertoire of the musicians rather than emphasizing individual works (Rose, 2022, p.148), which helps researchers identify the years of development and critical moments in a musician's career on Douyin. Researchers should reflect on the visual data collected to gain knowledge and insight into the musicians' past and current situations by mapping all their work on Douyin, especially during sensitive times such as the start

of their career, the pandemic, and turning points. In addition, researchers may benefit from conducting semiotic, cultural, and discourse analyses of the musicians' implications expressed in their works, particularly in sensitive fields such as politics, morals, gender, and law-related issues in the Chinese context.

In summary, I have employed a range of research methods to enhance my digital ethnography of online musicians on Douyin. Specifically, I combined ethnographic techniques from anthropological research with digital walkthroughs tailored for digital media studies. I chose to be reflective and adapt traditional methodologies for digital research, as suggested by Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2014, p.18), aiming to improve the efficiency and validity of my data collection process. Figure 1 below illustrates the two parts of my ethnographic fieldwork in this research, along with the related research methods. The first step involved observing a wide range of musicians on the Douyin platform, primarily during my search for and recruitment of targeted interviewees. For this, I heavily relied on digital walkthroughs and participant observation while examining these musicians' digital accounts on Douyin. This extensive observation on the platform provided valuable insights into the digital environment where these musicians operate during their online activities. The second step of my fieldwork focused on conducting background investigations on interviewees who agreed to engage in further discussions. This phase was more intensive, requiring in-depth ethnographic fieldwork to prepare for detailed conversations or interviews. By extensively observing the practises of a variety of musicians within the digital environment and user communities, I was able to reach a broadened perspective on musician's digital practises and deepen understanding on musician' situations faced

on Douyin. Considering the rich experiences of similar creative streamers on Douyin have also assisting myself in conducting a more in-depth and higher-quality interviews, benefiting both me and my interviewees.

### **3.3 Semi-structured Interview online**

Skilled interviewers may deviate from the research protocol and allow the informant to provide interesting and unexpected information (Johnson, 2001, p113). My research aims to develop in-depth conversations related to the topics of my research. I conducted semi-structured interviews to allow both the researchers and the interviewees to lead the conversation wherever applicable. Semi-structured topics also allow for flexibility in the order of topics when the researchers are faced with various backgrounds of each interviewee. I prepared a dozen topics that the musicians may engage in during the interview. However, I always allow musicians to add comments or make any complementation to my topics. The structured topics serve as an index for developing a conversation but should not limit the discussion. Researchers should not stop informants if they are still engaged with a related experience even outside of the prepared topic. Research should be creative and committed to gaining insights into the interviewees rather than just focusing on the topics (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p657). For example, gender matters when interviewing female musicians, as the paternalistic social system in the Chinese context may lead to additional topics or experiences of women musicians (ibid). Semi-structured interviews also create a relatively free speech atmosphere during the interview, which may lead to an efficient and close relationship between the

interviewers and the informants. From my experience, indie musicians tend to be frightened by a formal invitation for an academic interview. However, they feel more at ease when I described the interview as a "natural talk of personal thoughts" that is not necessarily limited to my research topic.

An online interview brings many advantages when researching online musicians, in addition to the high flexibility and accessibility in time and space during the 2019 pandemic. All the interviews conducted in my research are internet-based, either via WeChat video or voice call. Online interview increases the possibility of reluctant interviewees accepting a voice call via mobile as they may feel more safe and private-secured without showing their appearance in the interview (Adler and Adler, 2001, p531). The e-interview also allows musicians with busy schedules to manage their time because they do not have to travel or prepare for an offline meeting with the researcher. This works especially well for my research because I interviewed musicians in China, making it less possible to fit in an offline interview given travel restrictions between the two countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. It allows access to musicians from different locations. I have interviewed musicians internationally in America and Australia, and Chinese interviewees from dozens of cities. The internet-based interview saves travel, energy, and time (Bampton and Cowton, 2002, p12), but it also benefits disabled or chronically ill interviewees who may be less confident in face-to-face interviews (Morse, 2001, p317). The e-interview, therefore, better cares for their feelings and protects their privacy. In addition, the boredom and leisure time during the pandemic also increased the musicians' commitment to a long interview, as some of them regard it as a social event to express themselves. However, conducting

interviews online, particularly through audio calls, may have influenced the level of trust between me and my interviewees. This impact is not necessarily negative, as some individuals may feel safer speaking without the need for in-person interaction. Nevertheless, I may have missed out on valuable non-verbal cues that typically occur during face-to-face interviews, including facial expressions, body language, and emotional reactions, which information may also play a vital part in human communication.

This section sheds light on the interview method, which yields the most significant amount of qualitative data that being transcribed it into a written reference. Therefore, it is essential for this methodology chapter to engage with the essential stages of the interview for a clarification of the data collection. This section comprises two primary stages: recruiting interviewees and preparing and conducting the interviews. It is crucial to source interviewees from various digital spaces on Douyin to ensure diversity and criticality in forming the interviewee group. This diversity is essential for the validity of the research data because Douyin algorithms may limit access to a broader range of musicians by primarily displaying targeted content. Recruiting musicians also requires effort in making first contact, following up, and reassuring them with their concerns. Preparing for interviews plays a vital role in leading to a successful interview with convincing and substantial data as an outcome, based largely on critical thoughts and targeted questions in advance. As detailed fieldwork prior to the interview has been discussed in the previous section, this section will focus on contextualizing the interview through background research on musicians. Meanwhile, critical reflections on musicians' experiences in leading an in-depth discussion with the interviewees.

The last part will focus on interview arrangement and timetable conducting interviews with artists who tend to require high flexibility and frequent delay. In general, this section will provide critical interview skills and social skills interviewing musicians online.

### 3.3.1 Recruiting interviewees

#### 1) From diverse channels

A various channels used to find interviewees are a prerequisite for achieving a diverse range of musicians. Using different ways in finding musicians would result in a different emphasis (or no emphasis) on the features of musicians' background, and resort to a diverse way can prevent from the Douyin algorithmic control over researchers' vision. This study investigates different channels for finding musicians on Douyin, both online and offline. Online channels include those offered by streamers and platforms with accessible interfaces, such as popular or promoted content suggested by the platform, including the ranking list of musicians, live streamers, and recommended trends. However, this channel tends to be passive in accepting popular content suggested by the algorithm, leading to a limited vision for indie musicians who are less popular. Therefore, researchers need to be more proactive in searching for streamers to achieve greater diversity. The key is to find musicians wherever and whenever possible and to keep in mind the need to be random, unexpected, and contrary to the ordered, ruled, and analytical algorithm. For example, this involves searching for trending keywords in content but specifically focusing on musicians who are remixing the trending music. I also sought musicians based on their offers for online advertising, specifically through Douyin's official advertising platform called Xingtou, which

showcases popular streamers at various price levels. I recruited music accounts that primarily focus on live-streaming rather than posting music videos but still maintain a large fan base. I also found musicians through offline channels via interpersonal relationships. For example, two interviewees in this research are indie musicians who were peers in my postgraduate programme at a music college, chosen randomly from Douyin. Another method is snowballing, which involves asking interviewed musicians for further introductions. However, I rarely employed this technique as it might result in connecting with musicians who have similar backgrounds rather than those with distinct ones.

## 2) Contacting & following up invitations

The digital invitation and follow-up for the musicians on Douyin can be time-consuming but may be unsuccessful for various reasons. Normally, researchers should allow time for musicians to notice the invitation and give consideration to be interviewed. Researchers should get familiar with the technology and online environment of the digital platform to ensure that the invitation will be accessed by the streamers. Specifically, the private messaging system on Douyin allows at most three messages to be sent to a streamer if they do not follow each other. Therefore, researchers should make full use of the three opportunities to achieve the contact with the musician. However, streamers may receive large numbers of messages daily, especially those popular and interactive musicians. To increase the chances of my invitation being noticed within the message list, I put a red exclamation (see the below box 1) before each invitation and sent the invitation as streamers were about to end their live streams, as many live streamers tend to check feedback immediately after their live



show. However, the invitation may not be responded to, due to an unwillingness to be interviewed or simply not trusting the information gained on Douyin (Interview with musician XYT, 2022). In this situation, researchers should note the response rate of the streamers, and for my research, I obtained two responses for about every 20 invitations. To address this, I sent out 20 invitations at a time for a group of musicians and waited for several days before resending the same message. I also used a systematic approach for inviting musicians to interviews (see box 1). This helped ensure a consistent flow of information and saved energy, allowing me to focus on identifying a broader range of representative identities on Douyin.

## Box 1 systematic approach for inviting musicians to interviews

### ! Interview Invitation:

Dear musician (account ID ),

I hope you are well,

My name is Xiaoxiao Lu, a PhD candidate from the University of Nottingham (UK). This message invites you to attend my interview for my doctoral research. You are one of my targeted musicians, and I would be grateful if you were so kind to accept my interview invitation.

The interview would be a one-on-one online meeting that takes 30-60 minutes. You may be asked to talk about your personal experience with your career and life conditions after engaging with Douyin. Your participation would be anonymous and voluntary, and you have the right to revise your interview transcripts. The interview result may finally contribute to a PhD thesis published in academic articles, but no information would be shared for commercial purposes.

If I am lucky enough to find you are happy to have a talk with me, may you please leave your contacts (WeChat/WhatsApp etc.) for further communication?

Sincerely, Xiaoxiao Lu

### 3) Reassuring respondents

The Douyin account provided me with opportunities to demonstrate my work and personal background, which may increase my visibility and liability for the interviewees invited. It is not rare that musicians feel confused about the interview and concerned

about the security of their privacy. Many indie musicians have no experience with academic interviews, and they are not sure if and in what ways they can help (Interview with musician Luna, 2022). However, the lack of experience may also play a positive role in accepting the interview due to their curiosity. I have realised the importance of introducing my research and displaying some works on musicians to reassure those who are hesitant to engage with my research. Researchers should be more proactive before sending out the invitation, as the musicians may come to check my Douyin account when they receive the invitation and evaluate my credibility. I have refined my personal information on the Douyin account, which I use to send invitations to musicians. Additionally, I have created a digital image for myself as a PhD student who loves music by uploading a range of related content, specifically, research-related posts and videos of me playing piano for popular songs on Douyin. One of these series includes audio clips of interviews with musicians, whether posted anonymously or with identified account IDs of the targeted musicians. These clips comprise intriguing interview content that I have shared online.<sup>12</sup> These videos provide an overview of the interview based on other peers' experience, through which they may be assured by seeing this contextualization of a real academic interview. In this way, I make a closer-up on my work and life as an academic researcher and music amateur to increase my credibility and also resonate with musicians with my own music experience. In addition, further explanation of the interview rights and the use of information will be provided to the interviewees in accordance with the university's ethical policies.

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<sup>12</sup> You can find an example of this audio clip series on my Douyin account homepage. It features an interview with a Chinese superstar musician named Xuteng Xu, who has given consent to use his real name in the video title. This specific short interview video has garnered over 200 likes on my Douyin account. You can access the link to this interview on the Douyin website [https://www.douyin.com/user/self?modal\\_id=7071411581447343396&showTab=post](https://www.douyin.com/user/self?modal_id=7071411581447343396&showTab=post) here:

### 3.3.2 Preparing and conducting the interviews

#### 1) Contextualisation and Anticipation

A successful interview is based on good communication and can be enjoyable and beneficial for both the interviewer and interviewee. To achieve this, I will ensure that both parties are well prepared by contextualizing the interview and setting expectations. While researchers may know more about the musicians based on prior fieldwork, I would ensure that the interviewees are prepared by sending out the interview topics one day before the interview. The interview topics will include several related questions that serve as an index and reminder of the interviewee's experience. Although I emphasise that the interview can go beyond the prepared topics and questions, having a dozen topics will help to organise and remind the musicians' responses.

I also prepared myself by contextualizing the interview based on all the information gained from prior fieldwork on the targeted interviewee. For example, I teased out a timeline of the musician's career experience or account history on Douyin and anticipated their potential attitude towards each interview topic. The night before the interview, I reviewed the musician's account updates and field notes, which provided a strengthened impression and update on the musician's recent situation. I noted down any questions for additional information and further discussion outside of the prepared topics and was sensitive to the specific identities of those musicians. For example, I asked female musicians specifically about the balance of their work and life, especially those in rural areas who were expected to take on most of the housework and childcare responsibilities in their families. For ethnic minority musicians, I added extra

questions about their experiences adapting their national music to online popularity. Other identities that I paid attention to included disability, age, popstar, handcrafter, businessman, grassroots, overseas musicians, pandemic, and more.

## 2) Critical review the musicians' experience

Researchers should consistently maintain a critical assessment of each musician, as it is essential for conducting in-depth discussions that reveal the musicians' personal attitudes, reasoning, and philosophy regarding their involvement with Douyin. Researchers should focus on identifying significant and unique experiences revealed through digital ethnography when examining musicians' backgrounds. This entails paying attention to aspects that stand out from the norm. For instance, female musicians streaming overnight (Lynn Interview, 2022), or musicians displaying negativity towards their fans online (MWL Interview, 2022). Additionally, I will investigate less common scenarios, such as independent musicians losing money but persisting in touring across the country (EJ Interview, 2022). However, it is important to note that some of these critical experiences may not become apparent until the actual interview takes place. Therefore, researchers must remain alert and perceptive during interviews to identify and address new, critical topics. It's also essential to maintain an ethical approach, being cautious when addressing sensitive issues and framing questions in a considerate and respectful manner. My research will prioritise addressing those critical topics that may provide insight into a specific group of musicians and keep actively engaging until the musicians have fully expressed themselves. Many critical experiences can be found by carefully investigating the timeline of a musician's career development on Douyin before the interview, including

their first popular videos, changes in their styles, timetable, monetization methods, major donations, location, and more. All of these deep engagements with the musicians' past will contribute to a deeper comprehension of their careers and lives.

### 3) Interview arrangement and timetable

An academic interview may always be of secondary importance in a musician's timetable, as musicians' may always be open for gig opportunities. This requires flexibility in scheduling interviews to accommodate the musician's schedule. One significant feature when interviewing Chinese musicians is the seven-to-eight-hour time difference, as I was in the UK during the fieldwork. The most suitable interview timeslot for my interviewees will likely start from 5 o'clock in the afternoon (9 am UK time during British summertime (GMT+1)), which may also be a convenient timeslot for many performing artists. Therefore, I needed to be proactive in explaining the situation and finding a suitable timetable to fit both parties. Normally, I arranged only one interview per day in case of any interview delay, which can be frequent as some musicians tended to have unpredictable offline gig work or delayed online streaming services, which they may prioritise over attending an interview. Therefore, I tend to leave plenty of flexibility after each interview timeslot in case of any interview conflicts. Another reason for scheduling only one musician per day is that I needed an hour to review fieldnotes and prepare for the interview, so, I would have a relatively loose timetable. I did not wait too long to start chatting with the musicians after adding them on WeChat. Since the musician's Wechat account tends to be full of gig work chat groups that frequently update, making it difficult for musicians to retrieve my message. Therefore, I often provided an indicative option for the musicians to choose a timeslot

during the week or the following week. I tend to avoid weekends as it may be the busiest time for musicians to work, both online and offline, in addition to their personal life, making the interview schedule even more unpredictable. Moreover, it is always better to remind the musicians of the interview in the morning of the interview day and check once again before the scheduled interview to ensure that they will attend.

To conclude, doing research on social media requires the digital ethnographer to immerse themselves in online communities and use the same technological devices as the participants in their study (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2014, p.18). Digital methodologies may learn from traditional methods, whereas it may also take researchers to different ways of thinking and knowing knowledge (ibid). Recruiting interviewees online provides advantages in accessing a larger base of subjects with differentiated backgrounds. However, researchers are required to develop new techniques and critical thoughts in facing technological settings and algorithms on specific social platforms. The internet itself keeps a good record of the users' past activities, and this record can benefit digital ethnographers in researching the subjects' backgrounds. A careful review of a timeline of posts can contribute to an overview of the streamers' experiences, a process that can be compared to reading a musician's autobiography. However, researchers must critically review the selective presentation of the digital work by the streamers themselves. Researchers may focus on critical moments and uncommon phenomena of the musicians' experiences, which may be the key to gaining insights into a specific type of musician identity. Lastly, a considered and flexible arrangement of the interview is vital to allow the interview to proceed as

expected, considering the flexibility and precarious working conditions of many musicians as gig workers.

### **3.4 Reflections on Qualitative analysis**

Decisions made by researchers are at the core of the thematic analysis as the process involves co-constructing a theme of meaningful data rather than just collecting data into themes (Roulston, 2014, p.310). Researchers must be reflexive as they are central to the quality of data produced (Terry and Hayfield, 2020, p.430). The analysis of the data relies even more on the subjective active engagement of the researcher with the data in relation to the targeted research questions (ibid). Due to this feature of targeting research questions, researchers can concentrate more on dealing with the vast interview data and find similarities and differences across the interviewees (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.97) when conducting thematic analysis using the software. I also set multiple attributions to categorise the musicians' background for cross-analysis, including basic information such as age, fan base, ethnicity, account type; and more traits of the musician's digital career such as income type, financial situation, offline career, etc. Sometimes, researchers may find unanticipated insights as new themes may generate from the data that are unexpected but contribute to the data result (ibid). Nevertheless, the thematic analysis that draws similar data from multiple interviewees tends to focus on cross-analysis between multiple individuals rather than just one musician, making it difficult to retain a sense of continuity and contradiction in an individual account (ibid).



Ethnomethodological ideas allow data analysis to go well beyond thematic or content expectations, requiring researchers to treat individuals' answers internally and understand them as sense-making work through engaging with the interview data (Baker, 2001, p.777). In practise, I familiarised myself by communicating with the interview several times, either by being fully engaged in the interview, reviewing the interview transcription, and extracting audio clips to be posted on Douyin, coding the data, and reviewing all coded data under one interviewee. Working with all 30 interviewees and their interview data has enhanced my memory of their stories, actions, and logic. This familiarity enabled me to keep the most significant musicians' experience in mind, and I could rephrase the musicians' experience of how and why from memory. The ethnographic analysis emphasises one thing: to understand the musicians within their context, such as identity, experience, personalities, career situation, life philosophy, financial level, and expectation, in interpreting their behaviors as a musician on the Douyin platform. In this way, a more fundamental comprehension of the subjects can be achieved with a combined analysis method of thematic analysis targeted for research questions.

Theoretically, since different ways of data analysis stress different aspects, their collaboration can strengthen each other and offset their respective weaknesses (Atkinson and Coffey, 2001, p.806). Having familiarity and being a participant in the broader Douyin community can significantly benefit data analysis as it has the potential to bring reflections and insights into the subjects and their community. In other words, participant observation can act as a critical tool to prevent disinformation from interviewees. Some informants may distort their accounts for various reasons, leading

to misinformation. Therefore, being in a better-informed position, researchers can be more critical (ibid, p.813). The online environment and digital market on Douyin are essential to consider when referring to musicians' experiences. For instance, understanding the digital facilities and the market competition on the platform can make it more reasonable to comprehend why and how musicians react and face challenges. Observing the phenomenon of the market on Douyin has led to a better understanding of the overall musicians' situation and the digital music industry on social media, which reflects in the Chapter 6 that addressing the technological, social, and economic changes in the digital market on Douyin. These observations were not planned but occurred naturally throughout conducting the research, such as researching the platform, recruiting the musicians, being a frequent user, or signing up to become a streamer, etc. These organic participant observations have been embedded in the fieldwork on musicians and co-constructed in my insight for creative research.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the research strategies and methods for studying online musicians on social media. Ethnographic fieldwork is combined with three other methods: interviews, participant observation, and digital walkthrough to achieve the best results for a digital ethnography on a digital media platform. The most significant part of the data comes from online interviews with 30 musicians on the Douyin platform, a social media with advanced technology and an individualised algorithm. From my experience, researchers on social platform must be alert and proactive on these platforms to prevent a restricted vision caused by the individualised content feed by

the algorithm system. Other researchers may also reflect on musicians' online work, as the digital work displayed online may be designed and distorted for various reasons such as online popularity. So, it is important to be critical in investigating the musicians' experiences and contradictory expressions within the information provided. Furthermore, interviewing online artists who tend to be gig workers with a flexible lifestyle requires an adjustable interview timetable from the researchers, especially when interviewing musicians internationally across different time zones. The data analysis process takes advantage of both thematic and ethnographic analysis, combined with participant observation findings, to ensure the best validity of the research. In conclusion, as Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2014) stated, digital methodologies may be fuelled by old understandings, yet they may also lead us creatively toward new types of knowledge.

In real practise, I have designed three rounds of interviews, each consisting of approximately 10 interviews. This approach was necessary because, despite having a planned list of interviewees, not all of them may respond or be able to accept the interview invitation. Therefore, I had to dynamically evaluate the interview process, considering various factors such as their account types, music genre, account performance, live streaming style, ethics, and gender backgrounds. This dynamic evaluation ensured flexibility in accessing a wider representation of interviewees and validating the outcomes of the interviews. Furthermore, demographic considerations were essential in my research. I conducted a total of 30 interviews with individuals from diverse backgrounds, including ages ranging from 20 to 60, spread across different locations in the country, and representing various genders and ethnicities.

However, I observed that despite belonging to similar demographic groups, each musician's background was unique. This uniqueness stemmed from significant identities or career experiences that influenced their status as music streamers. Factors such as family support, financial backgrounds, and other income sources, as well as individual life philosophies, played crucial roles in perusing their digital careers. Therefore, I approached each individual case with a high level of specificity, not solely focusing on demographic factors. Additionally, I recognized that I could not anticipate every interviewee's experiences beforehand, and some expectations might be overturned due to critical factors in their lives. For instance, I encountered a musician who became less ambitious in her digital career after being diagnosed with cancer. Despite having the potential to further develop her digital career, she chose not to commit as much due to her health condition.

Furthermore, I am deeply committed to my research, investing personal time and energy to ensure the best possible outcomes. This dedication has enabled me to secure interview opportunities by actively engaging in digital activities, even arranging interviews at unconventional hours such as 2 am UK time. As part of my innovative approach, I have embraced social media for research purposes and regularly update digital content to exceed the demands of my PhD research. Originally, my Douyin account was established for recruiting and observing interviewees, but I have expanded its use to enhance my personal credibility and enlarge my research impact through self-branding. For instance, I portray myself as a music enthusiast, aligning with the experiences of potential interviewees and musicians. Additionally, I share selected interview clips (with permission) to acknowledge interviewees' efforts and

contribute to their publicity. Recognizing the importance of identifying challenges and offering solutions in qualitative research, I actively seek interviewees from diverse backgrounds through various channels to overcome individualized algorithms on platforms like TikTok. To conduct in-depth interviews, I observe live performances of interviewees and access real-time income statistics through online donations, leveraging these unique insights for my research. Indeed, whether it's being innovative, dedicated, and persistent in identifying challenges and finding solutions, these qualities have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the positive progression of my research.

## **Chapter 4: What it is like being Douyin / TikTok**

### **music influencer?**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In the past, musicians often found themselves in a disadvantaged position as their agencies wielded significant control over various aspects of their music careers, including revenue sharing, music adaptation, marketing investments, fan interactions, and self-identity. Consequently, some musicians opted for independence, seeking to reclaim control over their music and personal brands. Independent musicians were relatively few in number compared to those under agency contracts because they sustained themselves through income sources like music sales, merchandise, crowdfunding, largely confined to their existing fan bases and not widely adopted by the broader market. Typically, musicians only pursued independence when they had already amassed a substantial fan following. Despite the relatively small indie musician population, the majority musicians remained with agencies to access various forms of support within the music production value chain. However, emerging musicians often found themselves at the lower rungs of the value chain, facing challenges like tailoring the music to meet high marketing investments and audience preferences, which often meant compromising on their creative autonomy. This left signed musicians with limited choices but to adhere to agency decisions.

This transformative shift in the music industry began with the emergence of various social platforms, enabling musicians to reclaim control over their music production. Social media, in particular, became a vital tool for independent artists to connect with their fans and monetise their content. In particular, the Douyin platform has played a significant role in this transformation by offering musicians greater flexibility in building their online careers and providing numerous monetization opportunities. Musicians can now choose to embark on their online careers at various stages and gain the expansive fan base they've cultivated both offline and online. Consequently, this chapter delves into the working and living conditions of online musicians as they navigate the realm of social media, shedding light on the dynamics and challenges of digital careers in platforms like Douyin. It's important to note that the conditions of Douyin platform can differ markedly from those other types of digital platforms due to the different platform setting and design.

In specific, Section 4.2 will depict the various types of newcomers to the digital music industry on the Douyin platform, encompassing music professionals, music enthusiasts, and business owners. It will provide insights into the typical identities and motivations driving these individuals to embark on a digital career on Douyin, considering both objective factors and subjective considerations, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Section 4.3 will then focus on the operational aspects of digital Douyin accounts managed by these musicians. It will reveal their specific strategies for positioning their accounts and themselves within the platform, emphasizing their self-reliance in maintaining independent digital career. This section will also address the evolving attitudes of musicians in response to the unpredictable

and uncontrollable algorithms governing Douyin account performance. Section 4.4 will shed light on two distinct types of Douyin accounts curated by video streamers: video bloggers and live streamers. It will provide a detailed overview of the characteristics associated with each account type and outline the job specifications typical of these roles. Furthermore, it will examine how these digital jobs impact the work and life situations of the musicians involved.

Section 4.5 will bring into focus the aesthetic dimension of music work and its ambivalence concerning the commercial development of musicians' digital careers. It will explore the ongoing debate regarding whether to prioritise the intrinsic value of music or its market value in adapting to the broader digital market on Douyin. Additionally, it will investigate the delicate balance between the interests of musicians and their fans in music production and consumption, in order to cultivating a stable fan base and sustainable income through fan loyalty. Finally, Section 4.6 will delve deeper into the intricate relationships between online streamers and the digital public, notably fans, followers, and the broader online audience. It will uncover facets of digital fan relationships that diverge from traditional idol-fandom dynamics, owing to the open and easily accessible nature of private messaging on contemporary social platforms. This section will explore two questions: the extent to which fans' loyalty is directed towards the musicians themselves or the Douyin platform, and whether these fan relationships tend to be positive, negative, or both.



## 4.2 Engaging with Douyin as a musician

### 4.2.1 Emerging musicians on Douyin

Musicians on Douyin come from diverse backgrounds and have various motivations for engaging with the platform. These musicians can range from seasoned professionals who make a living through their music careers to newcomers in the music industry. Professional musicians often use digital platforms actively to gain exposure, capture public attention, and stay connected with their fan base. This is especially true for indie musicians who handle music production, marketing, and distribution independently or through small, independent record labels (Walzer, 2017). Independent musicians prioritise artistic expression over commercial success and appreciate the control they have over their creative process, operating independently outside major record labels or musician agencies (ibid). Various social platforms serve as primary tools for most musicians to reach their niche audiences. These platforms also foster a participatory culture by offering free software for content creation and interactive social functions that facilitate strong user communication (Burgess, 2013, García-Galera and Valdivia, 2014). This, in turn, enhances marketing efforts and strengthens fan relationships.

Professional musicians have actively embraced popular social platforms and live streaming services, which encompass a wide range of social media timelines in China. These digital platforms include video-sharing platforms such as Tudou and Youku (similar to Chinese YouTube), entertainment platforms like YY Live, Changba, and QuanmingKge, which facilitate video sharing and live streaming services, as well as

universal social media platforms like Weibo. Additionally, major streaming services like Tencent Music and NetEase have played a significant role. These platforms have served as online venues for musicians to showcase their work, establish their digital presence, connect with fans, and engage with various stakeholders over the past two decades. However, in recent years, the emergence of technology start-ups such as Douyin, often fueled by angel investors and venture capitalists (Watson and Leyshon, 2022), has marked a new trend in the MusicTech platform landscape, challenging the economic dynamics of existing digital platforms. For example, Douyin has successfully shared diverse user groups from major music streaming services in China due to its business model and commercial operations in creative content monetising for users (Analysys, 2020). What sets Douyin apart from other technological social platforms is its original positioning as an application for music videos, leading to the prominence of superstar musicians signing their content on the platform to accumulate initial user base.

Initially, Douyin positioned itself as a social media platform for short music videos and introduced a series of musician-friendly policies, such as boosting traffic for musicians' content. This made it an attractive platform for musicians seeking exposure. Many musicians rapidly built substantial fan bases during this period, though the dynamics have shifted on today's Douyin. Douyin has since changed its market position, transitioning from a music video platform to a platform that promotes "recording the good life."<sup>13</sup> This shift in focus has allowed Douyin to capture a broader audience and

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<sup>13</sup> Douyin APP is a shooting software that initially focused on 15-second music videos emerging in September 2016. However, Douyin changed its new tagline that 'Record the Good Life' in March 2018.

Reference: <https://www.qdcm.net/446.html>

develop a more commercial business model, expanding into industries such as fashion and e-commerce. However, the music industry on Douyin no longer receives the same level of preferential treatment as before. Most musicians and their works, except for superstars, struggle to generate profits for the platform compared to industries like cosmetics. As a result, when Douyin prioritises content exposure for more profitable industries that contribute higher commissions to the platform's income, musicians and their work inevitably suffer from reduced online visibility. Nevertheless, many musicians still find Douyin to be a valuable platform due to its vast user base. One superstar musician mentioned that they joined Douyin during the pandemic due to its higher economic potential.

It can say that Douyin is now the hottest platform in our country, so I just want to engage with it to accumulate more popularity, and when people gather, I get traffic for my music. I originally thought that my fans could reach 1 million or even 2 million, and then if 5% of people are willing to buy my record or something, that would be good as I can make a positive cycle (for income and career). (Interview with musician TL, 2022)

The above narrative showed that the popularity of a social platform plays a crucial role in attracting creative workers, as a larger user base signifies a more extensive music market. In around 2018, when short video social media platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou gained significant influence, they emerged as strong competitors with similar positioning. However, Douyin's daily active users (DAU) surged, making it one of the most widely used social media platforms in China. In fact, it boasted a DAU that rivaled WeChat, the largest Chinese SMS service offered by the IT giant Tencent (Topklout, 2020). Douyin rapidly expanded its user base by extending invitations to superstars

from various fields, leveraging their existing fan followings. This growth coincided with the outbreak of the 2019 pandemic, which led many creative workers to turn to the platform for alternative activities. Additionally, numerous ordinary individuals joined the platform for entertainment and socialization. As a result, whether through effective platform management or fortunate timing, Douyin has achieved widespread popularity across the nation.

#### 4.2.2 New entrants to the online music market

Despite musicians who have previous experience in other digital platform and has started engaging with Douyin over recent years, new entrants to the online music industry on Douyin are very common. The 2019 pandemic of Covid contributed to musicians enrolment on social media, such as Douyin, seeking alternative performing venues and career continuance. Music professionals lost their job opportunities during the lockdown, employees in other industries were shocked, and some became unemployed. The commonly descending of people's financial condition and unstable career status accompanying longer leisure time during lockdown has triggered people's expression online and exploration for subsidiary careers. The pandemic also led to an influx of users into social media to seek social connection and entertainment, thus an expanded user base for the online music market. The participatory culture fostered by Douyin has resulted in a clear distinction between different digital identities, including content producers, consumers, and platform users. Consequently, users often find themselves in combined roles, blurring the traditional boundaries between producer and consumer. This phenomenon has been described by Bruns (2009) as

users taking on the roles of both "prosumer" and "producer." The new entrants in the online music industry consist of mainly three types:

1. Music professionals who have started an online career.
2. Music enthusiasts posting their music online.
3. Musicians as business owners online <sup>14</sup>

The first typical types of online musicians on Douyin are professionals who either started their digital career during the pandemic or began taking it more seriously at that time, even if they were previously regular users or casual video bloggers. Typically, musicians who experienced a decline in offline performance opportunities during the pandemic turned to Douyin for live streaming as a means of earning supplemental income through fan donations during their streams. This was especially crucial during lockdowns when physical venues were largely unavailable, and online platforms became vital for musicians' subsistence. In contrast to video bloggers on Douyin, who primarily monetise their content through advertisements (a relatively one-time and formal cooperation method), live streaming provides real-time income every time musicians perform on the platform. Additionally, advertising cooperation is more likely to occur with those who have a large fan base (well-known brands typically collaborate with accounts boasting hundreds of thousands of fans). Consequently, live streaming became the primary revenue stream for many musicians, especially independent ones. While post-pandemic conditions have allowed musicians to regain offline performance

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<sup>14</sup> You'll find both online services and offline entities in the music business, including music agencies, recording services, live music venues, music publishers, music instrument retailers, and music training courses.

opportunities in reopened physical venues, those with smaller fan bases on Douyin have found alternative ways to generate income from outside the platform during the pandemic, such as offering online teaching services.

The other part of newcomers to the Douyin platform consists of music enthusiasts who pursue a musician's career on a part-time basis. These newcomers often have vastly different career backgrounds compared to music professionals. They typically hold full-time jobs in fields unrelated to music and maintain their music interests or related experiences. One category within this group is known as 'grassroot singers.' In the Chinese context, grassroots people are individuals typically from lower social classes with lower levels of education (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). They are often rooted in rural areas with fewer opportunities to gain recognition through mainstream media channels (ibid). Chinese audiences are accustomed to well-trained and glamorous musicians who are commonly featured in professional media. This contrast makes grassroots musicians, often with a more modest appearance, stand out and attract public. For example, one female informant, originally a farmer, gained sudden popularity on Douyin after posting a video of herself singing karaoke at her street stall. Her fanbase grew significantly when she began first live streaming from her farmland. Another grassroots singer, a truck driver by profession, turned to live streaming on Douyin to supplement his income during the pandemic. His live streaming earnings surpassed his truck driving income within just three months, leading him to transition into a full-time Douyin live streamer.

In contrast to grassroots musicians, who are often gifted and self-taught, another segment of music enthusiasts consists of skilled amateurs. These skilled individuals are competent in the field of music but did not actively choose music as their primary profession. They may come from strong music academic backgrounds. The precarious nature of a music career, characterised by one-time gigs, intense competition, low and irregular income, a slow path to recognition, and unstable work hours and locations, has discouraged many individuals from pursuing it as a full-time occupation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). This trend is particularly pronounced among female musicians. Female musicians often face time constraints, as societal expectations often require them to shift their focus to childcare at a certain point in their lives, especially in those patriarchic society like some areas of China. This can disrupt their music careers and lead to fewer women choosing to pursue full-time careers in music, which demand significant time and energy investments for success but offer limited long-term stability. The skilled amateurs interviewed typically have full-time employment, which could include positions in state-owned enterprises, investment banks, or roles as music tutors, sound engineers, or full-time undergraduates who have not yet chosen their professions. Douyin has provided these individuals with a flexible online platform to experiment with their musical talents as a secondary or alternative career option with lower risk. They can be described as 'sitting on the fence' musicians, assessing their potential in the music industry. Some of these musician's transition to become full-time professionals when they feel confident about making a living from music, while others choose to maintain their current positions.

Another category of newcomers to the digital music industry on Douyin are businesses owners or entrepreneurial musicians. Typically, these businesses are musician agencies or studios that offer various supporting services related to music, such as music training organizations. These organizations may be led by individual musicians who have transitioned from relying solely on their music careers to focusing on their business ventures. This shift often occurs when popular musicians find themselves facing decreased popularity in the current music market or when they recognise that their music may not appeal to a broad audience, leading them to explore alternative career paths in business. Musicians involved in such businesses prioritise the overall profitability of their companies through the sale of services and products. However, they may still occasionally perform music on the Douyin platform. For instance, one musician might play the guitar during a live stream to attract a larger audience for selling handmade guitars (as observed in Interviewee SGJT, 2022). Furthermore, there are more subtle forms of business practises on Douyin beyond simply playing music. For instance, one musician who owns a music marketing firm has used the Douyin platform as a testing ground for his marketing strategies. Successful experiences in promoting music on Douyin have allowed his business to attract more offline clients and expand its reach.

#### 4.2.3 Motivation related to the Covid-19 pandemic

While objective reasons play a significant role in motivating individuals to engage with the music industry on Douyin, subjective motivations also contribute significantly. The isolation caused by the pandemic led to an increased need for online socializing and communication (Bataille et al., 2020, Rendell, 2020). People turned to popular and



sociable platforms like Douyin to alleviate boredom and loneliness, seeking emotional compensation (ibid). Interestingly, the responses from the interviewees indicate that the personal rewards derived from Douyin often hold even greater value than the objective career benefits. For instance, some musicians find fulfillment in managing their online accounts, as it provides them with a sense of running their own business. They appreciate receiving feedback, such as fan growth and other performance metrics provided by Douyin's backstage data. Many respondents mentioned the emotional gratification that comes from forming bonds with fans and receiving encouragement from them. For example, one musician achieved local fame by amassing a substantial fan base, which boosted both their confidence and reputation in their work and personal life. Another musician, despite being elderly, embraced the opportunity to stay trendy on Douyin by acquiring new skills and knowledge through practise. Additionally, some well-trained musicians, often with academic backgrounds, perceive a sense of mission and personal value in sharing higher-quality music on the platform, targeting a high-end market. All these subjective motivations are equally influential in driving musicians' engagement with Douyin, alongside the objective motivations.

In addition to prompting domestic musicians to join Douyin, the pandemic also led musicians residing in foreign countries to do the same. In some countries, the pandemic and lockdown measures have been more frequent and extended than in China, such as in Australia. This exacerbated the already precarious financial situations of many musicians. Consequently, musicians, often with Chinese backgrounds, chose to relocate to China in search of more stable employment

opportunities, given China's stricter pandemic control measures. For these musicians, Douyin served as a platform during the transitional period while they sought employment in China after becoming unemployed in their foreign place of residence. This situation mirrored the circumstances faced by domestic musicians during the initial lockdowns in China. Musicians residing abroad turned to social media platforms for both emotional support and career continuity. It's worth noting that some privileged musicians working for music institutions in China had their salaries fully covered during the lockdown, thanks to subsidies from local governments. For example, one Chinese American musician was fully funded for over 4 months during the pandemic while working for a music institution in Shanghai (Interview with musician JLA, 2022). Consequently, this musician was more inclined to join Douyin for subjective reasons, given the security of their income.

### **4.3 Strategy, independency, and mentality for operating account**

#### **4.3.1 Account positioning and musicians' strategies**

Musicians on Douyin position their accounts based on their economic expectations and self-evaluation. Two primary account positions are classified based on their main sources of earnings: live streaming and video blogging (vlogging). Live streaming musicians, who primarily rely on live streaming revenues, are typically full-time musicians in real life. Some of them dedicate long hours, even an entire day, to maximise their income. Live streamers earn money from audience donations, which are converted into 'Douyin coins' at an exchange rate of 7:1 for Chinese yuan (Douyin, 2022). These 'Douyin coins' are generated from virtual gifts sent by audiences during

live streaming sessions, from which Douyin platform will share half of this from musicians' income. These live streamers earn money each time they perform, providing them with a timely and fast income source. This has become a crucial means for musicians to earn during the pandemic, especially for those who were unemployed.

On the other hand, video bloggers are the second main account type on Douyin. They generate income primarily through advertisements due to their large fan base. Advertisements are often irregular and one-off, making this monetization method unpredictable and unstable. Video bloggers may explore additional income streams, such as selling products via Douyin's e-commerce function. Most video bloggers are part-time streamers who hold full-time jobs in other fields. They invest limited energy into running their Douyin accounts, receiving extra income from the platform. Video bloggers on Douyin occasionally engage in live streaming, but their primary purpose is to stay connected with their existing fans, reach new audiences, and expand their fan base. While they may earn some additional income through live streaming, it typically does not become their main source of revenue. These part-time video bloggers often adopt a wait-and-see approach, observing their performance on Douyin and considering a transition to full-time musicians when they feel secure and confident in doing so. However, even if video bloggers decide to become full-time musicians, they may not necessarily choose to become full-time live streamers. This decision stems from the distinct set of skills they have developed, and the audience base they have accumulated as video bloggers. For instance, video bloggers excel at creating engaging and popular videos, as they are well-versed in the platform's algorithmic rules. Additionally, their fan base may not primarily consist of live streaming

enthusiasts. Consequently, transitioning to a different account position may be a time-consuming process, and success in the new role is not guaranteed to match the achievements they had as video bloggers.

Musicians also carefully consider how they position themselves, including their identities, content style, and digital interactions, in order to compete for popularity within the Douyin market. Self-evaluation of their skills and adaptation to the digital music market are both essential for designing appealing content. While musicians can focus on their musical style, it's not enough to simply "perform music" when competing in the crowded Douyin platform. Therefore, musicians must compete on various other factors to gain popularity and have their work displayed on the platform's "recommend list" for broader market access. In the highly competitive Douyin environment, musicians targeting similar audiences strive to capture the audience's attention. For instance, some musicians invest in official marketing tools like 'Dou+' to boost their traffic and stand out from the sea of content on the platform (Douyin, 2021). In such cases, positioning oneself sensibly and creatively becomes crucial, as it can save both energy and investments in the long run while competing with other musicians in similar niches. As an example, one of the interviewees, a French horn player, decided to play popular songs with a horn, effectively dominating a unique and less-explored niche within the platform (Interview with Musician JLA, 2022).

One effective way to compete for greater popularity on Douyin is to adapt musicians' work to match the platform's preferred style. Douyin is a versatile entertainment platform that facilitates creative video productions for its users. The mainstream

content on Douyin is typically designed to be engaging, entertaining, and suitable for people's daily leisure, often consisting of short videos lasting around 15 seconds. In Chinese, the content and information dissemination pattern on short video platforms like Douyin is described as 'short, flat, and fast' (*Duan, ping, kuai*)<sup>15</sup>, aligning perfectly with Douyin's characteristics. In the realm of music, musicians who tailor their music videos to fit the 'Douyin style' often receive more favourable responses. For instance, shorter and lighter music clips may achieve higher exposure compared to longer and more serious symphonic pieces. The key to achieving broader popularity lies in understanding and adhering to Douyin's algorithm rules, which reflect the platform's taste and preferences (Zhao, 2021). Although Douyin's algorithm remains unpublished and constantly evolves, musicians can glean some insights from the features of currently popular content in hotspots. Another effective positioning strategy is to target a less competitive market or carve out a niche to avoid intense competition. For example, some musicians opt to start live streaming at midnight when there are fewer live streamers on Douyin, allowing them to stand out more easily.

#### 4.3.2 Independent musicians and their concerns

The majority of musicians I interviewed independently manage their Douyin accounts, handling all aspects of production, promotion, and public relations on their own. While some musicians are affiliated with agencies that offer support in production and copyright solutions, they still maintain a high degree of flexibility and freedom in

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<sup>15</sup> In the context of the new media era, it's essential to understand the concept of 'short, flat, and fast.' This term embodies the key principles of creating content that is concise, easily digestible, and quickly engaging for the audience. Source: 新媒体时代要掌握的"短平快"是什么意思? <https://www.prtoday.cn/web/sdetail?uid=cb99ee6f-5694-42f7-af78-7d126cd6d226>.

running their accounts. For instance, one interviewee mentioned being part of an MCN (Multi-channel network), which primarily assists with commercial operations and provides production support like video filming. However, the artist emphasised that the agency cannot interfere with their account's operation against their wishes. Even when musicians are signed with agencies or have their music companies, they often maintain a strong sense of independence and take personal responsibility for their online music careers on social platforms. This growing trend of independence on social platforms has led to a transformation in the music agency business, with agencies now offering less strict and more flexible support for online musicians. Indies and their agencies form loose alliances based on partnership for mutual benefit, a departure from the traditional model where musicians were considered employees that subject to agencies. In the digital platform era, whether musicians are signed with agencies no longer serves as the definitive indicator of their independence.

Musicians with substantial fan bases often receive contract offers from various agencies, including flexible service providers like MCNs, traditional agencies with more control, and official copyright agencies approvals by Douyin. However, most musicians approach these offers cautiously and prefer to maintain their independent status. Musicians who enjoy higher popularity and have larger fan bases tend to receive more contract offers, as agencies see greater economic potential in partnering with more popular musicians. In contrast to the proactive stance of agencies, Douyin musicians are generally more conservative when it comes to signing contracts. Many independent musicians are content with their achievements on Douyin and do not see a compelling need to join an agency. They have concerns that signing with an agency

might compromise their control over aspects such as music production, accepting advertisements, shaping their self-identity, and more. Independent musicians have confidence in their ability to establish and maintain the popularity of their accounts and may question the agency's capability to sustain or enhance their future popularity. Consequently, indie musicians tend to prioritise retaining control over their accounts rather than ceding control to agents. As one musician stated in an interview,

Many companies have messaged me, like [here omit media's name]. They want to sign me for a full contract, and then I thought about it, but I have not agreed yet. Basically, they want to do full-time business with me, like live concerts, a lot of advertisements, a lot of business and advertising for a lot of products, everything... There's no creativity. For example, they want you to play this, and you have no choice that you just have to do it. You might disagree, but you do not have a choice. I want to have more freedom. I want to have more creativity. (Interview with musicians JLA, 2022)

Despite musicians' dedication and hard work, Douyin platform's significant role in determining their success and popularity, highlighting the platform's influence over individual efforts. Musicians have developed their skills and gained valuable experience as they independently manage their Douyin accounts, deepening their engagement with the platform. Indie musicians on Douyin often play the roles of "bedroom" musicians, handling tasks such as playing music, filming, editing, and more, entirely on their own. Additionally, they serve as music curators, administrators, technicians, managers, and executors for their accounts. These musicians actively acquire live streaming skills to attract more fans and maintain strong relationships with

their audience. They invest time in understanding the platform's rules and algorithms, either through research on websites or by closely observing the platform's operations, to enhance the dissemination of their music on Douyin. They also regularly assess their account's overall performance, devising solutions and adapting their strategies for increased competitiveness. However, despite their efforts and progress, musicians sometimes encounter challenges and experience frustration when their account growth or performance improvement does not occur as expected. Many feel powerless and uncertain about how to elevate their accounts to a higher level. It becomes evident that, to a large extent, the keys to their popularity on Douyin are held by the platform itself. As one interviewee indicated, his feeling was that the influence of this online platform significantly exceeds that of any individual. If the platform does not support the musician's field or style, quality alone will not lead to popularity. (Interview with Musician TL, 2022).

#### 4.3.3 Changing mentality toward digital music career

Musicians have been guessing what actions can lead to higher popularity on Douyin, and the algorithm rules of the social platform are the focus of their speculation. Social platforms like Douyin design and run sophisticated algorithm rules to automatically carry out the platform's content preference and topic tendencies. People may not figure out the exact encouraged content; however, they can find clues for the content tendency on Douyin. Several ways to spy upon the algorithm of being more popular on the platform exist. First, participating in official events or programmes online would contribute to a higher exposure of the content as these online activities are usually related to commercial interests such as adverts on the Douyin. So, it would



probably be beneficial if musicians could enrol themselves. Second is learning those 'dominance genes' of the Douyin algorithm, specifically, platform rules, platform images, and algorithm interpretations by other companies. It would always be wise to follow the platform's will and avoid against the rules. The third way is to observe the 'invisible genes' of the algorithm, that is, to research what traits of the creative content may contribute to the popularity of Douyin and trial what rules work. Nevertheless, misunderstanding the actual algorithm and misuse of those experience will not work, and knowing the algorithm is largely guesswork. So, this method for spying on the algorithm could be blind and less reliable for most musicians.

Musicians have inevitably kept guessing and practising their understanding of platform algorithms in nature as long as they are running their accounts. Exploration of the algorithm and tendency has become musicians' source of creativity and motivations for progression. However, most musicians feel tired and hopeless about the Douyin algorithm as they have been 'trying errors' too many times. So, they have changed their ambitions and frustration to a more compromised and lazier attitude toward the Douyin algorithm, just like the Chinese popular internet slang so-called 'Buddhism' (*foxi*<sup>16</sup>), referring to a life philosophy that has a peaceful, chilled, Hippy-like attitude. The remaining small part of musicians with a positive experience of trialing algorithm feels more confident when talking about their hacks for higher popularity in the interview. In a word, exploring algorithms and conforming to them, otherwise changing

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<sup>16</sup> In the context of musicians attitudes, when musicians refer to adopting a "佛系" (*foxi*) attitude toward the Douyin algorithm, they mean that they have become more relaxed and accepting of its unpredictability, recognizing that they may not have full control over their popularity on the platform.

into a more disposed attitude, have all been a part of musicians' skills for running Douyin accounts.

Despite musicians' helplessness with the unpredictable Douyin algorithm; on the contrary, they hold a positive attitude to continue their careers on the Douyin platform. Musicians acknowledge that Douyin has brought them essential benefits in terms of financial condition during the pandemic, online and offline career development, and spiritual rewarding through Douyin. All these contribute to musicians' strong will to continue their engagement with Douyin to obtain further advantages. Their willingness is also based on the musicians' evaluation of their 'returning rate': how much energy they input and how much benefit output from the platform; which should also consider the pandemic situation. The unemployment of musicians during the pandemic has increased their evaluation of Douyin because no matter how much they gain online are better than nothing. However, in post-pandemic time when most musicians regain their original income, they will have to trade the energy spent online or offline for a higher 'returning rate' that represents the efficiency of using personal energy. For example, part-time musicians may reduce their frequency of updating their accounts as they will put more energy into their main jobs. Another example is that professional musicians who regain their offline performance and income may change or reduce online live streaming duration.

Nevertheless, musicians who can choose a better energy distribution for their best interests are only part of the 'middle-class' musicians who have already secured a

survival job.<sup>17</sup> So, whether these musicians continue to run Douyin account is more about personal choices regarding their extra income, career development, spiritual values, etc. Nevertheless, the other part of musicians tends to be choice-less but continue their online career for survival reasons, whether they are satisfied with their situation. These musicians normally take Douyin as their full-time job and spend most of their energy on the platform as their offline income is not enough to well-support their lives (or they simply only work online). In this case, the musician must take their Douyin account seriously as it has become the main source of their revenue, and they just have to continue their engagement with Douyin whatever the platform is offering to them; they just have to accept it and try to work it out for better results. Two typical examples of interviews are disabled musicians and musicians of minority music genres who have relatively less advantageous to support themselves through the offline market such as Chinese drama and western orchestra. Therefore, they keep live streaming online whenever they can to gain more audiences and income.

However, being a full-time Douyin musician can be risky as their career is all based on the platform where ones can lose their fame overnight quickly as they gain. Douyin has been creating a long list of sudden popular internet celebrates on it, and some of them suddenly disappear due to various reasons such as involvement of sensitive topics (illegal or political) or a violation of platform rules such as unlicensed advertising. Once being detected to be a violation, there is a possibility for an account closure that leads to an elimination of all the fans and fame overnight. Furthermore, compared to

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<sup>17</sup> The social groups and social mobility of *wanghong* musicians will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

the offline music market, where the music quality and performing skills play a relatively larger role, the music popularity on Douyin is based on multiple and unpredictable factors (like the unknowable Douyin algorithm). This platform's feature makes it less helpful for musicians to improve their music for higher popularity. In this logic, the career accumulation as a real musician makes no sense, as Douyin requires more operational skills for the online music market than simply being a qualified musician.

Recognising the risky and opportunistic nature of being music practitioners, whether full-time or part-time on Douyin, musicians have taken action to avoid the dark sides of their online careers. Some musicians choose to be more self-disciplined to the platform rules to avoid being punished meanwhile learning and responding to the algorithm for a strong momentum. Through this active way of joining in competition, musician can keep their accounts alive to win wider fans as a hedge against natural fans' loss over time. These musicians tend to be entrepreneurial and like a quasi-expert in their own field on Douyin. They tend to be more confident in running an account, especially when they already receive some outstanding results. One full-time live streamers share some useful hacks for live streaming. He notes that the Douyin algorithm values more the live room, which has a higher conversion rate of new audiences, which means the Douyin algorithm values more gaining new fans than maintaining existing fans,

It is impossible to gain new fans every day for a long period. Even with the help of professional teams, one cannot guarantee an increase in fan base for long as it is too uncontrollable. So, live streamers like us constantly change their accounts to gain new fans... Fans base is just a statistic that does not

make any sense. Because Douyin does not give your flows, your viewing traffic will naturally dry up. I must constantly change to a new Douyin account; the new account gets more support from the platform. (Interview with musicians, EHFQ, 2022)

Other less-entrepreneurial musicians have developed multiple ways of monetising their content and obtaining benefits from the platform in the long run. Except for one-off cooperation such as offline performance and teaching work gained from private messages, there are other formal ways to earn long-term revenues on Douyin. One of the earning ways relies on those 'digital properties' typically copyrighted music and paid content being put on the platform to be accessed or consumed at any time. Specifically, some musicians upload a list of their copyrighted music on Douyin for more plays, thus increasing loyalty income; other musicians sell recorded music courses via e-commerce functions online. These digital assets generate income whenever possible but rely on musicians' real-time performing, so to be long-term monetising channels. The musicians' 'personal credit' will boost the sales for these digital properties; for example, one of the grassroots musicians is selling agricultural by-products on Douyin aside from earning from live streaming. She tightly selects and controls the quality of the production and accumulates business credit for herself, which is like a self-brand strategy for long-run turnovers. In a word, musicians who have realised their career instabilities have been developing their distinct way to maintain account status through multiple monetising ways that a combination of one-off cooperation, selling digital properties, and increasing trust with fans via daily operation and live streaming.

## 4.4 A work of pleasure or toughness: video bloggers and live streamers

### 4.4.1 Receiving income and benefits from Douyin

Despite the insecurity of musicians' careers on social platforms like Douyin, the majority of *wanghong* musicians receive a financial increase through their practise on the platform. A small part of full-time musicians earns their living nearly all through Douyin; however, the majority of musicians work part-time on the platform. Part-time musicians gain extra income and benefits through multiple channels on Douyin. The following list shows the income streams and benefit types that musicians referred to in interviews. The table 3 on the next page illustrates musicians' income from their original careers inside or outside the music industry before engaging with Douyin. Among all musicians, famous musicians or business owners tend to have a higher financial condition than those indies and freelancers in original, though not in all cases, and all musicians have taken advantage of Douyin. Musicians' extra income from Douyin can be sorted mainly into two types, one-off cooperation, such as gig works and long-term digital assets, such as copyrights. The other non-income benefits are related to future income or career development for musicians. In short, musicians' financial affordance, either short-term or long-term, has been enhanced through their engagement with Douyin.

Table 3 Musician's income other benefits received form Douyin

	<b>Original income from career as</b>	<b>Extra income (From Douyin)</b>	<b>Other benefits (From Douyin)</b>
Within music industry	<p><b>Higher economic capacity</b></p> <p>famous musicians, instrument seller, live house partner, music college professor, music training business,</p> <p><b>Lower economic capacity</b></p> <p>Ordinary Singers, Non- famous composers, local drama performers, freelancers, music trainers, players in orchestra, indie musician, undergraduates in music college sound engineer original singers, ...</p>	<p><b>Long term Digital assets</b></p> <p>Music loyalty, E-commence of peripherals, Recorded music courses, Fans donation via live streaming</p> <p><b>Short term or One-off cooperation</b></p> <p>composition jobs, offline performance income, blessing video for private fans, advertising for brands, advertising in videos, online &amp; offline music training, instruments selling,</p>	<p><b>Strong related to an extra income</b></p> <p>Loyal fans, Musicians' fame, Increased song popularity, Interpersonal relationship, Network with music agencies, Business publicity,</p> <p><b>Other benefits</b></p> <p>A spread market of music genre The account as digital CV or record, Familiarity of online music market, Marketing experience for songs, An expended repertoire</p>
Within other industry	<p>Workers in state-owned enterprise, truck drivers, products sellers on WeChat, officer in investment bank</p>		

A small part of musicians is business owners who practise business online, such as advertising or promoting their services. These businessmen tend to care more about their overall business interests than direct income from their music work. For them, a digital platform like Douyin is a tool for marketing, into which they are investing money than earning money. These musicians attract audiences through video works or live streaming to promote their products and services that bring them higher profits; for example, instrument selling probably generates more income at once than occasionally live streaming for donation. Another business example is a musicians' agency holding talent shows online to find music talents to sign up with. These music agencies hire famous musicians to live stream online and attract public participation, so they can find talents for long-term cooperation from a broader base. The revenue gains from live streaming on Douyin probably be invested back into the agent's account in the live room to receive more audiences. Specifically, they set up a large amount 'count-down to claim' lucky money (called 'fudai' with Douyin coins in it) to retain more passengers in the live room, though which way they gain more opportunities for marketing advantages with enhance public attention for the agency.

The joining of business capital led to fierce competition in the music market on Douyin. Music businesses and independent musicians have overlaps in their monetising channels; however, music businesses usually have more advantages in services and price, for example, guitar companies and indie guitar players are both selling guitars on Douyin, but customers receive a lower price from the company sellers; similarly, live streaming of music business has shared audiences' attention through offering live



performances meanwhile frequently sending money in forms of 'fudai' ('count-down to claim' money) to retain their fans. Besides, music businesses have more financial capabilities than individuals in marketing via official marketing tools on Douyin called 'Dou+', a paid service for boosting digital traffic for content. In this way, music businesses tend to have higher content exposure through paying money to the platform for marketing, especially for the live stream, which values profitability and the audience number in the live room. The high attendance in the live room would, in turn, increase business performance in terms of selling or other results. On the contrary, independent musicians who are lower in support of their monetisation become not compete in many ways with the business, and the individual's market is naturally sidelined by the active businesses practising on the platform. Therefore, indies should be more self-motivated, strategical, and committed than stagnant in status if they want to be more successful and profitable on the platform.

#### 4.4.2 Full-time live streamers: tough work for a higher return

Full-time live streamers are largely affected by the fierce competition on the platform; their working conditions have deteriorated over time. Full-time live streamers depend on their revenue from fans' donations in real-time live streaming, so they take their online work seriously by setting a fixed timetable, longer duration, and designed performing content. Full-time live streaming has been a popular choice for many musicians due to the immediately gained income; most importantly, the revenue for live streaming is coming without a high ceiling (and bottom). It is not surprising on Douyin that popular live streamers receive income as a unit of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions (RMB) at one time, which makes live

streaming in China a shortcut for quick fortune. A similar condition in the music industry, the high pay, has triggered many live streamers to work extremely hard to compete for its market and higher revenue. For example, the overnight live streamers are commonly seen on Douyin, who start living streaming around midnight till dawn; through this way, they target a less competitive night market where superstars or large enterprises are seldom sharing the market.

Full-time live streamers have been emotional labouring for a better fan relationship, especially those who paid high in the live room. A good fan relationship is vital to living streamers' income as fans directly or potentially pay for musicians' online performances. Live streamers have different patterns of live room revenue donated by their fans. Many musicians receive most of their donations from a small part of their loyal fans, which can be compared to the 'Pareto Principle, that 20% of donators pay for 80% of the donation. The main contributors will be placed at the top of the donation list and will be called by special and respectful call names, typically 'Ranking first big brother' (bangyi dage) or 'ranking second big sister' (bangyi dajie) to show the prestige status in the live room. Keeping a good relationship with this 'big sister' or 'big brother' may be tough work that requires high emotional intelligence and sometimes extra emotional labour outside the platform. This is because the relationship between the musicians and their main donators is subtle and nuanced in nature. The payers for musicians' live streaming are in both roles of customers and loyal fans, and the reason they pay for the live performance and their fanatic about the musicians. It is common for fans to pay a premium than just a basic donation to their musicians' live room though there is no standard fee to the live room; therefore, good maintenance of paid

fans will probably generate a higher premium. Nonetheless, streamers may drive fans away if they ask for an overpayment that is beyond their fans' financial ability; hence, musicians keep evaluating and balancing between their incomes and their payers' willingness. In the opposite situation, discouragement of donations and insufficient appreciation from live streamers will possibly fade fans' enthusiasm away with a lack of positive reaction and close bonding. One musician shares her entangled feelings with fans,

I am actually quite entangled with a fan's relationship. Once I advised everyone in my live room to be rational and keep their living expense first, and not to donate money to my live room blindly or impulsively. Later, my fans really became as rational as I told them to. That makes me feel difficult, and I got no idea as they do not send me virtual gifts anymore. The condition of fan relationships is like wandering on the edge of this kind. (Interview with musician TY, 2022)

Waiting for the major donators is an important factor for many musicians' live streaming for long times on Douyin because the payment sent by major donors consists of the musicians' major income in the live room. Major donators may join the live room randomly over time and make a huge donation, making up a decent income for hours of performing. Musicians also receive small donations from the other fans for the rest of the time, which is a long tail for musicians' revenue. There is a term to describe the small donations in the live room as 'flowers and grass' (huahua caocao), which refers to the basic virtual gifts often less than a hundred Douyin coins (equal to around 15 RMB, around £1.8). However, virtual gifts value much higher, typically

thousands of Douyin coins. For example, a 'private aeroplane' values 3000 Douyin coins, which equals 428 RMB (around £50), which is a prestigious virtual gift with a gorgeous special effect when someone sends it out in the live room. Another virtual gift, 'carnival', is one of the most expensive on the Douyin platform, which values 30,000 Douyin coins that equal 4285 RMB (about £516) for each sending. We can find that one prestigious virtual gift can reach a rate of five hundred times the basic virtual gift value, let alone main donators tend to send pieces of prestigious gifts than just sending one. This phenomenon rationalise why musicians' daily long-time or even monthly long-term waiting is worth the time as one major donation may cover all the income expectation at once,

There are more than 100 'big brothers' in my live room, whether they are big or small [major donators or not]. But they can not come back every day.

That's why I can go from the first day to the 365th day in a year and never stop. I must live stream every day, right? I retain my live streaming every day, and as long as they (Big Bros) occasionally come back in three or five months and give 'encouragement' to me (online donations), my life will be guaranteed.

In this way, I formed a virtuous circle of my online work. (Interview with musician PTCW, 2022)

The working time of live streamers varies from several hours to the whole day. Normally full-time live streamers work for a longer time throughout either day, night, or overnight. The day term is from morning to afternoon, the night term starts after dinner to midnight, and the overnight term starts from midnight to dawn. For all full-time live streamers, hours of performing online can be exhausting because they do

not rest during each music playing; they are still on live and interact with their fans in the live room. They cannot stop playing for a long time; often, in several minutes, they are expected to play again, whether for strategic reasons or required by their fans. Musicians are in an active and busy situation during live streaming as they have multiple works to do, especially send appreciation to donators, keep answering fan's questions, remember the next play, pay attention to the overall statistics in the live room, and encourage audiences to give more like etc. This intensive workload has tensed musicians for hours, which keeps musicians' nerves excited for another several hours after their live streaming. This phenomenon is especially prominent for those who play at night or overnight, as their rest and sleep pattern has been heavily affected for a long time. However, most musicians play at night as there will be more users on the platform searching for leisure, entertainment, and relaxation after work, which bases a larger market for music content. One full-time live streamer conveys worries about his health,

I have been 'kidnapped' by Douyin, and I have to live stream here every day. I will get a hair transplant; as you see, my hair has dropped a lot. Staying up late will hurt my body, and no one wants that. It will not be so late like this till three or even five o'clock in the morning if I personally want to stay up late. I was too excited to sleep after I finished my broadcast at one o'clock in the morning. Especially when my popularity was booming that day, 50,000 to 100,000 people watched my live streaming, you know, an offline concert only got a few hundred or thousands of people. (Interview with musician CWY, 2022)

Full-time live streamers may not rest for the rest of their day after live streaming except for a long sleep to compensate for sleep deprivation during the last night. Live streamers are highly interactive and receive enormous feedback during their live streaming; therefore, musicians must consider or handle it in case that situation happens again. Here are musicians' tactics for improve their online performance in live streaming. First is to be prepared for the comments and questions proposed by audiences in the live room. Musicians may receive negative feedback such as sarcasm or trap problems, which musicians should answer in a public area on an open-to-all platform like Douyin. Therefore, getting emotionally prepared for unwanted questions or comments becomes the basic skill for a live streamer. The second is to be prepared for live performing in terms of music practising, repertoires, and interactions that improve the general quality of broadcasting. Finally, extra but vital work is keeping a good interpersonal relationship with those major contributors to ensure their fans' frequency of visiting the live room to donate a live-saving income and premium for the live streamer.

The exhausting work and life conditions tend to be seen among full-time live streamers but not for those occasionally broadcasting musicians. Unlike full-time musicians who rely heavily on live streaming online, part-time musicians are those who mainly obtain revenue elsewhere. The live streaming function on Douyin is more likely to be a gig work whenever they can gain extra income aside from their main job. In another situation, occasionally, live streamers may run their accounts that monetise through many ways due to their large fan base; their live streaming is like 'fans meetings' to consolidate the fan relationship but not aim for an income. Due to the casual nature of

part-time live streamers, they have more choice than those full-time broadcasters in terms of timetable, interactive styles, fan maintenance etc., to lead a balanced work and lifestyle. For these casual live streamers on Douyin, whether to be hard-working as a full-time does is a personal choice based on their self-willingness. However, part-time live streamers tend to have loose fan relationship, so their income from live streaming may not reach the level of a full-time do in a similar field as live streamers' main income are mainly from premium paid by their loyal fans (Big Brothers or Big Sisters). Besides, some musicians are live streaming for other reasons, for example, providing and marketing their services or themselves online to boost income from another monetising way. One professional composer receives more song editing orders outside the platform as he frequently reviews songs on live streaming.

#### 4.4.3 Part-time video bloggers: higher flexibility

Video bloggers, in opposite working conditions to the full-time live streamers on Douyin, are sharing a much more balanced work and lifestyle. Making video bloggers is not a heavy workload that sometimes takes half an hour to several hours at maximum, making it a part time job. Most video bloggers on Douyin work part-time, aside from their main jobs, and they may not transfer to full-time due to the unstable nature of video bloggers' revenue, normally from one-off advertising. For video bloggers, the Douyin platform is a place to display their work and themselves and obtain benefits either in income or other cooperation. As all these resources are extra from musicians' main job, they can be selective in responding to the feedback gained from the platform. Musicians can now judge from their situation and decide on energy input into their online career, giving them more control and initiative in managing their accounts. Most

importantly, unlike live streamers who keep themselves live online in real time for a specific duration, video bloggers' work can be done almost in non-real-time. In a word, the nature of the online blogger enables a looser workload and higher flexibility, thus a better work-life balance.

Many video bloggers work outside the music industry earning a stable and essential salary in such as state-owned enterprise or higher education, whose positions provide a relatively long-term career with a steady income in the Chinese context. Especially during the pandemic time when many private companies and freelancers have lost their work opportunities due to economic downturns, stable jobs with lower risk are pursued by many. The stable occupations are in the nine-to-five timetable and an even level of salary, which provide time flexibility to grow a secondary occupation for extra income. A similar situation in part of private companies. According to the National Bureau of Statistics 2021, the annual salary of a state-owned enterprise where most young people earn starts from 89138 to 102090 RMB, equal to £10,739 to £12,300 (Zhu, 2021). In this case, a stable income plus a bonus from an online career becomes a preferable mode for part of musicians' choices. Typically, they work in the daytime for the main job and maintain their Douyin account in their spare time during their work break or after work. Some music videos can be made more efficiently, and one informant said that he makes multiple videos at one time on a weekend afternoon and post the video daily on Douyin for the next week, which would only take several minutes per day.



Another part of part-time video bloggers is full-time musicians who work online and offline to maximise their earnings. Although they work part-time in their online career, the platform has brought them a valuable resource to enhance their offline career. For these full-time musicians, especially those indies with relatively low influence in the field, both their online and offline careers are unstable as their income depends on their job opportunities. Therefore, they start their online career to expand work exposure or start offline careers to gain extra working opportunities; this way, they alleviate the lack of work opportunities and income insecurity. The Douyin video blog is one of the earning channels for these full-time musicians, and they may have developed other earning ways, for example, frequently online live streaming, joining the network of performing associations, providing other music services, copyright income, etc. As most of these income channels tend to randomly happen and have short-time cooperation, musicians' lifestyles are not changing too much though their financial situation has improved. Musicians' timetables are fragmented, their income depends, and their career risks are unsure once they lose the market and fans. The significant change is that they have more options on whether to work and what types of work to accept based on their improved cash flow and affluent work opportunities to gain more control over their work and lifestyles. A popular musician whose timetable is almost fully occupied indicates her life as a 'perpetual motion' without any free slot (Interview with musician, AAWA 2022).

## **4.5 Commercial ambivalence: free music on digital market, and fans loyalty**

### 4.5.1 Cultural ambivalence on digital platform

Pairing ambivalence in the cultural and creative industry usually refers to the conflicts between the public value and commercial value of cultural production (Stahl, 2010). Music production has public attribution to be disseminated for public interests as cultural work, while the market consumes the commercial value of a cultural product. The ambivalence is that cultural production always seeks a wider spread to the public while commercial products set a price barrier hindering unpaid customers from accessing. This ambivalence has been alleviated in the era of the digital platform, where online cultural work is free online as the related cost is paid by advertisers of the platform in exchange for audiences' exposure to advertising and accessing the content. For example, the advertisers on YouTube are implanting adverts into popular videos and paying the content providers on every clickthrough; meanwhile, the services provider (YouTube) receives commissions from streamers' remuneration. Music streaming platform balance the ambivalence in another way; they request a membership fee from their subscribers to unlimitedly access the music database. In both business modes, musicians' works can widely spread online without an upfront marketing investment; meanwhile, creative workers receive pay to survive their careers.

The highly developed digital infrastructures on Douyin enable multiple channels for its users to monetise their works, from which the various actors collectively pay for the

musicians' online work. The multiple monetisation ways all contribute to the musicians' online careers, such as direct payment for live music, e-commerce, loyalty, and commercial cooperation. Through this combined way that is resourcing payment from multiple monetising, Douyin creates accordingly business mode of multiple profiting channels in compassion to the other social media dominated by one income stream. Like the others, Douyin facilitates individualised content distribution for exposing the creative work to targeted users on the platform; meanwhile, Douyin makes itself a free-to-access and easy-to-use viral dissemination platform for an extended audience base for online cultural work. However, the digital music market on the platform may be quite different from the offline one; the online creative market has developed its personalities in such as user base, streamers, and content preference. Online musicians are in the evolution of their job circumstances employing sophisticated digital facilities online to practise their creativities, and they are in a digital market with rewritten rules for publicity and popularity led by the social platform.

Musicians on Douyin have adapted their music for a wider spread in the digital market on Douyin, which contributes to higher market attention and an increase in revenue. In this sense, making music videos for higher popularity is similar to the marketing practise. However, the music video is not an actual advertising video, and musicians produce their music with personal creativity, style, and design, which leads to ambivalence about whether to insist on musicians' willingness to present their work or adopt the work for wider market potential. For example, the Douyin algorithm values the videos with a higher completion rate of viewing and a good performance in interactions of likes, comments, and shared. These widely held algorithm rules has

triggered many musicians to cut their music piece into shorter length and only present the most beautiful part of the music for a higher completion rate. Musicians also design an eye-catching start or creative way of playing their music to sustain the audience's attention for longer. Neither of the music adoption methods on Douyin prioritises preserving the highest quality or completeness of music works. Instead, the market dynamics on Douyin primarily revolve around attractiveness rather than musicality.

Douyin encourages users to create professional accounts dedicated to producing innovative content tailored for specific audience segments, a strategy often referred to as vertical content designing in industry jargon. Douyin algorithm uses multiple labels to build digital 'audience portraits' indicating the user's personal information, social background, content preference, etc. Based on these labels, the algorithm then groups audiences in specific niches called 'audiences pool', for which the streamers' contents are expected to feed 'vertically'. In other words, Douyin discourages the production of unfocused videos that lack a clear target audience, instead promoting a strategy where content is tailored to specific audience segments to avoid scattering within the market niche. All the feedback generated through the online practising will update the streamers' portrait and other backstage statistics, such as fan structure, for future content distribution. In this case, musicians who satisfy 'vertically' to their specific niche benefit more from the Douyin platform as it follows the algorithm's preference. In opposition, the account advantages will be scaled down by the algorithm if musicians keep taking changes in niche and receive less positive feedback in statistics. Therefore, progressing in the same field will help the account performance, whereas

a changing market niche probably leads to a decrease. One musician reveals in detail in an algorithm logic,

The platform will build a fan model in the first 30 days for whom is attracted by one video. If I suddenly change direction during the time, for example, I post a piece of classical music, then anime fans attracted before will be completely uninterested, and they will swipe that video away... It will be hard for the platform to judge your fan base if you have too many 'pan-fans' who do not have a specific preference. Eventually, the platform will feed your video to random audiences, and the account will not find a targeted audience base. It is not good for the long-term health of the account. (Interview with musicians AAWA, 2022)

Musicians are another dilemma if to adapt themselves to a wider market taste on Douyin. Musicians have been seeking new fans to offset the natural loss of existing fans from a wider audience market, not only those less popular indies but also well-known musicians. However, the market taste on Douyin is tricky because many sweeping songs on the platform are often 'brain-wash' ones, which tend to have easy-to-copy rhythm in spoken lyrics with coarse emotion expressed and vulgar themes whereas widely spread in numbers. This can be attributed to the overall user base on Douyin, the mass, who contribute the largest in numbers but not necessarily have good taste in music, whereas navigating the music trend through their collective behaviour disseminating those 'brain-wash' music on Douyin. In a mass market, musicians feel tangled if to cater to the mass at the expense of music insistence and self-positioning. For example, musicians struggle to memetic those 'brain-wash' songs,

which help to gain more exposure following the platform-sweeping trend. Some very popular songs may result from commercial marketing; Douyin will increase the exposure of those works for a better marketing statistic for their advertisers. However, musicians' adaptations of their music and themselves to the platform are limited, and most musicians only promise a specific level to the Douyin market. They tend to set bottom lines to self-identities, music styles, and morals as a professional but explore new ways for wider markets, such as transforming the way of representing the music or changing their position sites for live streaming. One well-known musician states his philosophy for catering for the market, which is to fight for more traffic and stand out from the industry before gaining 'the right to speak; by what he means, there is enough traffic to survive a musician in the industry through playing only their own songs.

A small part of musicians holds a more market-targeted but self-satisfying mindset in their music production. They are like music suppliers of the industry, and their musical work is like common goods designed to fit the market needs, so less in a cultural attribution. These musicians value market value equal to or higher than the aesthetic value of music works. They scan the market needs and tastes when composing their music; their insistence is more on the market sales than their self-identities or music styles. Similarly, their music is more about feeding the marketing with a music production than merely an expression of themselves, which makes them more committed to the market than their music beliefs. For example, a music brand himself as the 'prince of saliva songs' (easy-to-remember melody with spoken like plain lyric), and his market target are clear for those fast sale, low taste, and specific need such as plaza dancing background music for elderly Chinese. Another musician targets to

make profitable from producing popular songs for Douyin users. He researches the Douyin market and specifically writes songs for the elderly on the platform. These highly market-oriented musicians have less ambivalent situations in adapting their music to the market as a higher market is what they are chasing. In opposition, purely 'for self-satisfying' musicians are rare, who only consider expressing and recording themselves on social media but have no expectations receiving other advantages.

#### 4.5.2 Concerns on an over consumption' of fans loyalty

Live streamers have faced more real-time and interpersonal ambivalence on Douyin in their subtle relationship with their fans, the payers, especially those full-time musicians who rely more income on their loyal fans. An active encouragement from an idol for more donations will probably boost the fans' payment online; however, an 'overconsumption' of fans will also chase fans away. So, musicians design ways to trigger fans' donations naturally in a considerate manner facing those donators. For example, musicians encourage or praise the donor in either word, facial emotions, and body language for the general fans in their live room; meanwhile, they will show consideration to those 'big brother/big sister' enquiring about fans' recent life or health or tell them not to continue donating too much. However, some musicians express unease and sometimes feel guilty when they feel overpaid on the platform. Some consider it immoral to take interest from loyal fans with high pay that an offline performance will never reach. Nevertheless, most musicians feel good about earning a moderate income from their fans in live streams when they find a healthy and acceptable relationship with their fans.

There is a more stimulating way for online fans to donate on Douyin, a platform function for online performance competitions called 'PK' (player killing). In the PK mode on Douyin, more than one musician stays in one live room for an online performance, and the competition result is according to the fan's donation. The 'losers' of the competition will be 'punished' by doing things the winners ask them to do. These game rules reasoned the musicians' encouragement for more online donations to win the game, creating a 'donation competition' for boosting musicians' income. Most musicians acknowledge the PK game will increase their earnings by consuming their fans' credit to win, but many musicians dispute the way that 'begging' is in low esteem for higher donations. Many interviewees who self-identified as music professionals tend to hold a chilled attitude toward fierce PK games as there are confident in gaining income from their music skills and unwilling to induct for donation. However, a despite of PK games does not mean a full rejection of using this platform function. The PK games will probably lead to a wider exposure of the content by the algorithm because the musicians' revenue gained from the live room will contribute to the platform's income at a 5:5 rate of commission. Besides, musicians have been using the PK function in another way for non-monetary benefits, for example, taking a performing break during other people's performances, interacting with fans, and attracting fans from the rivals' live rooms. That is why many musicians still use PK functions on Douyin though they dislike the original setting of the game.

Music practitioners who are more open-minded to PK games are those whose main aim is to accumulate quick fortune through online music performing. They hold a more positive attitude toward earning money from loyal fans and are proud of their ability to



trigger more donations from fans. These live music practitioners have been developing skills like flattering verbal expression, exaggerated emotions, and eye-grabbing body motions to reward their fans after each donation to make donators feel stimulated or prestigious in the live room. For this live streamer, inducting for higher donation are a skill that is similarly important to their performing skills online. Their focus is not only on exploring new payers through their performance skills but on exploiting maximum value from existing fans. These live streamers probably do not identify themselves as musicians though they are making money from music performing, and their fan relationships may be in a different mode in comparison to those music professionals. To be specific, live streamers must frequently keep interaction and build close or even intimate relationships with their major donators, which situation can be compared to a seller maintaining its major customer with interpersonal relationships. Through this skilful and proactive maintenance of fan relationships, the live streamers ensure a decent income paid by their fans in the live room. One musician discloses her high revenue under this way of maintaining only a dozen of loyal fans,

My current income from the live broadcast is stable at about 60,000 or 70,000 RMB a month (£7228-£8433 in GBP). My income may be twenty or thirty or forty thousand yuan when I first came to Douyin in 2019, but now it reaches higher, like eighty or ninety thousand yuan (per month). My income has progressed gradually, not because my guests have more money or my audience traffic is higher; my traffic in the live room has been stable at around 10 people. My income increased because my approach (to maintain the fans) is different now that my income has increased. (Interview with musician Lynn, 2022)

Social platforms make multiple online interactions where fans can communicate with musicians much closer. The easier communication channels have virtues in maintaining fan relationships, information updating, emotional relations, and financial support due to frequent interactions. At the same time, a closer fan relationship may lead to disappointment in expectations if fans are neglected for time or a dilemma in accepting or rejecting a fan's comments. Therefore, it is vital for musicians to carefully deal with unwanted suggestions while reassuring fans about their relationship with their idols. Most musicians hold a rational attitude toward their fans; their compromise with them is limited, especially when the fans' requests are against their music insinuations. Most musicians commit to their overall fan base more than individual fans and will only follow individual fans' suggestions if they feel compatible or acceptable to their self-identities. Most musicians on Douyin have large controls over their music work, and they are in a dominant position accepting or rejecting others' suggestions on their work either in a kind way, neglect, or simply refusing to do. In some conditions, musicians will have to consider concessions with their fans for market concern when many fans ask for the same thing. As one informant sighs that she must play an unfavourable song in the end, many fans comment on the song name below other unrelated videos, which affects the popularity of those videos as the Douyin algorithm is targeting the wrong audiences through evaluating unrelated keywords in the comments area.

## **4.6 Fans, followers, and the online crowd**

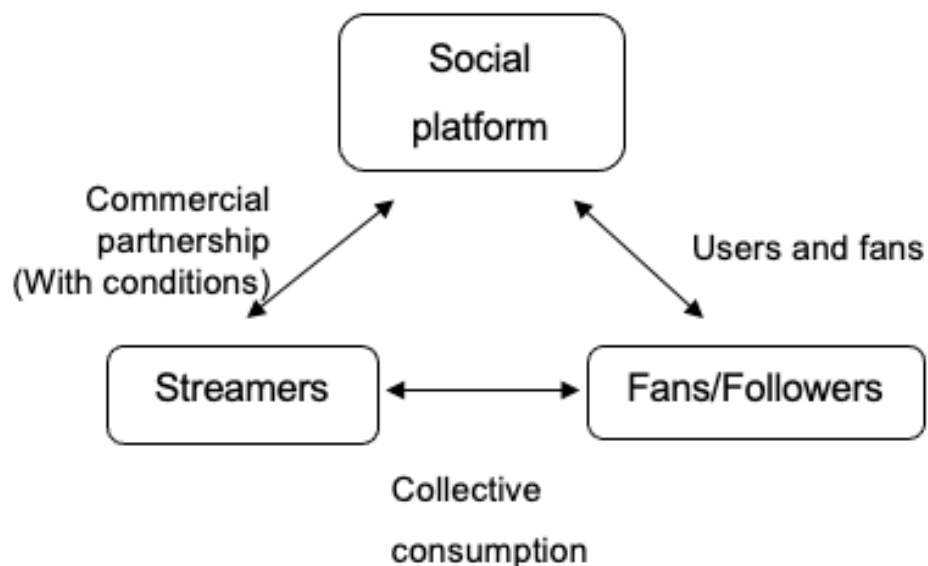
### 4.6.1 Fans' loyalty towards whom?

Fan relationships are part of the public relationships managed by music agencies. However, maintaining fan relationships has become a crucial aspect for individual creative workers on social media platforms. Social platforms like Douyin provide digital infrastructures, including interactive functions and fan communities, facilitating communication between streamers and their fans. Fans can now interact closely with their idols through private messages, and musicians can independently nurture their relationships with fans through various online interactions. It's important to note that social media platforms offer these online services not out of charity but due to their business interests. They benefit from strong fan loyalty and engagement as it leads to higher commissions from fans' online activities. This creates a 'triangle of interest' among musicians, their followers, and the social platform, fostering an ecosystem where all three parties contribute and benefit.

The figure 1 on the next page illustrates the three primary relationships within the 'triangle of interest.' The main relationship between the social platform and streamers is characterised as a 'commercial partnership.' Social media platforms attract creative individuals to embark on their online careers by offering digital services and access to an online market. In return, the platform takes a share of streamers' revenue when they begin making a profit on the platform. These online services are free for streamers who have not yet started generating profits or are earning outside the platform. This

free-to-enter policy is a common industry practise in social media, as it encourages greater user engagement and participation, fostering content diversity and an interactive atmosphere that fuels momentum. In essence, social media platforms attract potential partnerships, allowing them to explore the platform's digital infrastructure and other online services. The platform subsequently begins collecting commissions from streamers who utilise monetizing channels on the platform, such as the live streaming function or Xingtou, which is an official agency for online commercial cooperation on Douyin. Additionally, the Douyin algorithm actively monitors and detects unlicensed advertisements on the platform, ensuring and enhancing its revenue.

Figure 1 Triangle of interest on Douyin



At the same time, streamers on the social platform have engaged with the platform to expending their influence and attract audiences from the digital creative market for higher commercial potential. Their relationship with fans can be described as 'collective consumption' because not every fan pays for the content, so paid fans are covering all the cost for the others in supporting the streamers' account sustains. Nevertheless, the unpaid fans contribute too, for example, an active online interaction in live rooms which contributes to higher popularity of the live room and bases for those payers' vanity. In fact, all the benefits the streamers gained from the platform, whether in monetary or non-monetary form, all collectively contribute to the streamers' account continuity on the platform. These gains of musicians, whether one-time payments, long-term digital assets, or career opportunities, are all joint contributions to the evaluation of musicians on their Douyin account. In some cases, the non-monetary advantages will compensate for the musicians' income expectation and still sustain their willingness to continue their online careers. In addition, the platform has played a positive role in helping establish tighter and longer-term fan relationships for a potential interest of the platform; for example, Douyin sets the rules for fan bands in live rooms, indicating fan's interaction frequency and donate rate in a visible icon before audiences' username.

Good-quality content and higher user engagement with streamers likely lead to a long-lasting or expanding user base for the social platform, ultimately increasing the platform's overall commercial potential. A larger user base is a valuable asset for any digital platform, as it represents a larger digital market and greater popularity, attracting new users, streamers, advertisers, and investors. While social platforms do

not create content directly for their users, they empower streamers to produce content that captivates and retains fans, benefiting both the platform and the streamers. Through a designed content feed system, platforms like Douyin tailor content to individual users based on their preferences, gradually introducing them to related content by analyzing user data collected over time. These personalised content selection and feeds are services provided by the platform, and users both utilise the platform's services and consume the creative content streamers offer. Interestingly, users tend to develop loyalty to the platform itself rather than specific streamers as their content preferences evolve over time, often following multiple accounts on Douyin. Consequently, the more streamers a user follows, the higher the likelihood that they become loyal to the platform. This is because the platform satisfies their expanding appetite for diverse creative content and offers quality selections from the digital creative market. In essence, loyal platform users are cultivated through the deepened use of platform services, characterised by personalised content feeds that cater to each user's unique preferences. One musician describes having a limited connection with her fans, as she has a fan base of over half a million followers on Douyin, but her fan group consists of only around six hundred people (Interview with musician XLX, 2022).

The user interface design of the Douyin platform has significantly contributed to barriers that delay or disrupt the discovery of specific bloggers' content. Douyin (and TikTok) was originally designed for a fast-paced video queueing system under several tags, including "recommended," "followed," "local" (which requires enabling geolocation), and more. These videos automatically play when the app is opened,

whether from the "recommended" list during the platform's rapid growth phase, or the "followed" list in the consolidation stage to engage existing fan bases. The "swipe up for more content" feature is consistent throughout this period. Unlike video platforms like YouTube, which provide a list of subscribed accounts on the user interface, Douyin does not offer quick access to followed streamers. The account names only appear under the tags when the streamers are actively live streaming on Douyin. Otherwise, fans must "swipe up" repeatedly until they find a specific idol's post, or they can search indirectly by typing the account name from the full list of followed accounts. These platform settings create gaps in digital accessibility and psychological disruptions between fans and their idols' content. Consequently, the platform's algorithm captures the attention of fans more effectively than individual streamers, although we cannot discount the determination of dedicated fans who persistently seek out targeted streamers.

Douyin has successfully captured the attention of fans through its individualised and intelligent content feed system, primarily exemplified by the "recommend" list of creative content. Douyin curates an endless queue of selected videos for each user based on a comprehensive understanding of their "user portrait." This user portrait is constructed through the collection of data from at least three sources. First, there is the basic individual background data, including age, gender, occupation, and location. This information allows the algorithm to identify collective interests among users with similar backgrounds. Second, personal content preferences are determined based on user behavior patterns, video-watching habits, interaction frequency, and feedback such as manually disliked content. This data refines the individualised content list to

improve the user experience. The third aspect involves cross-referencing similar communities to identify potential content that aligns with an individual's preferences. For instance, the algorithm may recommend videos liked by a user's friends or those with a similar "user portrait." This algorithm, coupled with user labeling and the individualised content feed mechanism, along with features like content analysis and branding systems, forms the core of the services Douyin provides to its users. These services encompass information gathering, content selection, and presentation. Douyin has expanded its users' content preferences by introducing a specific realm for longer videos, allowing for easy transition into landscape mode on mobile screens. This design not only enriches the experience for existing users but also competes with other social platforms specializing in long-form videos. Consequently, Douyin fosters user loyalty to the platform's collective creative content rather than individual streamers.

Fans play a substantial role in a streamer's success, even though their primary loyalty is to the platform itself. As discussed in the previous section, fans collectively support musicians by paying for their online content, and some devoted fans are willing to pay a premium for live performances. However, followers can assume other roles that are vital to musicians' online careers, including business collaborators, industry peers, talent scouts or agents, and journalists or researchers. Effectively leveraging these resources can lead to higher income, increased job opportunities, broader influence, and even a shift in career trajectory. Musicians commonly generate revenue outside the platform through private messages for offline collaborations. This often includes offline performances, private music lessons, and the sale of musical instruments.



Since these offline collaborations are privately arranged, Douyin does not take a commission from these deals, and the musician retains all the revenue. Many musicians emphasise the importance of the online network within the Douyin platform for their careers. This network provides easy contact and equal communication opportunities, especially with prominent figures who may open doors to valuable resources and industry collaborations.

#### 4.6.2 Positive or negative fan relationships?

Commercial offers on Douyin can be unreliable and even fraudulent, requiring musicians to be selective and rational in their responses to messages from strangers. Followers are free to send messages to streamers, and people may have different purposes and levels of willingness to engage in commercial cooperation. Some musicians indicated that they experience of receiving multiple commercial offers on Douyin but rarely closed a deal. Many of the people who send messages are non-professionals who may be unfamiliar with market prices and the cooperation procedure. Additionally, their willingness to cooperate can vary, and not all inquiries necessarily lead to a finalised deal. Some fans may inquire about cooperation and pricing out of curiosity, only to lose interest or have no commitment to follow through. This situation appears to be more common among internet celebrities with higher earnings and young female creators who are admired for their appearance. Initially attracted by the musicians' fame or beauty, fans may lose interest in the conversation over time. To address these concerns, one established musician emphasised the role of professional brokers in evaluating offers, balancing the needs of all stakeholders, and facilitating successful cooperation. Although Douyin's algorithm includes a

message filter to screen out apparent advertisements or spam messages, musicians often rely on their own judgment when assessing genuine commercial opportunities. Alternatively, musicians can utilise the official agent services on Douyin, known as Star Map.

Sometimes, an inappropriate response to fans may deteriorate fan relationships; some fans will be unfollowed; in other cases, fans turn to anti-fans<sup>18</sup> or hate fans. Fans who have not been satisfied as their expectations go higher following higher contributions to the musicians will become angry and behave inappropriately to their streamers, such as sending hate messages. Angry fans do not necessarily send their messages in a good manner, which will not lead to the positive feedback they wanted, thus a worsening relationship. Therefore, musicians have been preventing this condition than leaving it to happen. Most musicians have developed basic techniques for fan maintenance. Video bloggers will frequently reply to some of their fans under videos who comment, especially if that fans appear many times and require a reply. Those live streamers regularly check donation ranking, frequently name out the donators and send prompt verbal thankfulness, which will be helpful in preventing anti-fandom. However, hateful fans can be original without a proper reason who are not fandoms in the beginning, and anti-fans are common on Douyin like fandom-fans. Some users send private messages not for normal communication but in a provocative or sarcastic tone. The reasons for their misbehaviour can attribute to the wanton nature of speech

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<sup>18</sup> Anti-fandom refers to a group of individuals or users who actively dislike or oppose a particular musician or content creator. These individuals may engage in negative behavior, such as leaving hateful comments, spreading false information, or even organizing campaigns to discredit or harm the artist's reputation. Anti-fandom can be a source of stress and emotional burden for musicians, as it can lead to online harassment and cyberbullying.

on social media, where most pranks are with no consequences. Musicians facing unwanted private messages, musicians may leave the message alone or blacklist those followers or entirely turn off the message function; otherwise, to be responsive but a smart way,

I'll reply sarcastically that it's difficult for them to reply when they look at it.

You're stupid if you reply something back to them a bit mean. And then, if they posted on Weibo or something, it just makes you look bad. You know, people do that like. A bad message is like a trap and tries to trap you. But if you post comments like that, what can they do? (Interview with musicians Julian, 2022)

Some musicians receive sexual harassment-like messages on Douyin, especially those females. Musicians' performance online has some blurred areas with sexual performance online, especially in live streaming when female musicians encourage donation through verbal flirting or playful punishment such as dancing sexily. Although controversially, many believe females have more advantages in live streaming, especially those women with good appearances who are more attractive to online public. This may be true. Even though female musicians do not necessarily choose to involve in the blurred area of sexual performance, they may take advantage of being female who is good looking, being higher relational and talkative with their fans, with higher social tolerance for 'low esteem' when asking for donations etc. Although not in all cases, the characteristics of female musicians probably contribute to a closer fan relationship and higher income, which females themselves realise. Speaking from human nature, a closer relationship, whether in friendship or ambiguity, will potentially contribute to a higher willingness to help each other in emotions and other ways, such

as money. Speaking for the market economics, live streamers on Douyin have provided their fans with an emotional value and an exchange for monetary value in the live room for vanish and interpersonal relationships for intimacy. That is the internal logic of why some live streamers receive the higher premium paid by their fans.

In some situations, anti-fandoms are welcomed and used by Douyin musicians to boost their exposure online. One of the secrets is that anti-fans may trigger an online debate, thus a 'crowd effect' where more users are staying and watching the development of a quarrel-like situation. This has become an unsealed marketing trick on social platforms, but it still works quite well. The intense discussions will trigger more passages' participation, not only those passages but also those fans who tend to defence their idols. Therefore, this kind of accident event leads to a sudden increase in accounts' flows and public exposure of the content because the algorithm has scored the content higher due to its rocket online interaction and viewers. The moderate use of anti-fandom will bring another benefit for musicians in fan consolidation. Sometimes an external conflict can condense the strength of the whole fan base for being in the same position in defence of the same idol. Meanwhile, musicians will gain more fan loyalty when they show partiality to the fans against anti-fans. One musician discloses his technique in taking advantage of anti-fandom in the live room, that is, to develop the controversial topics proposed by anti-fans, occasionally attacking those anti-fandoms politely to make fans happy, and do not attack to drive anti-fans away. The subtle balance is carried out by technical live streamers between fans and anti-fans to continue the debate for longer to lead to a stable high flow in the live room. However, a real fierce quarrel will probably lead to a

negative outcome; for example, many online complaints will lead to a temporary shutdown of the live room, driving all the audiences away.

A positive fan relationship has a positive impact on musicians' emotional fulfillment, which serves as one of the main motivations for them to continue managing their accounts, even during challenging times. Some loyal fans have transitioned from online connections to real-life friendships, especially those who live in close proximity to the musicians. In such cases, social media platforms like Douyin function more as tools for interpersonal socialization. Musicians also highlight other heartwarming moments on Douyin, such as fans volunteering to support them, offering assistance during difficult times, and expressing love and comfort through music. For prominent figures, fame on social media has elevated their social status and reputation, boosting their confidence in both their careers and income. For those who may not be as famous, the emotional bonds formed with their fan base serve as a source of moral support, enabling them to persist in their online careers. Many musicians derive a sense of accomplishment from being recognised and appreciated by their fans or customers for their contributions. This recognition extends to both public and personal interests, such as their role in popularizing rare music or instruments that were struggling in the market. In summary, despite being highly commercialised, social platforms like Douyin still retain their intrinsic value as social media by fostering human communication and relationships.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the changing working and living conditions of musicians, particularly *wanghong* musicians, since they embarked on their digital careers on Douyin. Music professionals have turned to popular social media platforms to develop their online careers and generate additional income. However, this commercialised platform has also attracted other newcomers such as music enthusiasts and music business owners to the digital music market, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when more individuals and organisations sought for additional income sources. These music streamers have developed strategies to align with the platform's algorithm-driven atmosphere, adapting to the platform atmosphere that encourages fast, entertaining, and creative content. The Douyin algorithm is complex and filled with unknown and unpredictable factors, making individual efforts alone insufficient to guarantee online popularity. While most digital streamers have attempted to understand the Douyin algorithm's rules, many have failed to devise effective and positive responses. Consequently, online streamers have had to adjust their mindsets from ambitious aspirations to a more liberated approach when seeking digital popularity and career success on Douyin.

Douyin, like other social platforms, offers free music access to the digital public, while musicians' income may depend on paid fans using online services or donating in live performances. Therefore, gaining a broader market exposure to increase their fan base and securing a group of paying audiences is crucial for musicians to monetise their efforts on Douyin. Some musicians may feel ambivalence or guilt when receiving higher donations or payments than expected, particularly when fans engage in online

competitions to support their favorite musicians financially. Despite having loyal fans who provide emotional, financial, or attention-based support for their digital careers, musicians also faced non-fans who can significantly impact musicians' accounts but not necessarily with a good purpose. Consequently, digital musicians must learn to manage public relations effectively to avoid harm, prevent significant negative consequences, or gain advantages for their digital accounts. Maintaining favourable fan relationships for sustainable digital career development and staying attuned to online public has been essential skills for today's digital labourers on various social platforms.

Digital content creators, such as online musicians, navigate with heightened caution within the commercial social platforms like Douyin. They have strived with intense competition resulting from the increasing number of practitioners in the online field and adapted to a market that prioritises creative ways of presenting music than quality. Professional musicians must find their arena to monetise their content on Douyin, otherwise, their free labour and music posts on Douyin yield little economic returns, despite the various available commercial channels online. Furthermore, the quality of fan relationships becomes increasingly critical for digital musicians in generating income, but this dynamic often gives rise to nuanced interpersonal relationships, with musicians sometimes confronting ambivalence in consuming their fans' loyalty. In addition, musicians may encounter negative experiences from the digital public, including harassment, hate comments, or complaints that can restrict their account performance. In rare cases, a *wanghong* streamer's digital account can be abruptly shut down due to offenses against public interest or political reasons, leading to an

abrupt end to their digital career. To conclude, while digital platforms have empowered some professionals or music practitioners to excel in their field through creativity and effective management of their digital accounts, the career situation remains marked by instability and precarity. For most musicians, being *wanghong* musicians on Douyin represents an opportunistic for potential rather than a long-term career choice.

## **Chapter 5: Being Entrepreneurial Streamers on Douyin: Change for A Chance**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Social media platforms have nurtured digital creative markets by offering online spaces for independent workers and freelancers to communicate and collaborate (Merkel, 2019). Within these platforms, various online groups and clusters form, enabling different actors to encounter and interact (Grabher et al., 2008), fostering a participatory culture that encourages user engagement (Burgess, 2013). Social media platforms also provide multiple channels for users to monetise their online work, including advertising and fan donations, especially on highly commercialised platforms like Douyin. In the digital market of social media, users often play the role of 'prosumers,' (p.10) combining production and consumption, as they invest their spare time in creating content while consuming the work of others (García-Galera and Valdivia, 2014). Digital platforms have thus created a social network where various actors, both human and non-human, interact collectively, as discussed by Latour (2007) in his broader exploration of networks, fostering an environment conducive to cultural entrepreneurship.



Social media has attracted entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds to launch online businesses. Significant events like a pandemic or an economic crisis can accelerate this trend as unemployment and low-income drive people to seek alternative sources of income (Bataille et al., 2020). Social media serves as an alternative working space during challenging times, fostering a labour relationship marked by self-employment, especially in the online creative market where co-working but self-employed individuals are prevalent (Banks and Humphreys, 2008). Hess and von Walter (2007) noted that social media mediate between producers, consumers, and the platform while creating value for all parties, unlike traditional media where elites produce and curate content for the masses. This shift has democratised content production, allowing a broader public on social media to share the online market previously dominated by authoritative organizations (Loader and Mercea, 2012). Furthermore, with sophisticated algorithms facilitating personalised content distribution, social media has enabled many media entrepreneurs to gain internet celebrity status through rapidly growing online fan bases (Burgess and Green, 2009, Zhao, 2021).

This chapter explores the entrepreneurial aspects of creative workers on Douyin, particularly focusing on musicians. Musicians' entrepreneurialism encompasses their mindset and practises aimed at achieving career advancement and economic gains online. However, not all musicians exhibit entrepreneurial tendencies; while some actively work towards income and career development, others may have less motivation in these areas. This chapter delves into the differences between musicians' entrepreneurialism and their musician's identity. Entrepreneurialism emphasises efficient efforts for higher returns, and the musicians identity underscoring career

survival and professional duty. This chapter begins by discussing the necessity for musicians to adopt entrepreneurial approaches, though categorising musicians into four types regarding to their current economic and career situations (section 5.2). It then explores entrepreneurialism by examining musicians' practises and their engagement with the platform, digital market, and online network (section 5.3). Thirdly, section 5.4 will highlight specific income patterns among musicians on Douyin, showing that most musicians earn supplementary income, while a smaller percentage earn above-average incomes. Section 5.5 further classifies *wanghong* musicians into three social groups based on their professional and economic competence, taking into account their long-term personal development. It highlights the potential for *wanghong* streamers to improve their social and economic status, despite facing challenges related to sustainability and social mobility instability.

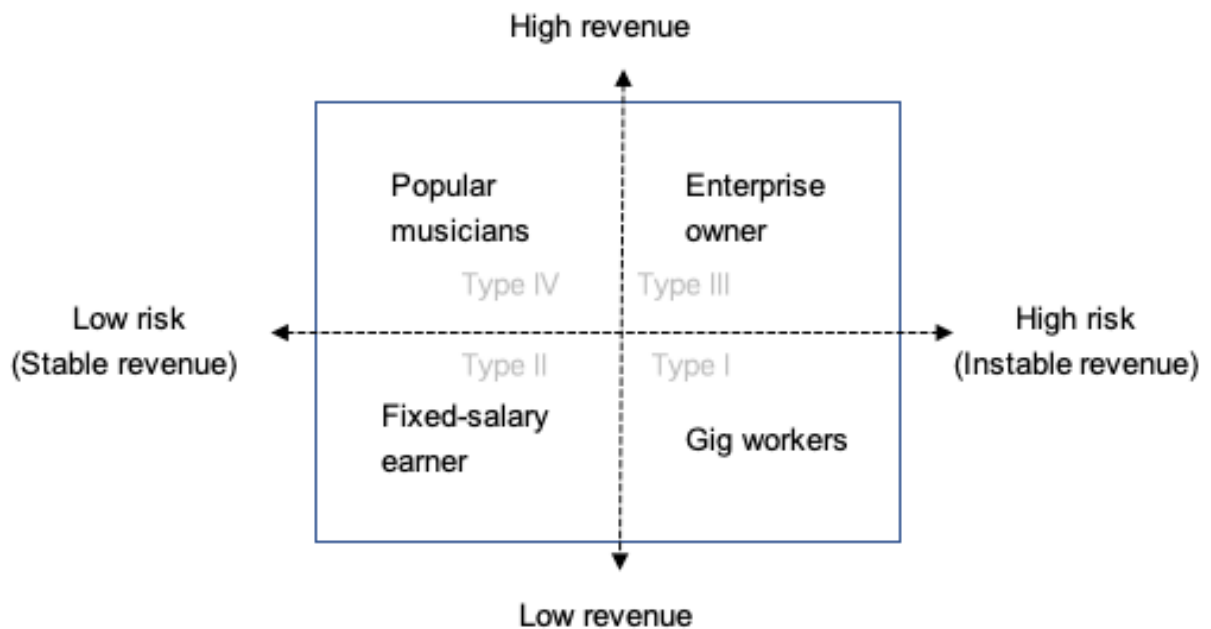
## **5.2 A rationale for musicians' entrepreneurship**

The section outlined a rationale for musicians' entrepreneurship in their online careers. It will discuss the objective factors associated with musicians' career situations and the subjective factors linked to their willingness, all of which play a role in shaping their entrepreneurship on the social platform. This section primarily categorised musicians into four groups, highlighting potential similarities in their career backgrounds and economic statuses. Examining musicians' career trajectories is essential for understanding their revenue structures, income levels, and overall financial situations.

### **5.2.1 A category of music streamer on Douyin**

Based on the primary sources of income that music streamers relied on before joining the Douyin platform, we can categorise them into four distinct types: full-time gig workers, fixed salary earners, enterprise owners, and established musicians. These four categories of Douyin account holders can be represented in a matrix that considers two key factors: 'level of revenue' and 'risk of revenue,' as depicted in the Figure 2 provided below. This classification, grounded in their income portfolios and career status, enables us to analyse the parameters used to categorise streamers and identify common characteristics among them.

Figure 2 Four musician types by their revenue streams



It is important to note that not all individuals within these categories strictly fit the definition of streamer types, and there may be some variation within each category. This categorization of music streamers on Douyin is more a reflection of the author's opinions as an interviewer for the thirty streamers evaluating income through economic concepts such as ownership, assets, and gig work versus non-assets. The specificity of each category is based more on experience than a rigid process, through referencing to the available information and indication from interviewing individuals. The aim of this categorization is to offer a comprehensive overview of the diverse backgrounds of streamers in relation to their careers, acknowledging the inherent ambiguity stemming from the unstable income and career statuses of creative workers, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Furthermore, it's worth noting that there may be some contention regarding the term "musicians," which is frequently used in the following sections. Music streamers on Douyin do not necessarily fit the conventional definition of musicians that a music professional. Instead, when I refer to "musicians," I refer to the various digital streamers on Douyin that feature music-related activities and highly related music content.

### 1) Type I: Gig Workers

Gig workers typically encompass freelancers, independent, or self-employed musicians whose primary income depends on various job opportunities. This category may include emerging talents in the early stages of their careers, individuals content with their current income and work arrangements, or even more mature musicians who may have limited alternatives for other professions. Full-time independent musicians within this group strongly identify themselves as music practitioners or

musicians. For them, expectations from a social platform like Douyin primarily revolve around boosting their music careers. This implies that they seek work opportunities and income to sustain and enhance their existing identities as musicians.

These musicians may not be overly selective when it comes to job opportunities, particularly if they are less recognised and earning lower incomes. They are often eager to access a broader market or maintain busy schedules to secure higher income and ensure career stability. Regardless of their specific career circumstances, these musicians have chosen the path of full-time musicians as a means of making a living through music. Some among them face challenges but persist in their musical careers due to various reasons, including their passion for music, the pursuit of work-life balance, unwavering commitment to their career choices, or limited alternative career options.

## 2) Type II: Fixed-Salary Owners

Fixed-salary owners are individuals who work part-time as musicians while concurrently maintaining another stable career, whether related or unrelated to music. These part-time musicians face relatively lower revenue risk compared to those dependent on unpredictable gig work, as their primary employment provides a consistent and steady income. Many practitioners in the music industry choose to pursue part-time roles as musicians due to various factors, including the impact of the pandemic, financial considerations, and personal preferences.

Around half of the interviewees fell into the category of fixed-salary owners, serving as employees in different industries while also engaging in online music activities. Part-time musicians in this group often exhibit a lower sense of self-identity as musicians and may be less motivated to prioritise the advancement of their music careers over seeking additional income from the social platform. These music enthusiasts effectively balance their time and energy between their primary careers and online endeavors, optimizing for the best possible outcomes in terms of income, energy expenditure, and career progression. For many of them, their online music career serves as a secondary income stream, especially during the pandemic, or represents an opportunity to supplement their earnings. It is relatively rare for these part-timers to transition into full-time musicians on Douyin, and such a shift typically hinges on exceptional account performance or strong personal motivation. It's worth noting that only one interviewee decided to transfer her well-paying regular job and pursue a full-time music career on Douyin,

My previous monthly pay is between 30,000 and 40,000 RMB [around £3614-£4819 in GBP], which is an entry-level of this field. This income is a benchmark and my standard of income, and I am sure that if I work on my Douyin account full-time, I do not want to earn less than this. And then obviously, the earnings from Douyin are much more than the previous work, so I transfer to Douyin full-time. (Interview with musicians AAWA, 2022)

### 3) Type III: Enterprise Owners

Music enterprises on Douyin can take various forms. They can be established by renowned musicians or artists' studios, offering unique collaboration opportunities with

these musicians themselves. Alternatively, music enterprises may be founded and managed by successful music enthusiasts who have also established themselves as entrepreneurs in other fields. In general, enterprise owners typically enjoy a more favourable financial position compared to other individuals in the music industry. Despite facing challenges during the pandemic, they have managed to sustain their enterprises by tapping into their savings and leveraging resources available within the music industry, including online opportunities.

Based on the interview results, most music enterprise owners are middle-aged individuals who have previously worked as music professionals. Over the years, they have amassed valuable music-related resources, including financial assets, industry connections, experience, and a deep understanding of the music sector. Enterprise owners often strike a balance between their identities as musicians and businessmen. They may have varying degrees of emphasis on their pursuit of artistic expression versus commercial success. However, their ambition for profitability tends to be prominent, even if their primary goal is not solely monetary gain but also involves enhancing their market presence. Some musicians in this category acknowledge that profitability is crucial for music enterprises operating on Douyin, even though these firms may also prioritise goals like music promotion and maintaining high-quality standards.

If we're talking about income coming from several social platforms, Douyin is the primary source. Viewers often make online donations in my live streams, which can generate around twenty to thirty thousand a month [equal to GBP £2500 to £3600] from this online income. However, I use most of this income

for marketing, giveaways, or providing benefits to my fans. In fact, I might not have enough left for advertising after allocating most of it to these purposes. So, I need to find other ways to generate income. For instance, I might offer courses where people can learn certain skills, and I also have some fans who buy things like tea, flowers, or musical instruments during my broadcasts.

(Interview with musicians CWY, 2022)

#### 4) Type IV: Established Musicians

Established musicians are able to sustain their careers and income primarily through their popularity, as their strong reputation within the music industry attracts lucrative cooperation opportunities. These musicians have diversified revenue streams, including earnings from copyright, offline advertising, commercial performances, concert tours, and more. While they constitute the smallest group among musicians on Douyin, they command the highest pay, especially when they enjoy significant popularity. The careers of established musicians are characterised by greater stability, largely owing to their enduring popularity and high public profile in the music industry. While they could be considered a form of "full-time gig workers," they do not receive fixed salaries. Instead, their income is derived from flexible cooperation arrangements. Even if their popularity wanes to some extent, they often maintain a lasting influence among their peers over several decades, and their public recognition continues to contribute to their income. One established musician indicates his expectations from Douyin,

My monthly income, copyright royalty, and usual performances are impressive. I have been living a well-off life and have always been quite



satisfied... Douyin platform is firstly a way to pass boredom, whereas the best benefit this platform provides is the affordance to communicate directly with a group of people who like your music. People cannot find me as I do not post any Weibo and other things, so I show up live on Douyin as a reminder for others and make way for communication. I reply to all my private messages by myself, as many people send me private messages after my live show. I never let my assistant do it for me, and I reply one by one and many times till midnight. (Interview with musician XYT, 2022)

As the quotation indicated, these prominent musicians, with large and dedicated fan bases, typically maintain a strong self-identity as musicians. They engage in online activities to solidify their fan base and enhance their market visibility, which serves as the foundation for their long-term income. It's important to note that, for established musicians, generating income from the social platform is not their primary motivation. Instead, their main goal is to sustain and potentially enhance their popularity. Financial income is likely less of a concern for these superstars, as their primary income sources remain rooted in offline activities within the music industry.

While the matrix outlines four distinct revenue types, musicians often engage in a combination of these in their real-life practises. Gig work is the most flexible type, allowing for additional income opportunities without strict time or location constraints, making it particularly attractive to part-timers. For instance, many individuals who work full-time during the day spend their spare time as part-time musicians on Douyin. Despite the four musician types, there are some blurred boundaries between the

different revenue categories. In this context, I prioritise musicians' public recognition over their ownership of firms, as a musician's popularity within the industry is their primary source of revenue. Music enterprises may be seen as extensions of the careers of superstars, enhancing and securing the competitiveness of their companies. I classify live streamers as full-time gig workers, given that their income fluctuates and relies on fan donations, distinguishing them from fixed-salary owners, even though both groups work full-time.

It's important to recognise that certain specific circumstances can influence musicians' choices regarding income types on Douyin. One such circumstance is a disadvantaged financial condition, often significantly below the average, and it's not limited to just one musician; several individuals in this category find themselves in significant debt. For instance, a grassroots musician began his Douyin account during a financial crisis and opted to focus on live streaming on Douyin, as it offers the potential for the highest income. Live streaming functions on Douyin provide a combination of advantages from two revenue types: immediate income from online gig work and the possibility of high earnings from fans' premium payments<sup>19</sup>. However, other monetization channels, such as advertising, typically become accessible only after accumulating a large fan base. This demonstrates that musicians' financial conditions can closely influence their career choices and income expectations, all of

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<sup>19</sup> Douyin does not set a ceiling for fan donations to live streamers during live streaming services. There is a possibility that the audience pays a fee or makes a financial contribution to access special benefits or content during a live stream or on an ongoing basis. This income can sometimes be higher than what musicians can expect to earn from a fixed price for a music performance. However, musicians may sometimes be underpaid for their online performances, as live streaming on Douyin does not require a minimum payment for accessing the content in real-time.

which contribute to shaping their entrepreneurial spirit, encompassing their ambitions, self-motivation, and determination to improve the performance of their digital accounts.

In summary, most musicians on Douyin are driven by the pursuit of direct income or career potential. These core values form the basis for their entrepreneurial spirit online, as they see the platform as an avenue to potentially reap rewards by investing their energy or capital. Beyond the motivations arising from their work situations, several other factors come into play as musicians deepen their engagement with the Douyin platform. These factors include their assessment of their position in the Douyin market, their performance on their online accounts, and their ability to strike a balance between work and personal life. These evaluations collectively shape musicians' expectations regarding their online careers, consequently influencing the form of entrepreneurship they adopt, including their attitudes, ambitions, and actions concerning their music careers. In the following sections, I will delve into how musicians navigate the trade-offs between their expectations and the reality they encounter on Douyin.

### 5.2.3 Musicians' trade-offs for a more sensible entrepreneurship

The digital creative market on social media may differ from the offline market, and musicians can only determine their actual market potential through their experiences on Douyin. While established artists often maintain high popularity, it's not uncommon for ordinary individuals to achieve even greater popularity on Douyin. Some musicians are pleasantly surprised by their online success, surpassing their offline expectations, while others may feel disappointed when they do not gain the popularity they

anticipated. For instance, one of the grassroots female musicians I interviewed has over three million fans on Douyin, which is three times more than a superstar in the field (Interview NCFJ, 2022). This illustrates the need for everyone to reassess their position on Douyin and adopt a "mentality of zero," as mentioned by Musician TL during the interview. In other words, individuals must be prepared to re-evaluate themselves and potentially start from scratch in the competitive Douyin market. As a result, musicians often reorient their expectations on Douyin, and these expectations may shift depending on their account's performance. Some musicians may overestimate their account's performance due to their confidence in their musical skills, only to find that the reality is quite different. Conversely, some may underestimate their potential and later discover untapped opportunities.

Fulfilling musicians' expectations can lead to a stronger commitment to the Douyin platform but falling short of these expectations does not necessarily result in reduced commitment. Musicians often continue to work diligently on their Douyin accounts, even when they express frustration about the perceived lack of fairness in returns compared to their efforts. There are several reasons why musicians persist in their efforts on Douyin. Firstly, the music industry on Douyin offers the possibility of high returns at a relatively low cost through online video posting and live streaming. Douyin allows ordinary individuals to achieve overnight popularity and potentially earn a substantial income, which motivates streamers to continue trying for success. In contrast to the offline music market, which is dominated by major agencies and established superstars, Douyin represents a valuable platform for many musicians who aspire to pursue and advance their music careers. Given the widespread

popularity of Douyin, there's less reason for musicians to abandon it in search of alternative platforms. Secondly, most musicians received various benefits from Douyin, including income, work opportunities, and increased exposure in the market. As a result, many musicians opt to maintain their presence on Douyin despite not always meeting their initial expectations. Some musicians also cite personal and spiritual reasons for persevering, such as their commitment to advancing their online careers and personal development.

Musicians have made trade-offs between the energy they invest and the interest or output they receive after evaluating their career potential and account performance on Douyin. Some musicians may have encountered limitations in their popularity on Douyin, experiencing less favourable results despite their efforts, leading to a sense of helplessness in achieving further improvements. Additionally, with the post-pandemic era bringing back more offline opportunities, the importance of online work has diminished for some musicians. Consequently, making trade-offs has become necessary due to limited energy and resources. Musicians have adjusted their allocation of energy and investment with varying emphasis on their online and offline pursuits, aiming to maximise their income or advance their careers. Those with dual careers often make such trade-offs and continually reassess their market value and career potential, making decisions accordingly. Full-time Douyin musicians typically earn high incomes, while many musicians engage in complementary careers alongside their online accounts. This arrangement implies that Douyin accounts often serve as a secondary career to supplement their income.

After becoming online musicians on Douyin, musicians often find themselves making trade-offs between their lifestyles and the work interests they receive on the platform. This is particularly true for full-time live streamers, who may experience significant lifestyle changes, especially during the pandemic when they are working long hours on Douyin. Full-time live streamers often have demanding and intensive workloads, which can lead to exhaustion, concerns about their overall lifestyle, and a struggle with their career choices. Many of them adopt intense and stimulating working styles to maintain audience engagement, involving long hours of live performances and active interactions to keep their viewers entertained. Balancing work and personal life become challenging for these full-time live streamers. For instance, single musicians may experience health issues (Interview with musicians Lynn, NCG, CWY, 2022), while married individuals may feel guilty about neglecting family responsibilities (Interview with musicians NCFJ, 2022). As a result, musicians frequently reevaluate their career situations, adjust their energy allocation, and occasionally take breaks from their online careers as needed. The prevailing attitude among musicians towards live streaming on Douyin is often one of "continuing to see where things go" before making a final decision. Despite the toll on their health and lifestyles, many musicians endure these challenges in the pursuit of maximizing their earnings while they are still popular on Douyin. They recognise the fast-changing nature of audience preferences and trends on the platform, and they are aware that long-term popularity is uncertain.

Musicians' self-identity is another field that musicians should evaluate when making a trade-off between compliance with the platform rules and loyalty to themselves. Musicians sometimes are ambivalent about whether to follow the platforms' indication

or their self-willingness. Complying with the platform rules usually leads to higher popularity in the digital market on Douyin, whereas the persistence of musicians' wills may not always bring a positive result. Douyin algorithm is representative of the market tastes, indicating users' preferences for creative work, which requires the adoption of musicians' work. For example, professional musicians who value aesthetic value and produce complete music work may have a small market niche; in contrast, those music amateurs who present their music in short for easy consumption on Douyin may have gained more popularity. Douyin algorithm is also a presentation of the platform interest, encouraging musicians to comply with it for a mutual benefit between streamers and Douyin. For example, Douyin encourages musicians to actively participate in online activities, which may be advertising for the commercial partners of the platform, so musicians' active responses in their creative work will probably lead to higher online traffic. In this sense, musicians should evaluate their level of adopting their music to the Douyin market and make decisions for a balance between the aesthetic values of the music and the market values of Douyin.

The attitudes of musicians are also influenced by the patterns of development in their Douyin accounts. Some may experience rapid fame and overnight success, while others gradually accumulate fans over time. Some maintain high levels of traffic for a period, while others struggle to regain that level of popularity. Interviewees express a range of opinions about online popularity. Some may take it for granted, requiring minimal effort to enjoy its benefits. Others may remain indifferent, seeing little difference in becoming popular on Douyin (Interview with musicians CZY, 2022). Some musicians may find themselves caught between hope and disappointment, as

they aspire to gain online popularity but have yet to achieve it (Interview with musicians WTDG). In the end, musicians must move past feelings of discontent, complaints, and helplessness related to the platform's rules. They often choose to continue their online careers on Douyin with a sense of gratitude, adaptability, and a mindset that embraces the element of chance that Douyin brings to their music careers.

Understanding the origins of musicians' ambitions and fluctuations in motivation is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of why some musicians may feel ambitious or hesitate to embrace entrepreneurship. This background information sets the stage for exploring musicians' entrepreneurial practises in real-life situations in the next section.

### **5.3 A practise of digital entrepreneurship on Douyin**

Entrepreneurism involves initiating small businesses not solely for profit but also for making an impact on society through economic activities, as highlighted by Kao et al. (2002). However, most creative workers who engage with Douyin do so without a well-defined business plan or a strong commitment to contributing to society. Many musicians operate independently on Douyin and only discover their market potential when they gain popularity on the platform. In this context, creative workers on Douyin tend to cultivate their entrepreneurship organically through their practise, with personal interests often taking precedence over public values. In contrast to offline public institutions that work collaboratively and are expected by society to assume social responsibilities, internet individuals face less scrutiny regarding profit-seeking or



personal interests. Consequently, individual content creators on social platforms like Douyin have greater freedom to pursue personal benefits without being overly concerned about ethical market practises and moral issues. For instance, if imitating another user's work can attract more online traffic, many content creators may do so without worrying about plagiarism or copyright concerns. In this way, the entrepreneurship of internet content creators tends to lean more towards individualism compared to the more structured and socially oriented forms of entrepreneurship.

A short video platform like Douyin fosters entrepreneurship that aligns with the platform's market dynamics. While most musicians on Douyin primarily engage in entrepreneurship for personal gain, they inevitably contribute to a diverse creative market by offering innovative content on social media. Short video social media platforms like Douyin featured rapidly circulating information rather than more in-depth content consumption. This platform characteristic encourages audiences to prioritise breadth over depth of information, favoring quick circulation and refreshing content. Consequently, quick content turnover and eye-catching material have become defining traits of the Douyin market. Within this digital market on Douyin, creators' innovative ideas and creative expressions have become valuable assets for many online musicians. These attributes complement traditional aspects of music work, such as artistic value, musical quality, and niche appeal (Nixon, 2006). For instance, competitive content creators must continuously innovate and pioneer new trends in the market before others start imitating their content patterns. Additionally, they must be keen, adaptable, and responsive to market trends to stand out amid the online competition. Indeed, Douyin's platform dynamics incentivise musicians to utilise their

creativity and innovation as valuable assets, thereby making these qualities essential for their success in the dynamic and ever-evolving digital market. Given that musicians' entrepreneurship on Douyin tends to be motivated by individualistic goals and active engagement in their practise to yield career benefits, the following three sub-sections will illustrate musicians' entrepreneurial practises on Douyin in real-world scenarios.

### 5.3.1 Clear awareness of platform rules and boundaries

Most musicians join Douyin by simply creating an account and initiating their content posting, benefitting from the platform's algorithm feed system, which offers automatic exposure to their creative works (Natalie and Caroline, 2020). Starting a music enterprise on Douyin is a relatively straightforward process, requiring minimal upfront monetary investment but relying more on non-monetary contributions from musicians, such as their engagement, creativity, and account management strategies, in addition to the quality of their creative content (Natalie and Caroline, 2020). The success of creative content on Douyin is not solely contingent on the use of expensive or professional recording technology. In many cases, creative videos shot with basic recording equipment, such as mobile phones, can gain popularity. Likewise, music videos produced by professional teams do not always guarantee better results. Some online musicians have achieved high levels of success by recording music independently with basic equipment, surpassing the performance of other professionals on Douyin. One example from an interviewed musician involves her initial success on Douyin, where she gained popularity by creating videos using a mobile phone to showcase herself singing at a street stall. She continued to attract a

larger online audience when she began live streaming using the same mobile phone, without the use of professional music equipment. The reason for this success may be attributed to factors beyond the music quality, such as her way of presentation, which appealed to the digital audience. Given this context, even musicians with limited financial resources can establish their music enterprises on Douyin without incurring significant costs.

Douyin requires musicians to agree to certain conditions as a precondition before they can join the platform. One significant precondition is related to copyright, where musicians must agree to allow their uploaded work to be freely used and shared on the platform by other users, whether it is copyrighted or not (Douyin, 2020). These copyright agreements come with an unspoken clause that implies acceptance of their work being freely used or even infringed upon by other users on Douyin. In fact, at least one-third of the music content on the platform is not properly attributed to its original musicians, and proper credit is often not given (Kaye et al., 2020). Even when musicians are correctly credited, a wider dissemination of their work on Douyin does not necessarily guarantee an increase in their online traffic. The extensive imitation of content on Douyin makes it challenging to recognise and trace the original creators. Another important precondition concerns the revenue and commission rate, which musicians must accept as set by the platform before they can start earning from it. For instance, the commission rate for live streaming on Douyin is typically a 50:50 split, meaning that the platform takes a 50% cut from every fan's donation in a live performance venue (live room), according to interviewees. Similarly, the rate for the official music copyright agency on Douyin, known as "*chi re xing he*," follows a 50:50

split (Douyin, 2022). There is also a 30:70 ratio of revenue sharing between the platform and streamers for the official music agency in advertising, although this rate may change over time (Douyin, 2022).

Musicians need to strategize to find the best monetization methods for their Douyin accounts to maximise their income while avoiding any potential consequences from the platform. Despite concerns about losing some music loyalty, many musicians have seen an increase in their income through monetizing their creative works on Douyin. The platform offers various ways for musicians to generate income, both within and outside the platform. While it may be assumed that offline income would surpass online income since Douyin does not take commissions from musicians, this is not always the case. Musicians may actually earn more through live performances on Douyin compared to offline gigs. This is because Douyin has cultivated an atmosphere of participation, recreation, and interactivity, resulting in more fan donations to musicians in the boundary-less online public venue. Additionally, Douyin encourages online consumption by acting as an intermediary between streamers and buyers, ensuring a more secure e-commerce experience. This includes guarantees for both the selling and after-sales services, benefiting both streamers and customers. The platform has taken measures to prevent unlicensed advertising or selling on the platform, which could lead to penalties or account suspension for violators. Given these considerations and platform restrictions, musician enterprises must carefully plan their income strategies on Douyin to ensure sustainability and avoid any undesirable consequences imposed by the platform.

In summary, musicians' approaches to monetization are diverse and localised, depending on their account's situation and the characteristics of their target market. Musicians often explore various monetization methods to maximise their income potential. The choice of monetization methods can significantly impact musicians' incomes, and this impact can vary even for the same musician. Market value depends on a variety of factors, including account types, service types and availability, market demand, the size of the market base, and the targeted customer base, rather than just the popularity of musicians and their accounts. Market value is intricately connected to musicians' income, and musicians need to carefully consider these factors if they aim for higher earnings. Many musicians develop combinations of income streams by identifying market needs, assessing their available resources, honing their operational skills, and balancing their willingness to optimise their earnings both online and offline. This process is dynamic and can change based on the current situation and popularity of their accounts. One interview stated his transformation of major monetising ways,

Initially, I offered an online class as many fans were inquiring about how to learn it [a type of music instrument] ...I offer dozens of lessons for one year for about 5000 RMB (less than £500) per person. I got about 100 students, but some withdrew later as they did not want to learn anymore, so I was tried and eventually earned little...I was thinking about selling the instrument as many are enquiry about the music instrument too. So, I come to another city to learn hand-making the instrument for the sake of gaining a first-hand source of the products (and a higher profit). (Interview with musician EBHL, 2022)

This example of selling music instruments is a common strategy among musicians that can generate quick, easy, and substantial income, especially when the musician is skilled and has a large fan base. However, this strategy tends to work better with lower-cost musical instruments, as customers often prefer to purchase expensive items in person rather than online.

Understanding how to avoid punishment on the platform is just as crucial as designing an effective profit mechanism for musicians. Violating Douyin's platform rules can result in economic losses and potentially disastrous consequences for musicians' accounts, typically, restrained online traffic or a permanent shutdown of the digital account. As the creator of the online digital market, Douyin bears the responsibility of regulating the market to safeguard its own economic interests. One common reason for accounts being banned is engaging in advertising or generating income privately without compensating the platform. To protect its interests, Douyin employs automatic algorithms to detect sensitive keywords like 'selling' and 'money,' which could indicate potential unlicensed business activities on the platform. The platform algorithms are also competent in identifying and penalizing digital accounts that resort to hacker technology to artificially boost their fan base or online traffic statistics. Another issue is the detection of potentially false product descriptions, particularly exaggerated claims about the functions of health-related products. However, some streamers interviewed have reported being mistakenly identified as a violation due to the platform's sensitive automated detection system. Consequently, many streamers on Douyin have adopted alternative words, including misspellings and indirect expressions, to avoid wrongful punishment and associated financial losses.

Social media platforms are not immune to legal and political censorship of digital accounts and content. Douyin, in particular, employs its algorithm to fulfill governmental functions in the interest of the nation and the ruling party, including the censorship of illegal activities and content that contradicts the party's ideology (Keane, 2016). Douyin has faced significant social criticism for issues like misinformation, privacy concerns, and content-related problems. Consequently, the platform has focused on improving its environment by implementing algorithms to filter out content that poses legal risks (Wang, 2020). In the music industry, copyright disputes have been mitigated through users' agreement to allow free copyright use on Douyin. However, copying or lifting content from other users' accounts is discouraged by Douyin, as it can undermine the diversity of creative content on the platform and may be considered infringement. According to one informant, the Douyin system designates the first-uploaded video as the copyrighted work on the platform. Any subsequent videos that replicate this content are seen as duplicates and are at a disadvantage in terms of traffic flow. Such duplications do not pass the content filter on Douyin and are classified as copyright infringements within the system (Interview with musician AAWA, 2022). As a result, musicians must learn from such experiences to protect their work before their initial exposure on Douyin.

Being sensitive to political issues is another skill for streamers who post on social platforms like Douyin, including musicians. Content censorship for political reasons is common on social media, especially during the pandemic when the Chinese government restricted the spread of panic and indignation posted online against social

stability (Wang, 2020). Under this logic, creative content involves any sensitive information in the form of descriptions, transcription, or pictures that will be detected and processed, either being banned or out of public reach. Therefore, users on Douyin who want to express something sensitive have taken an obscure way, whether in metaphor or indicative, to avoid being censored. Though there are human censors that judge the content manually in person, musicians have other ways to escape. For example, one musician posts a short music piece from *Les Misérables* to accuse the social tragedy that happened during the pandemic, in which expression is obscure and less likely to be detected. The censorship may be over religion, too, especially related to commercial activities. One musician takes a church prayer as background music but does not get passed on to Douyin due to 'religious issues' shown on the system (Interview with Musicians, AAWA). Another musician suspects the failure in posting her video on Douyin due to the adhesion of the Google website link inside (mainland Chinese are stop by a firewall from accessing the google website in most situations).

Once musicians have familiarised themselves with the prerequisites and benefits of engaging with the Douyin platform, they can begin their online entrepreneurial journey with a more rational and informed mindset, focusing on maximizing their returns. This journey often involves sacrificing a portion of their copyright and revenues in exchange for greater opportunities and returns offered by Douyin. This fundamental trade-off is the driving logic behind why musicians choose to enter the platform in the first place. By clearly understanding the boundaries of the platform rules, musicians can make informed decisions about how to navigate the platform, balancing safety and risk to pursue their interests effectively. Through practical experience, musicians learn how



to avoid negative consequences by adhering to platform rules while still expressing their creative selves. This knowledge of platform rules serves as the foundation for musicians to engage in entrepreneurship more wisely and sensibly, aiming for amplified benefits from their presence on Douyin. In the following section, I will delve into how musicians specifically apply entrepreneurial principles, exploring the ways in which they engage with the digital market and online network on Douyin to drive their entrepreneurial endeavors.

### 5.3.2 Strategic adoption for enhanced marketability

Douyin's large user base rapidly spreads information and engages with creative content, influencing the emergence of new popular trends. This rapid circulation of information and the platform's appetite for novelty have led to quick shifts in music trends. Music's adaptability to current events and national news can lead to its popularity, and music videos with high user interactions may gain popularity even if users primarily engage with elements other than the music itself. To better position themselves on the digital market on Douyin, many musicians have taken into account both the platform's features and its audience. They have recognised that Douyin has created a digital music market that differs from the offline music scene. Douyin's widespread popularity across various industries in China has led to a continuously growing music market. The platform's vast user base frequently uses background music for their videos, and there's no cost associated with music copyright, which means music reaches an extended audience. However, this extensive audience has a broad range of tastes, often leaning towards what is commonly described as "down

to earth" (接地气 *jie di qi*<sup>20</sup>) music. This term signifies music that is widely liked but not necessarily considered high art. In contrast, "elite music," favored by a smaller, more educated audience, tends to be marginalised on the platform.

In the ever-changing digital market, where audience attention is fleeting, musicians have adopted various creative strategies to capture the spotlight on Douyin. Even though they continually improve the quality of their work, musicians often find it necessary to make their content stand out by catering to the platform's demand for novelty and creativity (Nixon, 2006). This may involve amateur musicians competing with established celebrities in the field. For instance, one musician in an interview mentioned,

My music videos sound good, the recording is particularly good, and the shooting is not bad, but they just have a few people listening. So, I start to think about how to make everyone think that a common musical instrument can play anything special. I tried to make interactive videos and joke about things. I thought about playing music from games, TV shows, cartoons, and even mobile phone ringtones. I even considered making phone calls to fans-- basically, anything that people might find interesting. I've been focused on making my music performances intriguing to the audience on a daily basis" (Interview with Musician EBHL, 2022).

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<sup>20</sup> The Chinese term "接地气" can be translated to English as "down-to-earth." It describes something or someone that is practical, realistic, relatable, and in touch with the everyday concerns and interests of ordinary people. It often implies a lack of pretentiousness and an approachability that resonates with a broad audience.

This musician's statement highlights their efforts to adapt and innovate their content to engage and captivate the Douyin audience, demonstrating the dynamic nature of the platform and the need for musicians to continually reinvent their approach to maintain visibility and popularity.

Creating unique events, special situations, and uncommon experiences can help musicians stand out in the crowded and dynamic digital market on Douyin. This could include exaggerated performances, staged conflicts or arguments during live streams, and the creation of entertaining videos, as reported by interviewees. Therefore, both the quality of their work's content and their marketing strategies play crucial roles in competing for a broader market. Sometimes, a surge in traffic becomes essential for reaching a new and larger audience of streamers. The Douyin algorithm creates a stable and specialised 'audience pool' to which Douyin feeds personalised content. Therefore, a surge in traffic can break the boundaries of this established audience pool, allowing musicians to reach a broader and more diverse audience base. However, when people are drawn to a musician's content, maintaining a high level of content quality can help expand their fan base. For instance, some musicians who effectively managed their digital accounts gained many new fans after experiencing a significant surge in traffic on Douyin. Conversely, when content quality is poor, fewer people may choose to follow them.

In the digital market on Douyin, it is crucial for creative content to immediately capture the audience's attention and sustain that engagement throughout. Even a brief pause or uninteresting content can lead viewers to abandon a video, given the wide array of

entertainment options Douyin offers. The digital nature of the Douyin market has given rise to a unique environment characterised by a loosely connected relationship between streamers and their audiences. This dynamic presents challenges for musicians striving to maintain the interest of their fans. Douyin provides a vast array of creative content for audiences to explore, compare, and choose from, resulting in a highly competitive creative market and a fragmented fan-streamer relationship. Due to the sheer volume of content available and the expectation of rapid entertainment, audiences' attention can easily wander while waiting for other content to load or while scrolling through their feed. As a result, online audiences often have lower commitment and patience when following a single streamer. They are more inclined to switch between different streamers in search of the most engaging and interesting content. To illustrate this, one might draw an analogy to a "cherry on top" scenario, where audiences are initially drawn in by the most enjoyable part of the content and may lose interest in the less engaging portions. To thrive in this competitive environment, content creators must consistently provide engaging and entertaining content that retains their audience's attention, preventing viewers from migrating to other streamers' accounts.

The Douyin market does not necessarily guarantee professionalism or quality services. Instead, consumption on the platform often involves buying into whether through fandom or entertainment or social relationships, making the intrinsic quality of musicians and their creative output less significant when it comes to generating commercial profits on Douyin. Due to the lack of supervision by industry authorities in the current creative market on Douyin, more streamers have had the opportunity to

enter this unregulated industry. This situation is evident in the Chinese digital market, where e-commerce on Douyin has attracted public attention multiple times due to quality problems<sup>21</sup>. However, the chaotic and unreliable nature of the market on Douyin has led to intense competition, particularly in terms of consumption and profits. Individual content creators can post and earn from their creative content on Douyin without having to prove their professionalism or liability. Ironically, the individuals who gain popularity or achieve success in the music industry on Douyin are often not professional musicians but rather streamers who offer different market values. For instance, some streamers excel in running their businesses or managing interpersonal relationships. This phenomenon makes it challenging for professionals and high-quality content to gain recognition from the public, resulting in a lower market value and income received by professional musicians. The comments left for the streamers' videos further reinforce this bias, as fans tend to be more encouraging and complimentary toward their idols, while critical voices are often sidelined. Additionally, the Douyin algorithm tends to prioritise serving content to a streamer's existing fan base rather than reaching broader audiences.

Another aspect of the reality faced by creative workers on Douyin is their efforts to adapt to the platform's algorithm in order to enhance their account performance. However, navigating this algorithm can be challenging, as it primarily serves the

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<sup>21</sup> A local Chinese government has taken official action by summoning multiple digital platforms to address various issues related to digital products. These issues encompass several concerns, including streamers engaging in exaggerated promotion, using absolute advertising language, irregular or incorrect product postings, inaccuracies in sizing information, and disparities between promotional content and the actual products. For more details, you can refer to the news article titled "Nearly 30% of streamers and 40% of products are involved in violations" 近三成主播、四成商品涉违规！官方约谈多家平台 on <https://www.jwview.com/jingwei/12-23/452482.shtml>.

platform's interests rather than those of the musicians. In many cases, achieving higher popularity as a streamer may not be as significant if the account cannot generate profits for the platform. Conversely, a less popular account can still yield substantial traffic if it contributes a significant platform commission. These implicit rules within Douyin imply that creative streamers often sacrifice a portion of their revenue to the platform in exchange for increased exposure and potential collaborations, which, in turn, generate income for the platform. Douyin strategically employs its algorithm to provide both incentives and disincentives for its creative streamers. For instance, they reward frequent account updates. Some streamers suspect that Douyin intentionally imposes periodic traffic restrictions on their accounts to stimulate their ambition to regain popularity (Interview with AAWA, 2022). Consequently, they work harder on Douyin while allowing online traffic to flow into newly established accounts. One musician emphasises the crucial role of the platform in promoting musicians' popularity on Douyin,

It is a common occurrence on a relatively large platform like Douyin that the opportunity for online popularity, often referred to as "Feng shui," shifts between different accounts.<sup>22</sup> It's somewhat akin to Douyin selecting certain accounts for promotion and increased online traffic based on the profitability or positive outcomes generated for the platform. Therefore, our popularity on the platform is not solely determined by the streamers themselves; rather, it's largely influenced by Douyin's decisions. (Interview with musician CZY, 2022)

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<sup>22</sup> The interviewee used the Chinese term *fengshui* "风水" metaphorically to describe the shifting and changing opportunities for online popularity on the platform. In this context, "Feng shui" suggests that the platform's algorithms and strategies are constantly rearranging and prioritizing different accounts and content for online visibility and success.

This phrase indicated the complex interplay between the algorithm's psychological manipulation of platform streamers and the platform's own interests, creative workers have found themselves making compromises to align with the platform's business logic.

The competitive nature of Douyin, with its highly motivated creators and a large number of participants, drives these creative professionals to adopt various strategies aimed at gaining a larger market share and higher returns. Creative professionals on Douyin have delved into a more specialised and precise creative market by showcasing their core skills through innovative and creative approaches. These individuals actively adapt to the highly fragmented and personalised digital market on Douyin, expanding their digital content and services beyond just musical talents or styles. They focus on enhancing the marketability of their content by emphasizing factors such as attractiveness, uniqueness, and innovation in their presentations. For instance, they may target new audiences with universally appealing content, enhance their marketing skills to increase sales or align their content with the platform's algorithm to achieve better account performance and attract more online traffic.

### 5.3.3 Initiating exploration for enhanced reciprocity

Creative workers on social media have received multiple messages from different actors due to social media's openness and publicity nature. They face challenges in accepting and cooperating with those offers received from individuals or organisations. The cooperative offerors can be categorised into three types by their roles in supporting musicians. First is those who build interpersonal or commercial cooperation

with the musicians, typically the other musicians or firms from the creative industry or other industries. This cooperation tends to be temporary and aims to achieve mutual benefits for an increase in profit or influence. The second type of offerors is music agencies in diverse forms, specifically, copyright agencies, full-contract, or flexible contract musicians' agencies. These music agencies support musicians' activities in multiple ways by enhancing musicians' identities and influence in the field, and these agencies can be paid services for musicians or stakeholders for a long-term contract. The other types of offers are from the Douyin platform, which takes a vital role in promoting and marketing musicians in the digital market on the platform. Douyin has carried out a series of cooperation as the most important stakeholders for online musicians for implementing the overall business strategy for a higher platform interest. Next, I will elaborate on the cooperation of these three main types of actors.

#### 1) Co-workers and commercial advertiser

Most musicians have received numerous cooperative invitations on Douyin, and many have taken advantage of the online network. Musicians are empowered to an easier communication in an even way on social media, like Douyin, as social connections online are run more equally regarding power relationships. For example, novice musicians may send private messages to superstars who have their account on Douyin, whereas this can be hard to achieve in the offline music industry where private contact for famous people is only limited access. In an even communication channel provided on social media, users can build social relationships and increase the opportunities for liaison. Informal interpersonal relationship between musicians in different career stages has started booming, which creates a frequent flow in social



mobility between different classes of people in real life. Consequently, the industrial resources and capital have welcomed higher flexibility and initiatives in exchanging and combining within the industry, enabling cross-class collaborations and a democratic online community. Benefitting from these platform traits, musicians have been actively connecting themselves with other peers and intensifying the positive results of the online network. For example, musicians are introducing and sharing fans through co-working activities online, and they are agenting the commercial opportunities offline to other friends, from which musicians can even get paid for this informal agent work.

Creative workers have explored multiple ways to earn their living from their careers, and some benefits are brought by the virtues of technologies on social media, such as individualised content feeding. Most musicians in the industry used to earn their lives based on music selling, whereas only a small part of superstars benefit from their large publicity. Most musicians are less popular with a basic fan base and less able to be hired by a commercial business to take advantage of their publicity to make a profit. It seems the musicians' popularity works when high enough to generate commercial value for the business, whereas a normal fan base is less attractive to investors. Interestingly, this condition has changed in the digital market on Douyin, and less popular musicians receive commercial cooperation and investment, too, even with a lower fan base. This is because most creative accounts have a specific fan base in similar backgrounds, which enables advertisers to promote their goods more targeted. The musicians do not necessarily have a large fan base, but a specific audience pool will be attractive enough to some advertisers. The creative workers' accounts generate

a target customer base than an influx of public for the advertisers, which makes the quality and relevance of the fan base possibly outweigh the quantity. Besides, the musicians' fan base is valued by the other peers too; for example, composers pay some musicians to promote songs to their fan base, which means even a basic number of fans make sense in generating income for musicians on Douyin.

## 2) Music agencies: traditional and flexible contractors

Facing the second type of collaborators that music agencies, musicians have taken cautious steps in selecting the agency and cooperation types. Most musicians on Douyin do not favour the traditional full contract provided by music agencies that control musicians' work and lives. One informant reveals the logic behind their resistant attitude that these indie musicians gain popularity on Douyin alone without any help from agencies, so they are more believe in themselves in promoting themselves and creating further value. Traditional agencies seem to be notorious among indie musicians for being strict control, utilitarian, and less responsible for musicians' career development. Therefore, traditional agencies tend to be an ignored option for those creative workers, especially those who are already popular online and earn a decent income. These popular musicians tend to seek support from those MCNs who provides flexible contract in operation, marketing, and agenting help, which agencies are closer to paid services though the payment may be in the way of commission withdrawal by those agencies. Musicians feel more secure without paying the agencies in advance but in a commission way, as this payment method may prevent a financial loss for an unhelpful service. There are agency types between the traditional and the flexible ones on the market today, which is a full conditional contract

only to be triggered when musicians' popularity reaches a certain level before the agency will provide free support for musicians to become popular online. As we can see, today's agencies on Douyin tend to avoid seeking payment or long commitment from online musicians, which is probably attributed to the high independency and self-sufficiency nature of online musicians empowered by social media to compete for a larger market by themselves.

Even though independent musicians have a higher awareness of copyright, the copyright revenue is largely dependent on industrial practise. Normally the loyalty rate has a standard though in some differences between agencies. One composer complained about the unspoken but normal practise in today's music market that a buyout of the authorship of music work with a higher price though being illegal in the law. Musicians unwilling to sell their authorship will be less attractive to copyright buyers and receive a much lower price (Interview with Musician LFC, 2022). The copyright company tend to buy out the music before they start to invest and promote it through ways such as inviting a popular singer to sing in public, so a full right to the work will make them more generous to invest in the work and receive a higher return. Better being in the bottom value chain of music productions, popular singers' copyright is much better than those composers. These popular singers have two ways to manage their copyright: paying a copyright company for help or simply managing by themselves. Managing musicians may bring challenges, such as undetected copyright loss and dealing with an infringement lawsuit. While the copyright company will support these issues for the musicians paid with a proportion of commissions previously negotiated with the musicians. Usually, famous musicians will gain more

advantages in bargaining the commission rate, while those emerging internet musicians tend to receive a normal rate,

A music company will find you and sign a contract after you negotiate the conditions. They will pay you a fixed singing salary and an extra fee if you are the songwriter. If you are the composer for both lyrics and rhythms, then probably a little bit higher, which is paid in one lump sum... Later, there will be a copyright share between 10~20%, which will be paid from three years to perpetual. This is a general rate, and few receive higher. Usually, music companies will come to you only when your song is such popular to be on the charts. (Interview with Musicians YKLX, 2022)

### 3) Douyin platform: partnership in content promotion

The third type of online cooperation is officially from the Douyin platform, to which a positive response would benefit the creative streamers' online accounts. Douyin platform periodically carries out online activities and calls for musicians' spontaneous participation. In doing so, Douyin aims to elevate the interest not only for the platform itself but also for its partnership. For example, Douyin attracts musicians to engage and boost the online traffic for online musicians, which bases the initial users on the platform. Musicians who engaged with Douyin through this period tended to accumulate fans much easier than today. During this phase, musicians actively join a series of platform music activities and have gained higher content exposure and economic returns, although this strategic level of online activities is a commercial promotion for the platform. As a popular social media in China, Douyin has received major commercial advertising by itself, which requires users on the platform to spread

the advertising information creatively and actively. Therefore, a creative account that works for the commercial interests of Douyin is probably encouraged by the algorithm too. Another useful thought is the fierce competition between the major social platforms in the Chinese market that all social media are fighting for creative talents or big names' loyalty to their platform. Several musicians referred to their experience being asked to offer exclusive rights, such as music performing right only for one platform to achieve the best welfare on the platform. Musicians are widely aware of the benefits that compliance with the Douyin would bring them, and Douyin has become a major stakeholder in the backstage to develop creative workers.

This section has addressed how musicians start their enterprise on Douyin and practise their entrepreneurship by adapting to the digital market and attaching themselves to the main stakeholders such as peers, agencies, and the Douyin platform. This section pictures a new field that an online creative worker inevitably considers when engaging in a social platform like Douyin. The characteristic Douyin market request compromise in copyright to receive further advantages from the platform and encourage musicians to be more innovative, self-motivated, strategical facing with the digital market, and more spontaneous and cooperative in linking themselves to the digital communities, meanwhile, to compromise and sensible to the stakeholders' interest for reciprocal results. As we can see, the social platform and its technology have established a stimulating and reciprocal market environment where diverse resources are presented, and interests are intertwined, from which creative users are taking advantage by identifying themselves as independent CEOs for their online careers and enterprise. The next section will show the economic fruits of

musicians' practising their entrepreneurship on Douyin; specifically, the overall income increases after musicians engage with Douyin.

## **5.4 Advanced earnings of *wanghong* streamers**

### 5.4.1 Advancements in *wanghons'* financial conditions

This section will focus the financial gains experienced by musicians as a result of their engagement with Douyin and their entrepreneurial activities on the platform. It will emphasise the improvement in musicians' revenue directly attributable to Douyin and its impact on their offline music careers. Enhancements in musicians' financial conditions serve as a crucial metric for evaluating the fruits of their digital career and rewards of their market efforts. The income advancement is a direct signal of the economic impact on the musicians' overall financial situation, and a indication of musicians' evaluation of the importance of the digital account. Nevertheless, the musicians' income has very complex factors, that related to musicians' background, account types, digital competence, monetising ways, paid fans, and unpredictable income from various commercial offers. Therefore, this section on musicians' income primarily presents a result-oriented perspective, emphasizing the exact income advancement attribute to musicians' digital careers. Within this section, I will provide both qualitative insights and specific numerical data regarding the additional earnings musicians have generated through their involvement with Douyin. While these financial returns are largely individualised, this section will categorise them into three distinct scales to better illustrate the varying degrees of income growth among musicians.

Among the majority of the musicians I interviewed, 7 have experienced major transformations, 16 have seen moderate advancements, and 7 fall into the category of minor gains in terms of financial improvement due to their engagement with Douyin. However, these income categories can be somewhat ambiguous, as some musicians provided indicative rather than specific income figures. Therefore, the numbers within each group serve as a general index based on the thirty musicians I interviewed, rather than representing a broader income situation. Furthermore, this section primarily focuses on the overall income generated by musicians following their entry into a digital career on Douyin. This income may reflect more on the past earnings rather than future income expectations. One key reason for this is that the income gained during their previous Douyin endeavors may not be replicable due to differences in timing, job opportunities, available resources, fan base, account conditions, and advertising trends. For a discussion of the potential for long-term income and career prospects, please refer to Section 5.6. In contrast to this section, Section 5.6 will delve into the musicians' competence in income and career, offering insights into the career sustainability and economic outcomes that may have a longer impact on musicians' development. Next, I will start to introduce three levels of financial advancement.

#### 1) Major Transformations:

This category includes musicians who have achieved a significant improvement in their income, allowing them to rely fully on their music for their livelihood or establish long-term income sustainability, often through copyright-related avenues. This group may consist of live streamers, video bloggers, or business entrepreneurs who have accumulated savings due to income levels significantly surpassing industry averages.

Their success may be attributed to copyrights for multiple hit songs or their ability to consolidate market values for their personal brand. It's important to note that a high fan base or popularity on Douyin, on its own, is not considered valuable capital. Instead, its value lies in its potential to combine with other long-term economic factors such as substantial extra income, copyright ownership, and brand value. When harnessed effectively, a substantial fan base on Douyin can translate into tangible economic gains through musicians' entrepreneurial endeavors.

## 2) Moderate Advancements:

Musicians in this category experience increased income through their engagement on Douyin, typically on par with or slightly below the average earnings of industry wage-earners. While these musicians are willing to invest their efforts in maintaining their Douyin accounts, they generally do not rely solely on Douyin for their income. Instead, they view their online career as a supplementary income source, an alternative channel alongside their primary occupations. The economic earnings derived from Douyin provide these musicians with an additional wage that, while not substantial, serves as a welcome financial boost within the moderate advancements in income. These individuals often function as part-time musicians on Douyin or may not achieve as much financial success as those in the upper scale, even if they put in considerable effort on the platform.

## 3) Minor Gains:



This category of musicians' experiences only a slight increase in their earnings from Douyin, although they may find themselves in a relatively better financial situation compared to other types of musicians. This is often because these *wanghong* musicians may have already been earning a decent income prior to their engagement with Douyin, which can reduce their motivation for entrepreneurial activities or career development on the platform. For many of them, joining Douyin is more for enjoyment or other non-profitable reasons. Consequently, they tend to reap fewer benefits, as they may invest less in developing strategies or demonstrating the willingness to optimise their account performance for extra income. While engaging in less monetization-focused activities, these musicians may still become very popular due to algorithmic coincidences, their initial popularity, or having a large fan niche. However, they seldom generate substantial income directly from Douyin. In the following section, I will elaborate on the factors that contribute to a musician's income level.

#### 5.4.2 Factors contributing to high income among minority *wanghong*

The timing of entry into the digital market can significantly contribute to capturing a large market share. Many musicians who entered the scene early reported rapid growth in their online careers during the rapid development of Douyin, particularly around 2018. At that time, there were fewer competitors on the platform, allowing these early adopters to secure a specific market share and gain popularity on the platform. Musicians experienced a substantial increase in online traffic in 2018 when Douyin positioned itself as a "platform for short music videos," prioritizing the promotion of musicians. Once these musicians became prominent figures online, their

popularity often endured for an extended period, bringing higher market value through commercial performances. Popularity serves as a form of productivity for musicians, as fame translates into quick and enduring income, which can subsequently lead to other financial advantages, particularly through copyright ownership of gaining music ranked on Douyin. Some internet celebrities have expanded their presence beyond the digital realm and ventured into the offline music industry to tap into a broader market. This extension of popularity from online to offline has enabled them to achieve a higher income.

A natural market attractiveness contributes significantly to musicians' popularity on Douyin, and possessing a substantial market share often indicates high-income potential. Some musicians effortlessly gain popularity as the digital market on Douyin naturally aligns with certain tastes, and the algorithm identifies content that resonates with users. Occasionally, musicians become overnight sensations, entering into competition for higher income opportunities. The digital market inherently favors these fortunate musicians, either due to their distinct video style or an intriguing identity. Sudden popularity serves as a beacon, signaling to musicians the potential to monetise their presence on the platform. For instance, when a musician's work climbs in rank, they may start earning money through copyright royalties. Others discovered occasionally effective strategies for generating high online traffic or securing fan donations, which they then continue to pursue for increased revenue. Additionally, gender plays a significant role, as many females naturally excel in live performances on Douyin. This phenomenon can be attributed to the blurred boundary between online

entertainment and aspects of online sexual performance, leading to a larger market (Xu and Zhao, 2019).

I believe it's crucial to discuss the role of good appearance for female live streamers. On Douyin, live streaming often places appearance at the forefront, sometimes even above content quality. In many instances, both girls and boys are seated in front of their screens, and I understand that not leveraging my appearance might result in losing some fans. (Interview with a female live streamer, AAWA 2022)

Musicians who own an offline enterprise with a mature business model may command a higher market value due to their advantages in terms of market reach and business operations. Many music businesses have invested significant funds in marketing efforts on Douyin. Capital plays a pivotal role in marketing content on the platform, primarily through two avenues. Firstly, there are paid services officially offered on Douyin, known as Dou+, which enable online promotion to reach broader audiences. For instance, investing a hundred yuan (approximately £7 in GBP) can lead to an additional 2500 digital account views on the platform's organic online traffic (Douyin, 2021). These services allow musicians to tailor their content feed for selected audiences based on factors such as age, gender, location, interests, and more. The second approach involves providing "welfare" (song fu li) to the audience or fans to pique their interest and boost engagement on the platform. For instance, some live streamers organise timed lotteries for Douyin coins or other physical gifts within their live rooms to incentivize people to follow, comment, and spend more time watching their live shows. In this manner, streamers are effectively using money to gain other

benefits, such as expanding their fan base, which can lead to long-term higher revenue. One offline business owner reinvested all of his Douyin income back into his business development,

Douyin has significantly increased my income. My entire team relies on the revenue we generate from Douyin and other social platforms such as Baidu and Little Red Book. Among these platforms, Douyin contributes the most. However, I allocate a significant portion of these earnings to marketing, lucky bags, or live streaming giveaways. While I can earn a maximum of 20,000 to 30,000 yuan (£2,400 to £3,600) per month on my Douyin account, this income may not suffice for advertising my business. My primary goal is to convert these customers into tangible revenue for my business. (Interview with a music instrument seller CWY, 2022)

A monetization strategy compatible with musicians' situations and characteristics can significantly impact their income. Musicians devise the best monetization channels based on their access to resources and their ability to sustain them. High-income live streamers often excel in one of three areas: they either invest high levels of energy (full-time live streaming), excel in strategic interpersonal communication, or possess a substantial and dedicated fan base that contributes significantly through donations. For popular musician types on Douyin, full-time live streaming presents the highest potential for quick and substantial income. Live streamers can receive real-time fan donations without an upper limit, and it's possible to earn tens of thousands (around £50,000) per month, even with just a few loyal fans willing to contribute generously, as reported by a female live streamer. Douyin provides a valuable platform where

individuals with disadvantaged financial conditions can overturn financial status. People in debt may be motivated to explore live streaming as a rare opportunity to quickly repay their debts,

I have not counted, but anyway, my debt is not as instalment as before. I also paid last year's tuition for my three children, and I spent tens of thousands of yuan on live-streaming equipment. Making a substantial income is challenging for me as I'm not as popular as those big names, and I've done little commercial advertising and online competitions. My life is much better now than before, but I still have debts to pay off, so I've formulated a 10-year plan (Interview with Musicians, 2022)

An advantageous audience base combined with strategic online promotion can potentially lead to substantial income on Douyin. According to a musician earning one million annually, having dozens of loyal fans is sufficient to generate decent revenue from her online performances (as per the interview with the overnight live streamer, Lynn, 2022). These live streamers often develop their profit skills by learning from competitors' practises or through self-reflection. These musicians tend to benefit from fans who possess strong financial capabilities and are willing to support them, often referred to as 'Big Brothers/Sisters' in the live streaming community. Typically, these 'Big Brothers/Sisters' are individuals in middle age with decent incomes, which results in generous contributions. Donations from these fans can be motivated by various factors, such as appreciation for the live performance or genuine admiration for the musicians. A closer relationship with major donors likely contributes to higher payments for musicians, fostering a deeper interpersonal connection between the two.

In this sense, musicians may benefit from the intimacy they share with their fans, and gender dynamics may also play a role in shaping these relationships, as indicated by the insights shared by a female musician,

One of my strengths is singing old Cantonese songs, targeting male fans over thirty with the financial means to appreciate it. I adhere to the 'talented' approach, drawing fans through the quality of my performance. However, many Douyin live streamers opt for the 'pretty route,' relying on their appearance. They often maintain an ambiguous relationship with the 'Big Brothers' who contribute around 80% of their income. Managing these 'Big Brothers' privately can be demanding and may consume up to 80% of the streamers' energy for a relatively modest return. (Interview with musician LZC, 2022)

Music royalty serves as another advantageous income channel for musicians, particularly those with popular music and a high yield. These musicians tend to receive stable, long-term income. According to informants (interview with musician TY, 2022), some famous singers' royalties can reach levels of ten thousand yuan (approximately £12,000 GBP) per month. However, it's worth noting that royalties are more of a prestigious income source for renowned singers or high-yield musicians, rather than for those whose music is managed by copyright companies. Musicians typically receive royalties through their copyright agents or Douyin music agents. For most musicians, Douyin primarily serves as a platform to increase the visibility of their music and generate additional clickthroughs, which in turn promotes royalty earnings outside the Douyin platform. Musicians strategically promote themselves and their work online,

and their royalty income can experience significant fluctuations. Once their music goes viral on Douyin, such as becoming a universally used background music, their royalty earnings can skyrocket. Musicians' royalty income can vary widely, ranging from a monthly income of ten thousand yuan (£12,000) for a popular and prolific composer to a thousand yuan (£120) for an ordinary copyright holder (Interview with Musicians TY, 2022). One composer interviewed exemplifies effective practises by managing multiple copyrighted works, maintaining productivity, seeking job opportunities through online networks, and simultaneously promoting himself on Douyin,

The original annual income was 500,000 yuan (approximately £60,000 GBP), but now it may have doubled to more than 1 million. My income is not from Douyin platform directly, but the other music business related outside of the platform. This income includes annual copyright income and substantial one-off projects taken offline; this reflects the current state of affairs. (Interview with a composer ZHY, 2022)

Some subjective factors can negatively impact musicians' income, although this is not necessarily the case for all individuals. These factors include personal choices, a musician's identity, their evaluation of their career, and their financial situation. Many musicians have the potential to earn higher incomes from the platform but choose to engage with Douyin at a limited level. This choice may stem from their assessment of their account's potential, perceiving either limited growth potential or a high investment requirement, which leads some musicians to step away. One explanation lies in the strong identity of musicians as artists who hold their work in high regard and prioritise artistic integrity over commercial success. These musicians may limit themselves by

presenting their music in a high-quality but less innovative manner and may feel uncomfortable soliciting donations during live performances. Some musicians may face challenges in the entertaining, innovative, and highly competitive digital market on Douyin, as they may not conform to market norms and rules, resulting in lower traffic. However, for these musicians, maintaining a strong artistic identity may outweigh the financial gains. As one mid-age musician exemplifies, they are content to earn less from Douyin while preserving their artistic integrity,

I've been live streaming for almost two years, and I rarely engage in online competitions (PK) and never ask people to donate during my live streams. I simply showcase my genuine talent. On my best nights, I've earned up to 15,000 yuan (£1,800 GBP), but it made me feel guilty. I felt like I did not deserve the money. I hope that in the future, many indie musicians in this underground music scene will refer to me after my ten-year journey and say, 'This guy is truly dedicated to his music. Even though his songs may not be very popular, they are still of high quality.' Is it not that enough?" (Interview with Musician EJ, 2022)

To sum up, the high market value of Douyin will probably lead to a higher income for musicians. A small part of lucky musicians who entered Douyin earlier or are naturally favoured by the digital market have received high popularity on the platform, which bases musicians' long-term income. The other musicians have developed strategies to compete for a higher income. Among the multiple factors to a higher pay on Douyin, enabling effective monetising channels compatible with the musicians' availability is vital. Live streaming can be a shortcut to a dramatic income increase; however, not all



musicians have the opportunities (profitable fan base) or ability (stimulating communication) to maintain regular major donators. The increased popularity on social platform will also boost musicians' revenues outside the platform, from copyright income, offline jobs, and other commercial cooperation from musicians' online network. Some factors negatively affect musicians' income from Douyin, typically the level of musicians' willingness to commit to their online career and adapt to the digital market for achieving the best results from Douyin.

#### 5.4.3 A supplementary income earned by majority *wanghong*

While musicians employ similar monetization methods for their creative work on Douyin, their income levels can vary significantly. Unlike those high-paid musicians who rely solely on Douyin to sustain a decent life, the majority of musicians experience only a modest increase in their income, even when some work full-time on Douyin. Long and hard work does not necessarily guarantee favourable results in the competitive Douyin digital market. Many musicians approach a full-time career on Douyin with a rational attitude, recognizing the unpredictable nature of success. Even though some live streamers dedicate most of their time to Douyin, they maintain other work opportunities to supplement their income. Musicians who earn less than their high-paid counterparts may still have a sizable fan base. However, their content may be less favored by the Douyin market, they may receive less support from major donors, or they may not be as skilled in managing their online accounts to compete effectively. In the following section, I will provide examples of the income achieved by these musicians in terms of minor income growth through various monetization methods on Douyin.

Live streamers with limited market appeal often face challenges in earning income from the outset, particularly in music genres with small market niches. These musicians may endure financial hardships before accumulating a significant number of paying fans. It's not uncommon for them to spend an entire day live streaming and earn as little as several dozen yuan per day (as per interviews with musicians ZRYT, 2022; PTCW, 2022). This situation is common among indie musicians who struggle to develop additional skills to retain their fan base. However, once these musicians gain support from 'Big Brothers/Sisters,' their income can increase significantly, often in a matter of hours, depending on the frequency and amount of contributions from these major supporters. For example, one interviewee's income jumped from around 1,000 yuan (£120 GBP) for an entire day to over 10,000 yuan (£1,200 GBP) for just two hours of live streaming, all thanks to the contributions from these 'Big Brothers' (as per the interview with musician PTCW, 2022).

Some musicians may take longer to develop their ability to profit from live streaming on Douyin. This delay does not necessarily result from a slow learning curve; rather, it often arises from a strong sense of self-identity, particularly among established musicians. Renowned musicians from the offline world often maintain a traditional and caring relationship with their fans, eschewing a more strategic approach to extracting money from their fan base. Unlike successful live streamers who actively encourage fan donations, these famous musicians, whose income is not reliant on fan contributions, tend to discourage their fans from donating too much. This approach leads to significantly lower earnings for them on Douyin. For example, some musicians

have mentioned that a single offline performance can rival their monthly earnings on Douyin. Specifically, they might earn a modest amount, such as 1,000 yuan (equivalent to £120 GBP), for several hours of live streaming. While this approach is common among the famous, it becomes challenging to sustain such income levels when fans are discouraged from making donations. The same applies to those with smaller fan bases who rely on strategic communication to boost fan contributions.

On Douyin, it's a common phenomenon that creative promotion can result in a significant boost in sales, with fans purchasing products more for the 'creative promotion' itself than the actual goods being sold. The success of such sales depends on both the brand's existing market base and the promotional skills of the live streamers. Advertising and the sale of peripheral goods or services are common practises for video bloggers who primarily earn money from their fan base. Advertisers come from diverse backgrounds. For instance, when a commercial brand promotes its products by offering a commission, the income musicians receive depends on their online sales during live streaming sessions. This form of online advertising is referred to as 'bring up with products' (daihuo) in Chinese. Another common form of cooperation for musicians involves promoting the work of others through performances and posts on their Douyin accounts. Typically, popular vloggers receive a single payment of several thousand yuan for such promotions, which can be equivalent to a small-town wage (as per the interview with musician Maggie, 2022). Established musicians may also engage in commercial collaborations, such as recording blessing videos for paying clients to be showcased at events, adding prestige and appeal to these occasions.

The types of peripheral goods or services sold by musicians on Douyin are diverse, and the income generated varies accordingly. Based on interviews, it's evident that revenue can be higher for products that musicians create themselves and can sell over the long term with relatively less effort. For instance, one musician sells handmade guitars on Douyin, with each guitar priced at over 30,000 yuan (£3,614 GBP), and he has a backlog of orders from Douyin, which has raised concerns about workload and efficiency (as per the interview with musician SGJT, 2022). Another example of a long-term revenue source is a series of recorded learning materials produced by a musician, with prices ranging from one hundred to one thousand yuan. While income from this venture may be somewhat unstable, it generally provides a decent wage level (as per the interview with musician Luna, 2022). Additionally, some musicians offer services such as singing songs for others over the phone. One ordinary informant mentioned that his monthly income from this service can reach 5,000 yuan (£600 GBP), with individual purchases ranging from one to two hundred yuan (£12 to £24 GBP). In the upcoming section, we will delve into the lasting impact of competence in a musician's career and the potential long-term financial benefits that their digital careers can provide.

## 5.5 *Wanghong* distinctions with social mobility and instability

### 5.5.1 Three *wanghong* classes and distinct features

Given the inherently unstable and short-lived nature of *wanghong* digital careers, the benefits derived from internet popularity may eventually wane, potentially leaving musicians in a precarious position. Therefore, the evolution of *wanghong* streamers' social groups is crucial, as it reflects the sustainability of a burgeoning creative labour force within the music industry. It serves as an indicator of the opportunities that platforms like Douyin create for the growth and development of musicians and the music industry as a whole. This section explores three distinct social groups within the *wanghong* musician community. While *wanghong* musicians have diverse digital careers, these social groups represent a fundamental similarity among them - the evolving social dynamics resulting from their online popularity and financial career success. Unlike fleeting fame, musicians' advancing competence in economic, social, and political emphasise the enduring and long-term advantages that *wanghong* musicians can gain. The classify of *wanghong* distinctions are based on various factors, including economic emphasis, social influence, and political competence, all of which play pivotal roles in defining an individual's social group. These factors help us understand why some *wanghong* musicians thrive while others may face challenges or exploitation in their field. The table 4 provides a visual representation of the following three *wanghong* classes, each with its distinct features.

Table 4 The social groups of wanghong music streamers on Douyin

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Economic emphasis</b>	<b>Social statuses</b>	<b>Political competence</b>
Music celebrities emerged online	Income	Proliferation	Narratives
Musicians established offline	Capital	Stability	Restrained power
Gig workers with advantages fan base	Security	Self-exploration	Response or compliance

### 1) Music Celebrities Emerged Online

The first category of *wanghong* musicians comprises individuals who have risen to fame primarily through digital platforms, often having been relatively unknown or not fully established in their field previously. This emerging *wanghong* class is in the early stages of capital accumulation, relying on their digital popularity and influence among fans for income. Social platforms like Douyin have provided these creative talents with the means to transform their creativity into both monetary value and social capital by successfully establishing monetization channels, both online and offline. These musicians often leverage various methods to monetise their digital presence, including advertising, e-commerce sales, fan donations during online live streams, and commercial performances. Another subset of emerging *wanghong* musicians has experienced long-term capital growth by acquiring copyright ownership of their popular

music and establishing personal businesses within related industries. This prestigious top *wanghong* possesses significant potential for income generation and social influence on digital platforms, and the reciprocal relationship between online influence and income amplifies their overall impact. Based on their influence and economic standing, *wanghong* streamers have crafted individual narratives within the digital public sphere and negotiated power dynamics among stakeholders, including business partners and platform owners. However, it's crucial to note that the digital careers of *wanghong* musicians are inherently tied to the online environment and specific platforms. This inherent insecurity of status and the fleeting nature of fame have led to the rapid rise and fall of many new *wanghong* musicians.

## 2) Musicians Established Offline

The second category of *wanghong* musicians comprises individuals who have already established themselves in their music careers outside the digital platform and have secured substantial income through various streams. These income sources often include offline performances, revenue from music copyrights, participation in commercial activities, and, in some cases, ownership of music-related businesses based on their professional expertise and available resources. Due to their well-established offline careers, these renowned musicians can afford to take a more relaxed approach to managing their digital accounts on Douyin. Their primary objective is to explore additional avenues for career development and business expansion. They strategically invest their time, energy, and resources into their digital accounts with the goal of enhancing their music's popularity and strengthening their fan base. Their digital presence serves as a means to ensure career stability, as

consistent exposure on the thriving digital music market of Douyin can help offset the natural decline of their existing audience and potentially attract new listeners. Furthermore, these musicians leverage the digital social network to maintain their current fan base and establish connections with potential stakeholders, thereby reinforcing their revenue streams from offline sources through increased social engagement. Established musicians who are active on Douyin tend to have a less intensive relationship with the platform because they are less reliant on it. This reduced dependence makes them less responsive to platform demands and algorithm-driven incentives. In the early stages of Douyin's development, the platform collaborated with superstar musicians to attract users by leveraging their presence on the platform. However, when it comes to promoting these established musicians, Douyin may be less proactive, given the platform's focus on nurturing and signing new *wanghong* musicians. In contrast to emerging *wanghong* musicians, famous musicians on Douyin may encounter certain constraints, as they possess greater bargaining power in their relationship with the platform.

### 3) Gig Workers with advantageous fan base

The final category of *wanghong* musicians consists of gig workers who typically occupy the lowest social position among the three *wanghong* types. These popular account holders may still have a substantial fan base, although it is significantly smaller than that of the top new *wanghong* streamers. Despite their efforts, these *wanghong* musicians struggle to secure a substantial income from their digital careers. These musicians can work either full-time or part-time in pursuit of a sufficient income. Some may maintain an intensive gig work schedule, while others juggle their digital



careers with full-time jobs in other fields. Their primary aim is to achieve economic security and a stable income, although their digital music careers on Douyin may fall short of their aspirations. Most gig workers rely on continuous hard work, such as extended live streaming sessions or occasional supplementary income from other online monetization channels like product sales. While some gig workers are in the early stages of transitioning toward becoming top *wanghong* streamers, provided they have a substantial digital following and other career opportunities that could significantly improve their account's performance, the majority struggle for extended periods or may never have the chance to attain top *wanghong* status. There are no defined time limits or guaranteed outcomes for their investments in the Douyin digital market. This seemingly endless and often discouraging situation compels most music streamers to persist in their field, despite their inevitably self-exploited efforts and meager financial returns. In certain cases, strategic gig workers may have developed a promising income system for their digital content but fail to reconcile their artistic identity, aesthetic pursuits, and the commercial demands of the music industry. Others among the popular gig workers continuously experiment with various strategies in response to market demands, acting as opportunists and following anecdotal advice on Douyin's algorithm in their quest for financial growth and career advancement. This disparity in income and social position among *wanghong* musicians underscores the role of digital streaming platforms in creating and perpetuating social inequalities within the music industry.

### 5.5.2 Transferable *wanghong* classes and social mobility

It's important to recognise that musicians can transition between the three *wanghong* classes over time, depending on factors such as their level of fame, financial circumstances, and personal choices. These classes are indicative of musicians' primary competencies, including professional skills and commercial abilities, and are influenced by significant societal events, such as the ongoing pandemic.

Table 5 Transferable *wanghong* classes with emphasis in career abilities

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Competitiveness</b>	<b>Economic competence</b>
Music Celebrities Emerged Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital creativities</li> <li>• Online popularity</li> <li>• Social connectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online advertising</li> <li>• Significant fan donations</li> <li>• Music shows</li> </ul>
Musicians Established Offline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism</li> <li>• Stable fan base</li> <li>• Peer network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Copyright royalties</li> <li>• Professional performances</li> <li>• Commercial cooperation</li> </ul>
Gig Workers with Advantageous Fan Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time flexibility</li> <li>• Low price</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All gig works available (but in lower quality)</li> </ul>

As shown in Table 5, the top *wanghong* musicians excel in digital creativity, online popularity, and adept social skills, which enable them to effectively maintain their market position. Their success is evident through substantial income from creative advertising, significant fan donations, and higher fees for music shows due to their immense fame. Some of these top *wanghong* musicians also have a strong music background, gradually advancing their careers as music professionals, thereby enhancing their overall competencies within the music industry. Consequently, these top *wanghong* musicians can sustain themselves as full-time musicians, supported by sufficient income from music-related activities such as copyright royalties, live performances, and commercial collaborations. They benefit from their music professionalism and previous *wanghong* experience. This is similar to the situation of established musicians whose popularity was mainly gained before and increased through online engagement with digital platforms. These established musicians have reconnected with their fan base in the digital environment while attracting new audiences through their music professionalism and public reputation. Music professionalism remains a core quality for established musicians, which some new *wanghong* streamers have been criticised for lacking. Therefore, some *wanghong* streamers may not fully develop their careers in the traditional music industry due to lower recognition among their peers, even though they have substantial online popularity.

As a result, *wanghong* musicians who fail to maintain their popularity in the digital creative market online, sustain music professionalism in the general music industry, or seize commercial opportunities may ultimately fall into the gig worker class when

their market presence diminishes, economic benefits decline, or commercial opportunities dwindle over time. This was evident during the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic when numerous established musicians turned to digital platforms in search of job opportunities due to sudden financial constraints. Nonetheless, sophisticated algorithms facilitated by diverse pan-entertainment platforms that emerged during the pandemic lockdown have empowered gig workers and existing musicians, offering potential for class mobility in both social, economic, and political dimensions.

### 5.5.3 Unsustainable *Wanghong* musicians

Internet celebrities and *wanghong* streamers typically refer to individuals who have achieved high popularity in the digital market. However, this popularity may not necessarily translate into economic success. *wanghong* streamers with a large fan base often need to navigate the complexities of monetizing their accounts, and their choice of monetization strategies can be crucial in determining their profitability and account sustainability. Many creative workers manage their digital accounts independently, and they may have limited experience dealing with legal, commercial, and social challenges. The day-to-day operation of a popular creative account can be quite challenging, especially when it involves making decisions and negotiations with various stakeholders. Many creative workers value their autonomy on their digital accounts and prefer to rely on themselves rather than outsourcing to agents if they have the choice. As a result, *wanghong* streamers can find themselves in a precarious position as they face numerous uncertainties about their current and future prospects, with potential pitfalls lurking around them. The sustainability of *wanghong* streamers' popularity and accounts remains uncertain in a rapidly changing and highly

competitive creative market. There is no guarantee that they can sustain themselves, especially in highly specific situations. *wanghong* artists also grapple with various considerations related to their work and life choices, including questions of identity, how to allocate their energy, their artistic pursuits, and their commercial ambitions. Withdrawal from any of these commitments can have an impact on their account's success.

Some musicians may transition to offline careers, but online success does not always translate to success in the offline market. *wanghong* musicians face a dilemma when attempting to integrate into musicians' communities or other offline fields, as they may be criticised for lacking systematic music training and professional expertise. Some *wanghong* musicians gain popularity through their creative content delivery methods, and the final creative content often relies on technological editing rather than requiring solid music skills. This is why *wanghong* streamers' success primarily remains in the online sphere, and their online fame and income may not be replicable or sustainable in the offline market. It's worth mentioning that the emotional rewards and social connections that *wanghong* musicians derive from the digital network can fuel their commitment to their digital careers. This emotional fulfillment motivates many *wanghong* streamers to continue working on the platform even after their initial period of success has passed.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter emphasises the entrepreneurial spirit of creative workers striving for increased market value and career advantages through their involvement with Douyin. For many musicians, entrepreneurial practises have evolved as they discovered their potential on the platform. Douyin's unique digital market has underscored the importance of specific skills and entrepreneurial strategies for achieving success online. These include a keen understanding of platform rules, creativity in market expansion, the ability to enhance market value, and strategic networking within the Douyin community (Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018). Creativity plays a pivotal role in musicians' online popularity, encompassing content design, performance, and presentation. In fact, creativity has become so essential that it often surpasses other qualities like professional skills and strong identity in terms of market competitiveness. Creative entrepreneurs on Douyin have learned additional monetization skills to boost their economic gains and career prospects, yielding positive outcomes. Those who strategically monetise their accounts and adeptly leverage resources from the Douyin network tend to achieve the highest levels of success in their entrepreneurial endeavors, resulting in substantial economic returns.

Highly monetised social media platforms like Douyin have empowered ordinary individuals to generate income from various channels provided on the platform. Douyin earns a share of income whenever online streamers monetise their content. This creates a reciprocal relationship between the platform and its users. In other words, when streamers make money, Douyin makes money too. As a result, Douyin tends to favor popular musicians who are good at making money on the platform. These

musicians may also find it easier to get additional support from Douyin. So, success on Douyin is a result of both individual efforts and the platform's support. Social platforms, like Douyin, set the rules of the market and promote their own interests by boosting the performance of exceptional streamers. However, there's a delicate balance between the most profitable, fastest growing, and stable accounts. This leads to a complex business logic behind each platform's decisions. If a platform focuses only on the most profitable streamers, it can disrupt the platform's ecosystem and reduce its bargaining power with streamers who have large fan bases (as discussed by Lu and Wang in 2022). So, the decisions made by these platforms are not purely driven by financial interests. They involve a kind of game where the interests of all contributors, including the platform itself (as discussed by Van Dijck et al. in 2018 and Cotter in 2019), need to be balanced. This is why Douyin allows many musicians to earn moderate incomes, which sustains their efforts. At the same time, it also helps individuals with smaller fan bases to earn substantial revenue.

Similarly, the social mobility and career stability of musicians on digital accounts are influenced by the broader strategies and platform ecosystems used by Douyin. This encourages a wide range of users to contribute their online efforts, with some streamers reaping economic rewards. Entrepreneurial *wanghong* musicians on Douyin actively adjust their strategies to improve their economic, social, and political standing. However, there are differences in how sustainable their online presence is. In their *wanghong* journey, the Douyin platform still plays a critical role in determining the success of these streamers' entrepreneurial efforts, and all of this is in line with the platform's interests. While a small group of *wanghong* musicians, as they navigate

through uncertainty, may find opportunities to significantly enhance their careers and financial situations, the majority of them will have limited prospects in the long term, even if they hold the coveted *wanghong* status as internet celebrities.



# Chapter 6: How Can the Douyin Platform Become an Incubator for Innovative Streamers

## 6.1 Introduction

The digitalization of the music industry has brought about a fundamental transformation in how people engage with music, impacting various aspects from production to distribution and consumption (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018; Lerch, 2018). This transformation can be attributed to what Leyshon (2009) terms the 'democratization of technology,' which has empowered individuals to engage in independent cultural production, thanks to portable and accessible personal technologies. This democratization has also fostered the proliferation of user-generated content platforms, enabling non-professionals to autonomously promote digital content online (Banks and Humphreys, 2008). Over time, various social platforms with distinct features and business models have emerged, significantly reshaping the landscape of the music industry from the major labels to music streaming providers (Vaccaro and Cohn, 2004). In recent times, the music industry has converged with highly socialised platforms offering substantial monetization opportunities for online streamers seeking to nurture their digital careers such as TikTok and Douyin. These platforms, often backed by high-tech startups and capital ventures (Langley and Leyshon, 2017), have harnessed rapid growth potential, attracting substantial digital audiences eager to embark on digital entrepreneurship and monetise digital accounts. The presence of these sizable and socially interconnected digital communities on these platforms has empowered digital

audiences to explore greater diversity and possibilities in digital content. Consequently, this has given rise to a distinct digital creative market, separate from conventional production systems and markets found elsewhere (Kaye et al., 2022).

The digitization of the music industry over the decades has demonstrated the profound influence of technology on the economic landscape, as it becomes increasingly intertwined with social and economic structures over time (Van Dijck, 2013). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the domain of cultural and creative work. The cultural and creative industry can be thought of as a social network market, where culture and creativity are inherent aspects of human society (Pratt et al., 2007; Davidson and Potts, 2022). In essence, people are at the heart of the cultural and creative industry, with the creative class serving as its focal point (Florida, 2019). Social platforms establish digital infrastructures and bring together the online public, governing the platform and ensuring its continued functionality over time (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). The distinct digital infrastructures of various social platforms interact with their users, who create subcultures and generate economic activities online, ultimately shaping these platforms in unique ways. For example, Xiaohongshu (often referred to as the Chinese Instagram) incubates female-led enterprises (Wang and Keane, 2020), while Twitter serves as a platform for political debates due to its ease of posting text comments in response to nationwide news (Trilling, 2015). Technology, therefore, relies on its practitioners to harness and expand its power. It exerts technological, social, and economic impacts on the creative industry, with tech-social

and socioeconomic consequences unfolding through interactions on social platforms (Van Dijck, 2013).

This chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the distinctive digital music market on Douyin, focusing on the combined perspectives of technology, society, and economics. It examines the intricate interplay among platform technologies, the digital society, and the creative economy. Specifically, it investigates how the digital infrastructure of the social platform has reshaped the social relationships among online users, and how these changing social dynamics, in turn, have influenced economic activities and power dynamics among various stakeholders on the platform. In this context, Section 6.2 sheds light on the digital social network, exploring how the unique features of the Douyin platform have forged an enhanced online network for the digital cultural and creative industries. Section 6.3 provides insights into the overall digital market environment on the platform. It situates the digital music industry within the broader cultural and creative market on the platform, examining the distinctive features of music production and consumption within digital market. Lastly, Section 6.4 delves into the economic potentials and spaces available for digital cultural and creative industries on Douyin. This section introduces a theoretical framework that helps us understand the dynamics of the creative economy and platform economy within the social platform, both of which have been significantly influenced by the digital social environment. These empirical and theoretical insights collectively contribute to a deep understanding of the intricate digital market dynamics on social platforms like Douyin. It enables us to comprehensively capture the profound impact of emerging

technologies on the current economic landscape and industrial practises within broader cultural and creative industries.

## **6.2 Digital affordance and market potential of Douyin**

The digital infrastructure on social platforms encompasses both technological and social elements that differ from the offline world and significantly shape the digital market and creative industries. These digital facilities, along with other platform settings, act as the mechanisms and rules that govern the platform's digital environment. Their unique designs contribute to variations in platform affordance and atmosphere, ultimately leading to diverse user bases and creative production. Analyzing the digital infrastructure becomes essential when researching the creative market on social platforms, as it includes online facilities, platform terms of service, and various technical parameters that influence what users can or cannot do. While the digital infrastructure is initially designed by the platform owners and may evolve over time, once it is in use, it tends to be considered inherent and relatively fixed. For instance, social media platforms are open-access that do not necessarily require user accounts to access their services. In contrast, the other platforms tend to be more private and have limited access for guest users (Bump, 2021). Analyzing the digital infrastructure and platform settings of social platforms is crucial, as they play a pivotal role in shaping diverse social platforms, influencing human activities, and exerting control over the creative industries.

This section aims to explore the digital infrastructure of Douyin as a foundational element for the creative industries, with a focus on three key areas. Analyzing the digital infrastructure offers insights into how technological affordances shape the creative market. The first aspect of the analysis model centres on the role of digital infrastructure in establishing a public space and nurturing content producers. The online public plays a pivotal role in driving the digital creative market, influencing trends in creative production and consumption. Factors such as user numbers, diversity, and engagement are particularly significant. Notably, Douyin's emphasis on short-form videos, filmed and edited within the mobile application, sets it apart from platforms like YouTube, where the creation of long, well-designed videos typically demand more effort on a PC. The second and third aspects focus on the information exchange and stimulates economic gains and entrepreneurship within the network. Together, these three aspects shed light on how the digital creative industry on Douyin distinguishes itself from other social platforms in term of digital affordance and market capacity.

### 6.2.1 The digital infrastructures and the platform positioning

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when physical venues were forced to shut down, the demand for digital content on social media platforms surged. Social media became a popular alternative for individuals seeking social interactions and entertainment online, serving as a form of escapism (Fernandes et al., 2020). This trend created a unique opportunity for platforms like Douyin, which offered a comprehensive range of features, including news presentation, entertainment content, real-time online performances, and online shopping, all within a single application. Consequently, many offline

industries sought to transition into the digital realm as a way to mitigate economic losses during the pandemic (Rendell, 2020). For individuals and organizations alike, platforms like Douyin became sources of increased job opportunities and extra income (Bataille et al., 2020). This transition was particularly pronounced in the cultural and creative sectors, which had already been embracing digitalization for years. Creative workers, aligning with this broader trend, increasingly turned to online platforms as an alternative career path and a reliable source of essential income. As a result, social media platforms like Douyin, with their multiple monetization channels, witnessed a substantial surge in popularity among cultural and creative industries.

Today, Douyin's content and services have reached a scale that goes beyond merely attracting regular platform users. For instance, entrepreneurial individuals sign up on Douyin to promote their businesses to a vast audience, while marketers seek out streamers for advertising collaborations. Similar to many other social media platforms, Douyin adopted strategies to rapidly amass a large user base during its initial stages. By positioning itself as a platform for short music videos, Douyin drew in celebrities, particularly musicians, who engaged with their fan base (Mu, 2021). In its early phases, Douyin was recognised for its diverse but sometimes user-generated content, with some assessments describing it as less polished (Qicknews, 2018). This was partly due to the platform's user-friendliness, requiring minimal technical knowledge, which appealed to a broad range of users, including those with lower social status, who used it as a means to express their daily lives (ibid). However, in 2019, Douyin underwent a transformation into a more youth-oriented platform with a focus on popular culture, including featuring popular songs that resonated with younger users. Even well-known

musicians began publishing their songs on Douyin to tap into the younger market (Ma, 2019). During this transformation, young musicians began emerging on the platform, and Douyin took a more active role in governing and shaping its content style. For instance, it reduced the frequency of undesirable content<sup>23</sup> by filtering such content from the recommendation list. Additionally, Douyin encouraged content creators to produce more professional and designed content with the aim of generating income. To enable monetization, Douyin introduced various methods, including brand partnerships, advertising revenue sharing, virtual gifts, and in-app purchases (DomesticNews, 2019). As a result, individuals from diverse backgrounds, including entrepreneurs, flocked to the platform, posting professionally crafted content with the goal of turning a profit.

The potential for increased revenue has encouraged the posting of copyrighted works on Douyin, and the platform's relaxed approach to copyright restrictions has created an encouraging environment for individuals to reinterpret and collaborate with others' copyrighted content. One of the most distinctive features of Douyin is its unique copyright solution for musicians operating within its platform framework. Though it has generated controversy, Douyin permits users to freely use, edit, and collaborate with copyrighted content posted on the platform, provided that copyright holders agree to the platform's terms of service, which include agreements on copyright issues, before posting any content (Douyin, 2020). Furthermore, Douyin has established agreements with major Chinese music labels, such as Tencent Music, to license copyrighted music

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Douyin may filter out digital content that contains explicit or graphic depictions of subjects that may be considered sensitive, offensive, or inappropriate for certain audiences. This can include explicit language, sexual content, violence, or other material that is not suitable for all age groups or may be considered offensive or controversial.

for use on the platform (36Kr, 2020). Douyin has also implemented an auto-detection system (Valdovinos Kaye, 2020) to prevent the use of unlicensed works and to notify users when necessary. This copyright approach has given independent musicians confidence to create and perform on Douyin, as they are less likely to face copyright lawsuits or income losses. In contrast, on platforms like YouTube, independent musicians often need to obtain rights to perform copyrighted works and risk having their content muted or taken down if they violate copyright regulations (YouTube.com, 2021). Notably, some well-known musicians have reported an increase in their copyrighted income due to their music going viral on Douyin, resulting in more clicks on other music streaming services (Seabrook, 2022). However, it's important to acknowledge that this may not be the case for all musicians, particularly independent artists who create their own music.

The business model of Douyin focuses on providing digital streamers with various monetizing channels to earn income. In some cases, the advertising commissions generated on Douyin are equal to, or even greater than, the revenue earned by Douyin itself from advertisers. Some musicians have even reported that they believe Douyin's algorithm is fairer than those of other social media platforms when it comes to promoting their content. For example, it's not uncommon for streamers to achieve high popularity, even if they have a small following and limited content production experience. While the exact workings of the Douyin algorithm are not fully disclosed, users may have a chance, albeit a low one, to gain a dramatic boost in online popularity. Douyin has developed its business model based on the various monetising



channels for its video streamers, which may be more comprehensive and flexible<sup>24</sup> from the other today's social platforms. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube mainly rely on revenue from advertisers, sponsored posts, and product placements from external partnerships, organizations, and advertisements. In contrast, Douyin facilitates direct online partnerships between streamers and businesses and earns commissions from these collaborations. Specifically, Douyin generates commissions through e-commerce activities linked to streamers' videos, fan donations to live streamers, and acting as an intermediary for streamers to secure partnerships, in addition to other platform sponsorships.

On the Douyin platform, various elements of the music industry are recombined and collide to create new career opportunities for industry practitioners. The Douyin algorithm encourages creative collaboration among streamers, not limited to the music industry but encompassing a broader integration of online resources. Interestingly, the uniqueness of a piece of work often plays a more crucial role in driving online traffic than the quality of the music itself. Under this algorithmic framework, musicians are encouraged to create fresh and innovative content that extends beyond merely playing music. For instance, musicians are venturing into shooting music videos in scenic outdoor locations (Informant CZY, 2022; AAWA, 2022), donning unique costumes to enhance their visual appeal (Informant XLX, 2022), and even experimenting with music that mimics human speech (Informant EBHL, 2022). Some musicians may find

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<sup>24</sup> This website features multiple blogs that provide information about monetizing channels on Douyin. These blogs cover various aspects, including features, specific details, income levels, and real-life examples. They include both textual content and images to provide a comprehensive understanding of how to monetise on Douyin. See: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/388185673>

themselves running low on inspiration after exploring numerous themes and styles in their music performances. Consequently, they are turning to collaborations with other streamers to sustain their creative endeavors in music. This shift has led musicians to seek online resources and partnerships that can help maintain the performance and engagement levels of their Douyin accounts. Their ambition and motivation are growing, akin to those of career entrepreneurs seeking new opportunities and strategies for success in the digital realm. For many creative streamers, Douyin offers a platform to showcase their work, talents, and creativity. Having a comprehensive timeline of their work on their Douyin account enhances their credibility and reliability when seeking collaborations and partnerships.

The motivation and strategies for encouraging user participation on social media can vary and are often closely tied to the platform's interests. Douyin, for instance, frequently hosts online events, more so than platforms like Weibo, which primarily relies on advertisers. This frequent event hosting helps Douyin expand the social and commercial network of its users, ultimately benefiting the platform. However, platforms that are less dependent on user-generated income may prioritise long-term user loyalty over short-term engagement, making them less inclined to focus on mobilizing immediate user engagement for its streamers. Social media platforms commonly promote participatory culture by offering built-in editing tools that make content creation easier, such as Instagram and Twitter's photo filters or Douyin's video editing features. These tools facilitate connections between users, making information exchange more efficient and enjoyable. Additionally, features like hashtags, trending topics, @ mentions, and other interactive feedback mechanisms are common ways to

create opportunities for user engagement. These accessible and engaging social features lead to increased user participation online, and the collective contributions of many users have become a significant part of digital content production. On social media, users take on various roles as producers, consumers, and contributors, and participatory culture aims to encourage and stimulate these roles to foster a thriving digital community while enhancing user loyalty.

Douyin exhibits more addictive elements that contribute to a stronger social media addiction compared to other platforms (Zhao, 2021). Its short video-based format makes it highly accessible, as it requires minimal technical skills and literacy to watch short videos that can be as brief as 15 seconds. Additionally, it encourages content that are clear delivery, easily digestible and quickly consumable, with favourable leisure and entertainment content. Many musicians have noted that creating entertaining and engaging content is crucial to capturing users' attention for their music on Douyin (Informant LFC, CZY). The continuous auto play and cycling of video recommendations create an overall atmosphere of entertainment (Southerton, 2021), which can be both distracting and pleasurable for users. In contrast to Douyin, the first generation of popular social media platforms emerged decades ago when broadband internet was not yet capable of real-time video playback. These earlier platforms, such as YouTube, primarily requires text-based searching and for long videos that required wider bandwidth. Currently, well-established social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram tend to emphasise single-media content. Douyin, as a more recent entrant into the social media landscape, specifically targeting short videos, has greatly benefited from advancements in internet speed and information technology. These advancements include innovations in big data analysis and algorithms

designed for personalised content recommendations. These features make Douyin an addictive social space and represent a sophisticated strategy for fostering participatory culture and enhancing user loyalty in the realm of social media.

### 6.2.2 A strengthened industrial network for creative industry

This section will highlight how Douyin strengthens its social network by connecting online resources. Douyin has created an accessible online platform that incentivises content creators for their online participation. By consistently providing digital spaces for the online public, such as comment sections, discussion topics, and forums, Douyin fosters temporary online communities where users can meet and exchange information. This phenomenon is particularly vital for creative industries, as culture and creativity naturally thrive in a network-friendly society (Lee, 2015). Creative professionals often draw inspiration from online knowledge exchange, which enhances their creativity. The proliferation of innovative creative content on Douyin has not only enhanced the user experience but has also amplified the commercial value that streamers bring to the platform. Therefore, Douyin actively promotes social connections on the platform, benefiting both its popularity and its potential commission earnings from popular streamers. Next, I will delve into three categories of social networks on Douyin based on the actors involved: individual-to-individual networks, individual-to-organization networks, and organization-to-platform interactions.

#### 1) The interpersonal network of musicians on Douyin

In the music industry on Douyin, where superstars, independent musicians, grassroots artists, and various other classes coexist and communicate relatively equally, cultivating beneficial individual relationships can significantly contribute to the career development of musicians, particularly independent artists. The era of social media is characterised by democratic communication and engagement (Loader and Mercea, 2012), offering easier, more direct, and private channels of communication between account holders. Today's digital media presents information in digital form, providing a significant advantage in how information is sought and followed. Streamers on digital media platforms have much easier access to online resources compared to offline channels, which is especially beneficial for novice and independent streamers with limited offline resources. In contrast to offline resources, where access may be limited, social media platforms automatically recommend resources to streamers. For example, Twitter's "Guess What You Like" feature suggests content based on user accounts and preferences, along with recommendations for similar or related streamers or content. These auto-feeds create an extended digital network that serves as a readily available resource for streamers, facilitating their online immersion in a particular field.

The individual-to-individual network on Douyin encompasses various connections between streamers, primarily between streamers themselves. Douyin has established multiple online spaces that facilitate streamers in enhancing their visibility within the industry and creating opportunities for connection and collaboration. This dynamic digital network significantly impacts music production on the platform. Streamers within the same field often follow each other's accounts, driven by the potential mutual

benefits and the opportunity to build interpersonal relationships for future cooperation. Cooperation among musicians on Douyin frequently relies on the concept of "*renqing*" (人情), a fundamental aspect of Chinese social etiquette. *Renqing* involves acts of kindness, reciprocation of favors, and fulfilling obligations (Bond, 2010). In the context of Douyin, *renqing* cooperation among streamers typically entails the exchange of resources. For example, a streamer with a substantial fan base might collaborate with another streamer on creating music videos to gain shared attention from each other's fans. These collaborations often involve introducing and crediting each other, fostering a sense of mutual recognition and respect (Informant Julian, 2022). By staying informed about each other's work and nurturing a strengthened network within the industry, musicians on Douyin create more career opportunities for themselves compared to those who rely solely on offline interactions. This underscores how cultural norms like "*renqing*" influence the dynamics of the social economy within the digital music industry, which has been shaped by technology.

Cooperation between streamers and paid collaborators is a common form of the individual-to-individual network on Douyin. The initiative and individualised cooperation among individuals and their paid audiences indicate an enhanced social economy consequence for the overall cultural and creative industry, benefiting either the platform, the practitioners, or both. Specifically, these collaborators can be fellow musicians offering paid services or individual advertisers seeking paid partnerships. Douyin actively encourages such cooperation among streamers due to the various monetization channels available on the platform, including e-commerce sales, live streaming donations, and product endorsements, all of which generate commissions

for Douyin. In addition to online collaborations, some musicians secure offline job opportunities through private messages, with payments arranged outside the platform. The additional income and benefits gained from their Douyin accounts serve as strong incentives for streamers to consistently update their digital presence, leading to further advancements in their digital content and access to market resources on Douyin. Individual major donors for live streamers can also be considered as paid collaborators since they are not just fans but also function as almost complete sponsors for the musician's live performances on Douyin (Informant JJP, 2022).

## 2) Individual-to-organization networks

Douyin has established partnerships with various music agencies, leading to significant organizational cooperation in musicians' online careers. One prominent type of organization in this context is MCNs (Multi-Channel Networks). MCNs are entities that collaborate with content creators, especially on video-sharing platforms like YouTube, offering a range of services such as content management, monetization, audience growth, and brand partnerships. In exchange for these services, MCNs typically receive a percentage of the content creators' earnings from the platform (Gardner, 2016). Similarly, Douyin facilitates cooperation through its platform Starmap (*xingtu*), which serves as an official agent for commercial advertisers. Starmap assists content creators, including musicians, in collaborating with advertisers and brands for promotional campaigns. In the process, Starmap earns commissions for its services (Douyin, 2021). Notably, Douyin has launched a programme for musicians called "*zhire xinghe*" (炙热星河), aimed at providing comprehensive support, including copyright agency services and traffic boosting, to encourage more musicians to join

the platform (Chinanews, 2022). Musicians often seek cooperation with music labels and copyright management services, which are crucial for their income. The choice of a particular agent for music copyright management varies among musicians based on their specific circumstances. For instance, internet popstars frequently sign their most popular songs with major live streaming services like NetEase Music and QQ Music (Tencent), as these platforms often result in higher click-through rates. On the other hand, established musicians may opt for smaller agents they trust, ensuring a higher commission rate from music royalties (Informant TLT, 2022). This initiative underscores Douyin's commitment to the digital music industry and its willingness to share the copyright landscape when possible. Given Douyin's dominant role in generating online traffic, musicians who sign up with the platform may receive additional benefits, particularly due to their potential contributions to Douyin's copyright ownership. This investment in the digital music industry not only serves economic interests but also underscores Douyin's motions in fostering a vibrant digital network that can be supportive to music streamers.

### 3) Organization-to-platform interactions

The emergence of Douyin has brought forth copyright challenges for major streaming services in China, compelling the Douyin platform to secure licenses from these services due to the extensive use of copyrighted content (Hale, 2020). Before obtaining these music licenses, numerous popular songs on Douyin had to be removed due to copyright infringement (36Kr, 2020). However, the process of negotiating these copyright issues is more intricate than merely acquiring music



licenses from major copyright holders like Tencent. Douyin has effectively demonstrated its potential for promoting music online, a quality that major music labels are eager to harness to enhance music exposure in the market. For example, Douyin has substantially increased music click-through rates through the viral and memetic spread of creative works (Seabrook, 2022). This phenomenon has led to hundreds of indie music pieces receiving unexpectedly high levels of attention, even if they were not produced by established superstars (Ma, 2019). It has become quite common for music by well-known artists, lesser-known talents, or grassroots musicians to accumulate millions of views on Douyin when appropriately promoted. As a result, Douyin has actively engaged in negotiations with major labels for partnerships in various ways, recognizing the potential for copyright holders to collaborate with Douyin in music advertising. In practise, Douyin often serves as an intermediary for music labels, facilitating connections between volunteer musicians and trends circulating on Douyin. This collaboration may involve musicians recreating copyrighted music for online trends, utilizing features such as music champions, hashtags. In return, Douyin will boost online traffic for the streamers' content that incorporates the promoted work (Informant AAWA, 2022).

On the flip side, Douyin has emerged as a competitor to existing industry giants and is actively vying for musicians and music copyright by offering various incentives on its platform. This intense competition between Douyin, similar social media platform Kuaishou (Mu, 2021), and major labels like Tencent has become a well-documented reality, frequently covered in news headlines (36Kr, 2020). One of Douyin's strategies to attract musicians and enhance their online presence is the Zhirexinghe musicians'

plan. This plan offers comprehensive services that include song promotion, lyric and music composition collaboration, music production and distribution, and data analysis (Douyin, 2022). The primary goal of this initiative is to entice musicians to sign up and share their music copyrights with Douyin, allowing music streamers to earn copyright royalties when their music is played on the platform. Musicians who decide to partner with *Zhirexinghe* by Douyin are likely to enjoy privileged status, such as increased online traffic, as this partnership aligns their interests with those of the platform. It's worth noting that *Zhirexinghe* has its own channels to promote musicians' work on other social platforms as well. However, this has led to some musicians expressing concerns about simultaneously being active on multiple platforms, as their popularity is not exclusively tied to Douyin. They fear that this may diminish their favor with Douyin and result in reduced online traffic (Informant MYG, 2022).

### 6.3 A relatively balanced opportunity for various streamers

Social media has given rise to a widely recognised phenomenon where streamers rapidly gain popularity, wealth, and elevated social status (Zhang et al., 2022; Craig et al., 2021). It has created a public perception that becoming an internet celebrity on Douyin is a shortcut to financial success and a pathway to higher social standing. There is a sense of opportunism among creative workers on Douyin, driven by the success stories of internet celebrities known as "*wanghong*." In China, the term "*wanghong*" refers to internet celebrities who have attracted significant public attention due to their strategic branding and monetization efforts, which sometimes involve crafting an artificial online persona. For instance, some female *wanghong* may pose as glamorous beauty influencers to attract fans, whom they then promote products for

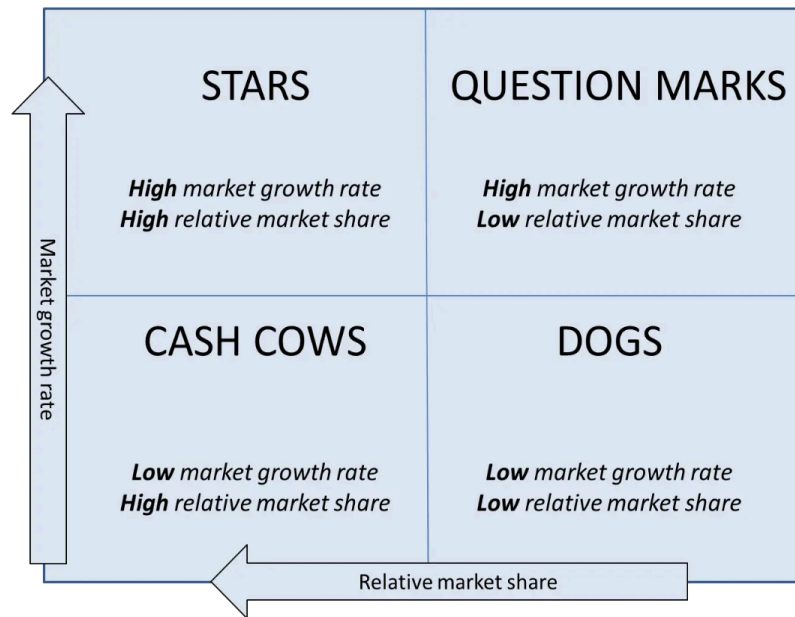
(Guo, 2022). The substantial incomes earned by *wanghong* have led media enterprises to engage with them through their online accounts. Some *wanghong* even go as far as sharing luxury hotel rooms with numerous peers to create the illusion of wealth (Yue, 2020). In the music industry on Douyin, certain characteristics, such as the use of sexual connotations, dramatic storylines, distinct identities, and emotional expressions of affection in their digital presence, can attract more public attention (Craig, 2021). While these tactics may not be employed by musicians themselves, they are part of the widely recognised "traffic code" for boosting online popularity (multiple informants, 2022).

The evaluation of Douyin's platform rules and their impact on benefiting creative streamers can significantly influence musicians' commitment to the platform. Musicians may choose Douyin over other platforms if they perceive that it offers greater advantages for their entrepreneurial efforts. Social media platforms like Douyin strive to establish a sustainable ecosystem or digital marketplace where streamers can earn income, users remain engaged, and the platform generates commissions. In contrast to platforms that have primarily rely on platform advertising revenue or have limited monetization opportunities for streamers, Douyin aligns its interests with the overall income of streamers and the enhancement of user experience. Some musicians have expressed their appreciation for Douyin as a supportive social media platform that provides better support for the career development and economic gains of independent musicians compared to platforms that prioritise superstars and capital investment (Multiple informants, 2022). While some musicians may be aware of tactics like the "traffic code," they also understand that such tactics alone may not guarantee

sustainable progress in their online careers (Informant WTDG, 2022). Achieving sustained popularity and income on the platform depends on various other factors determined by Douyin's business model. Therefore, it becomes crucial for streamers to actively contribute to Douyin's economic growth and user attraction, as an alternative way of capital investment.

While the practise may not be verifiable, streamers on Douyin may be strategically grouped and treated differently to maintain a balanced platform ecosystem that aligns with Douyin's business interests. The BCG matrix, also known as the Boston Consulting Group matrix (Porter and Strategy, 1980), can help explain how Douyin assesses its platform users' contributions to the digital creative market, the users themselves, and the platform's interests. Social media platforms like Douyin often categorise their users into several segments based on their impact on user attraction and economic gain, as well as their growth potential. These segments typically include "Stars," "Cash Cows," "Question Marks," and "Dogs" (see figure below).

Figure 3 Potential user segments classified by Douyin algorithm <sup>25</sup>



Overall, Douyin's platform strategy plays a vital role in shaping the performance of creative workers in terms of their online accounts and entrepreneurial endeavors. The platform strategically manages different user segments, balancing the interests of streamers, users, and itself for a sustainable partnership. This approach ensures that various streamer groups, such as stars, cash cows, and question marks, contribute to a well-balanced distribution of online traffic and public attention. In response to this, Douyin may apply different stages in specific to the four users' segments.

Stars on Douyin are streamers known for their exceptional ability to attract large audiences and generate significant economic contributions. These "wanghong"

<sup>25</sup> BCG Matrix and its Four Quadrants: <https://www.marketingstudyguide.com/bcg-matrix-and-its-four-quadrants/> (ACCESS DATE)

streamers tend to amass substantial fan bases or create substantial economic value for the platform. However, there appears to be an intrinsic relationship between the platform and these stars in terms of economic interdependence, traffic allocation, and user loyalty. The potential interest conflict is partly because the platform aims to maintain its dominant negotiating power over users and prevent the excessive concentration of public attention on a small group of digital streamers. Additionally, there are concerns about ensuring developing opportunities for other types of users who are new to the field, thereby fostering a thriving career vision for a broader range of content creators within relatively fair opportunities to develop. Some interviewed top *wanghong* musicians have shared their experiences of encountering restrictions and receiving periodic support from Douyin when their accounts reach a certain level (Informant AAWA, EHFQ, NCFJ, 2022). Furthermore, in specific cases, a popular user's music performs significantly better in parts of the platform, such as music rankings, rather than on the individual's homepage (Informant XLX, 2022). This observation suggests that Douyin employs various strategies to manage and control the momentum of these rapidly growing accounts.

The user segment of Cash Cows consists of stable contributors, typically middle-class streamers on Douyin. They are likely to maintain their productivity for the platform and represent the largest number of streamers. Cash cows frequently update their accounts and content, making them the most active group. They rely on a relatively lower income from the platform, which motivates them to continue working online to secure a stable income. These music streamers may not compete in a large market or generate substantial economic benefits on the platform due to reasons such as their

account types, music genre, and individual traits. However, the Douyin platform still offers them valuable benefits for their careers and lives. This additional advantage encourages the streamers to keep working on their digital careers in the hopes that their account situation will improve over time. Some live streamers interviewed only receive income when they are actively live, so they must maintain their presence to retain their market base (Informant NCG, 2022). In some cases, Douyin provides support to boost streamers' digital traffic occasionally, helping them regain confidence in their account performance and motivating them to continue updating their accounts (Informant XLX, 2022).

The user segment of Question Marks typically consists of new accounts with a growing market and the potential to expand further with additional time and support. These streamers have the potential to transition into other streamer types as they mature and gain more experience, especially as they explore their competitiveness within a niche market. The Douyin platform may actively promote these potential accounts as an alternative choice for users, diversifying the fan base and preventing excessive loyalty to a few dominant accounts in a similar field. This strategy indicates an approach that social platforms may maintain a balanced power dynamic in the digital market and mitigate the risk of user loss when streamers consider leaving the platform for another. This separation of power between emerging and established accounts contributes to the explanation of why some musicians' accounts, despite starting with a small fan base, experience sudden popularity boosts for certain pieces of work, propelling them into more established streamer categories.

The user segment known as "Dogs" constitutes the largest user base on Douyin. While individual users within this group may not have the potential to develop highly valuable accounts individually, collectively, they play a significant role as an audience base on the platform. Although individual users in the "Dog" group may have limited impact on the platform's interests, the collective user base is vital for the overall attractiveness of the social platform. A large and engaged fan base represents a significant asset and capital for Douyin as it seeks to establish its business empire in the digital realm. Maintaining a positive general user experience is crucial to retaining user engagement on the social platform. A large and active user base serves as an indicator of the platform's popularity and economic potential, making it attractive to investors and advertisers. Additionally, the mass user base provides valuable digital assets in the form of user data, offering insights into market potential, advertising opportunities, consulting services, marketing analysis, customer behavior patterns, and more. These assets contribute to Douyin's position in the digital platform industry and its ability to attract various business sectors.

In summary, this section provides insights into the Douyin ecosystem by highlighting its digital market affordances and environment. Douyin appears to meticulously balance the interests of its streamers, users, and itself to maintain a sustainable and promising partnership. It underscores how the platform's digital infrastructure, business model, and other unique traits, such as its entertaining atmosphere and additive algorithm, have created a thriving online market, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The section then shifts its focus to the highly socialised networks within Douyin, enabling diverse levels of online socialization and cooperation among



individuals, organizations, and the Douyin platform itself. Specifically, it explores Douyin's role in the digital music industry, including music agencies, copyright management, and various supportive services for music production and marketing aimed at its music streamers. Furthermore, this section introduces the concept of user segmentation, which categorises users into four potential segments--stars, cash cows, question marks, and dogs based on the BCG matrix. This concept offers a potential explanation for the different status of streamer's digital account, either growth, stagnation, fluctuations, and declines from the platform political and economic perspective. In doing so, it establishes a functional ecosystem where all stakeholders contribute social, financial, and political advantages and engage in negotiations to determine the value they can specifically attain on the Douyin platform.

### **6.3 Dynamics in online music production and consumption**

This section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the digital music industry within the broader context of cultural and creative industries on Douyin. It underscores the pivotal role of social practises, including content creators and other mass users, in shaping the platform's digital infrastructure, algorithmic rules, and the overall industrial landscape (Klawitter, 2018). Given the significant differences between digital and offline market dynamics, reassessing market conditions and gaining up-to-date insights into the music industry within the digital sphere is imperative. The objective is to examine key aspects of the digital music industry on Douyin, spanning from production to consumption. This digital market environment serves as the backdrop for the emerging digital music industry and the digital

entrepreneurship of music streamers, where they earn income and develop their music careers. Understanding the specific nuances of the digital music market on the Douyin platform is essential to grasp how music streamers sustain their digital music careers in a unique context.

This section begins by contextualizing the digital music industry within the broader landscape of digital industries on Douyin. It critically reviews the status of the music industry within this specific platform context. Subsequently, it delves into the distinctive features of the digital music market in terms of music market dynamics, production processes, and consumption patterns on the Douyin platform. These features are shaped by the social and economic practises of mass users online. Additionally, it sheds light on issues such as user variety and copyright infringement within the sociable digital network on Douyin, where copyright restrictions are more relaxed. Finally, the section zooms in on music consumption on Douyin, examining typical audiences and customers, consumption spaces, and patterns. By exploring the specific characteristics and details of the digital music market on Douyin, this section highlights the distinct music industry where many *wanghong* rise to prominence and achieve various milestones.

### 6.3.1 Music as one component of the digital creative industries

In recent years, social media has become a crucial space for independent musicians to stay informed about market trends and connect with their fans online. This shift has, to some extent, reduced the influence of traditional gatekeepers and positioned social

media as intermediaries that facilitate direct connections between musicians and their fanbase (Shabbir, 2016, Banks, 2008). Popular social media platforms like Douyin have significantly accelerated this trend, providing creative individuals with the means to establish independence from traditional music agencies and access the digital market through social media intermediation. During the 1990s, major music labels acted as gatekeepers within the music industry (Pratt, 2008; McLeod, 2005), exercising control over virtually every aspect of musicians' careers, ranging from production to fan engagement and consumption. The relationship between musicians and their agencies was often characterised as "talent scouting and product development" (Lin, 2009, p. 221). Music labels wielded substantial influence over musicians' activities, including production, marketing, and the commercialization of individual artists as celebrities (ibid). This industrial practise frequently required musicians to adhere to strict contracts governing both their professional work and personal lives to maintain a consistent brand image. Consequently, many musicians sought independence from their agencies. In this evolving landscape, social media platforms have emerged as intermediaries in the creative industries, amassing a large collective of content creators (streamers) and users, altering the dynamics of the music industry, and offering new opportunities for independent musicians.

Douyin wields significant control over online resources and has the authority to determine the prices for its services, effectively establishing itself as the gatekeeper of the digital creative market. Douyin has cultivated a favourable online environment that facilitates efficient digital networking, and its commercial value arises from aligning the needs of various actors within the platform. Social media platforms like

Douyin, which have built their business models around intermediating interactions among industry participants (Hess and von Walter, 2007), have acquired substantial influence, enabling them to compete with traditional gatekeepers in the music industry. Particularly during the 2019 pandemic, Douyin managed to assemble a thriving online community and attract numerous creative streamers to participate. Within Douyin's digital ecosystem, various actors, including streamers, users, and industries, have the opportunity to connect and engage in mutually beneficial interactions. Douyin serves as an intermediary between streamers and their audiences, facilitating the production and consumption of creative content and earning a commission in the process. It also acts as an intermediary between organizations in the music industry and platform users, facilitating advertising payments. Furthermore, Douyin intermediates between streamers and creative industries, enabling various forms of collaboration for profit. As a result, this position affords Douyin considerable negotiating power in its interactions with traditional gatekeepers in the music industry.

Research has demonstrated that the algorithms governing social media platforms are not neutral but instead reflect the platform's underlying values (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is vital for social media platforms to mediate the other parties interests to ensure long-term profitability and sustainability. In the Chinese context, Douyin must adhere to political interests and fulfill responsibilities such as content censorship, dissemination of official propaganda, and managing pseudonymous cheerleading (King et al., 2017, p. 484). Content censorship involves detecting and deleting inappropriate digital content, aligning with political or legal requirements (Ryan et al., 2020). Internet celebrities today are also involved in online propaganda due to their

high public awareness and influence within fan communities (King et al., 2017, p. 484). Pseudonymous cheerleading refers to the practise of individuals using pseudonyms or anonymous identities to express support or enthusiasm for a particular cause, person, or content. This can be used to artificially boost the popularity or perception of selected content online (ibid). Xu and Yang (2021) describe Chinese 'cultural governance' within two dimensions: 'governance of celebrity' and 'governance through celebrity' (p.484). This indicates the party's power to both control and regulate celebrities while working with them to serve political or cultural purposes.

In real practise, Chinese social media platforms may encourage internet celebrities to participate in related online campaigns or promote trending content to achieve specific digital exposure goals (Chen, 2020). However, in some extreme cases, certain *wanghong* streamers may face official and public bans due to their actions or content that goes against socialist values or ethical norms (Craig, 2021). This can include content that promotes non-traditional gender expressions or explicit sexual orientation, as well as activities such as prostitution and surrogacy (Gu, 2021), which are considered unethical or inappropriate in Chinese society. Engagement in such actions or the creation of such content can lead to a permanent ban of the digital account and have a detrimental impact on the celebrities' careers.

The algorithms of social platforms not only reflect the platform's values but also serve the interests of various contributors (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The Douyin platform has evolved into a digital space where political, cultural, and economic practises intersect, and its complex algorithm is influenced by various factors. Popular social media

platforms like Douyin, with tens of millions of users, wield significant cultural and economic influence, making them potential political spaces subject to regulation and oversight (Carah and Angus, 2018; Willson, 2017). Douyin has encountered challenges in the Chinese market related to issues such as privacy and data security, illegal content (including politically sensitive content), financial regulations, and misleading consumer practises (Yu, 2018). Additionally, Douyin has faced obstacles when expanding into the global market due to concerns about national security, content moderation, and competition from established social media platforms (Biancotti, 2019). Navigating these challenges can be complex, and Douyin must adjust its algorithms to ensure the security and sustainability of its platform's business. Douyin have maintained a reciprocal relationship with the local government in economic promotion. For instance, Douyin has partnered to promote city branding for tourism, disseminate local cultures, and contribute to poverty alleviation efforts in rural areas (Xu, 2021). These partnerships enable Douyin to align with regional development goals and cultivate positive relationships with local authorities, potentially providing future political advantages, such as avoiding huge administrative fines or penalties.

### 6.3.2 The way of digital music production: diversity, plagiarism, and engagement

Douyin has created a dynamic environment that fosters knowledge exchange online, allowing both ordinary users and copyright owners to harness the potential of the digital network. Remarkably, Douyin has effectively addressed music copyright issues, creating an environment akin to a "creative commons" (Creative Commons, 2021). In this setting, users provide licenses that allow creators to share their work under certain

conditions while also leveraging the work of others. This community-driven convention is outlined in Douyin's Terms of Service and facilitates knowledge exchange by mitigating concerns related to copyright, rather than imposing strict protections on copyrighted works. In the realm of music, Douyin permits ordinary users to create content using copyrighted music as background music. This approach grants greater exposure and potential income from various sources, contributing to the online popularity of streamers and boosting the visibility of musicians' copyrighted works.

Protecting music works in advance is crucial to prevent plagiarism on Douyin, where plagiarism refers to the unauthorised copying or imitation of someone else's work. The open digital network on Douyin makes it relatively easy for users to discover, recreate, and replicate another person's content. It's not uncommon for someone's work to gain popularity when others perform or replicate it. Furthermore, social media platforms like Douyin have fostered a trend of imitating popular content when sharing information. Interestingly, mimicking or imitating popular works can lead to increased popularity, as the Douyin algorithm often spreads trending content widely. However, this practise of imitation may result in economic losses for musicians if their music is not copyrighted. In such cases, the original musician may not receive royalties or compensation on other music streaming platforms when their work is mimicked or replicated by others on Douyin. Therefore, it's essential for musicians to strategically protect their copyright interests outside of Douyin. Copyright ownership still provides robust protection offline and plays a significant role in a musician's income.

For instance, independent musicians often remix or adapt the works of other musicians, leading to significant popularity on Douyin and subsequent earnings from these remixed versions, which are based on other artists' original work. In typical scenarios, well-known musicians sign contracts with music labels that handle all copyright licensing matters with the original music owners. This ensures that musicians earn royalties from the fully developed, copyrighted versions of the music. The income generated is then shared between the remixer and the original musician, with each receiving a portion (Informant XLX, 2022). However, if the original music is posted on Douyin without proper copyright registered, it is unable for the musician to assert their rights over the music and claim royalties offline. This is especially true when the original music is a short piece and is not adequately protected by copyright law. Hence, it is essential for musicians to copyright their work either before sharing it on Douyin or as soon as they observe a surge in online popularity. This proactive step safeguards their creations from being freely distributed and recreated, significantly reducing the risk of economic losses due to unprotected music plagiarism.

Digital public attention in the online cultural and creative sphere often displays a distributed and decentralised nature. On platforms like Douyin, users have the flexibility to effortlessly transition from one piece of content to another at minimal or no cost. This characteristic is especially prominent on social media platforms specializing in short videos or microblogs, where users seek quick and easily digestible information within a brief timeframe. Consequently, this digital landscape has opened doors for emerging and lesser-known content creators to be discovered by the online audience and establish a dedicated fan base. To thrive as a content creator, it's vital for



streamers to differentiate between "viewers" and "consumers" of online content on Douyin. "Viewers" typically engage with content on a superficial level, quickly scanning through various themes, while "consumers" or "audiences" invest more time and commitment to deeply engage with and comprehend the content. Successful content creators, including musicians, must possess the skills needed to transform casual viewers into engaged audiences, particularly given the limited attention spans of contemporary audiences. Today's audiences demand content that is not only stimulating but also delivered efficiently, therefore, it is essential for musicians to captivate viewers in a short time in an impressive and innovative way. In contrast, those who adhere rigidly to traditional music consumption values, such as complete music compositions, may face challenges in capturing the fleeting attention of impatient audience.

### 6.3.3 Music consumption in digital: integrated, subliminal, and long-tail

Douyin boasts a vast and diverse user base encompassing people of varying ages, social classes, genders, locations, sexuality, race, ethnicity, education background, experiences, and purposes, which leads to a rich tapestry of tastes and preferences for online content. Contemporary social media platforms, including Douyin, have broken down traditional boundaries, providing users with easier and quicker access to a wide array of related fields and interests. This shift has fundamentally transformed the way people consume cultural and creative content. Users are constantly informed as information flows seamlessly through the intricate digital social network, facilitated by features such as comments sections, followers, and connections with peers in the

same field. In this context, social media platforms like Douyin transcend their role as mere marketplaces; they function as dynamic public spaces where people are intricately linked and connected more efficiently than ever before in the online realm. Consequently, the creative industry has the potential to reach a vast online public, with many individuals who may not even be considered target customers in the offline market such as rural people living in remote area. Douyin has transformed into an online community that serves as an extension of the offline world, presenting fresh opportunities for content creation and consumption. This evolving digital public comprises both content creators and emerging consumers of the digital market, representing a potential market niche with distinctive dynamics and preferences. This shift underscores the platform's role in connecting individuals from various backgrounds and enabling them to participate actively in the digital creative ecosystem.

Music on Douyin has become an integral component of multimedia content, with its value integrated into and represented by the final creative work. The consumption of digital creative works on Douyin is often dispersed across different timeframe and locations. Music consumption on the platform has evolved beyond just listening to music; it now takes various forms, including serving as background music, enhancing live streaming performances, and adding value to other digital content and activities. Musicians play a crucial role in supporting successful online events, whether structurally or by providing emotional stimulation, in the cultural and economic events hosted on Douyin. The widespread use of music across diverse digital spaces elevated the sense of music use on Douyin. Digital music consumption on Douyin occurs over extended time frames, encompassing daily and yearly scales. Throughout

the year, numerous recorded or real-time digital works circulate on Douyin, which operates 24 hours a day in China. The platform's constant activity enables music consumption to occur at any time and place feasible for users. The frequent exposure to music integrated into short videos on Douyin can have a subliminal impact on users, with many finding themselves unconsciously learning melodies (Blanchard, 2016). In essence, music consumption on Douyin can be a passive and integrated experience. Even musicians who may not receive explicit credit for their music's consumption on the platform can still benefit from increased recognition, as the familiarity of their music strongly correlates with its popularity as a cultural work.

Music consumption on Douyin has undergone significant transformations, manifesting in three distinct patterns. The first pattern is the "music familiarity-to-popularity" model, as previously mentioned. It involves users repeatedly encountering background music in short videos on Douyin, which leads to them becoming familiar with the music. This familiarity results in higher engagement with the music on major music streaming platforms, ultimately boosting its popularity. This increased popularity can lead to higher music royalty generated by listeners and generate additional commercial value for the musicians. The second consumption pattern is characterised by major sponsorships. In this scenario, the digital careers of music streamers are sustained through substantial donations from a select group of dedicated fans. While a minority of users primarily sponsor the account, the majority of users collectively contribute to the musician's income as a supplementary source. The third transformation in music consumption on Douyin can be likened to a "long-tail" pattern, a concept originally proposed by Anderson (2012) in the fields of business and economics. However, it

can also be extended to the context of *wanghong* on the platform. This pattern signifies the emergence of a small number of very popular *wanghong* amidst the growing number of less popular participants in the digital platform. In other words, there is a concentration of popularity at the "head" (popular *wanghong*) and a much larger number of participants in the "tail" (less popular *wanghong*) of the platform. The "long-tail" effect in the context of Douyin's music consumption also reflects the substantial economic contributions made by millionaire streamers on the platform. These popular streamers are part of the "head" and contribute significantly to the platform's music economy. On the other hand, the "long tail" represents the collective contributions of numerous less popular streamers, catering to niche audiences and adding to the platform's diversity and content offerings.

#### **6.4 Emerging economic spaces across broader industries**

These sections are of significant importance in our comprehensive exploration of the economic dynamics of the digital creative market on Douyin. They provide valuable insights into how Douyin has merged with the music industry and given rise to new economic and cultural paradigms within the digital sphere of a variety of sources and availabilities. This section first introduces the concept of the digital market as a hybrid economic space, where traditional and digital economic practises converge in the digital realm. One of its key focuses is the diverse spectrum of music production, which has not only revolutionised how music is created but has also resulted in a rich variety of creative digital content. This section aims to illuminate how this hybrid economic space stimulates innovation and creativity in music production, opening up

opportunities within the emerging digital music economy. The second focus of this section is the notion of liberated economic value within digital social platforms like Douyin. Douyin has democratised the digital creative market, empowering ordinary users and enabling them to carve out unique spaces and audiences. Specifically, I explore how Douyin empowers emerging content creators to become *wanghong* musicians, challenging the field dominance of established musicians.

The third section focuses on the culture economy and digital collectivism, highlighting their pivotal roles in shaping the digital creative market on Douyin. It sheds light on how users collectively influence cultural trends and values within the platform, extending its impact beyond economic considerations. The third section reveals Douyin's position as a cultural powerhouse and investigates how the music industry, as an integral part of the broader creative sector, is influenced by digital collectivism in its industrial practises. It will highlight the collective consumption that is shaped through integrating into wider creative industries within an extended economic context, therefore, a larger exposure and higher economic potential for those music works. In summary, these sections collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of how Douyin has reshaped the cultural and economic landscape of its digital creative market, and consequently, an evolving digital music economy.

#### 6.4.1 Hybrid economic space for market diversity

*wanghong* influencers is uniquely positioned to facilitate knowledge exchange and resource-sharing between the online and offline music industries. They serve as

conduits for the cross-pollination of ideas, experiences, and opportunities, further blurring the boundaries between these two realms. Social practises on the platform often lead to collaborations among specialists in the digital music field, welcoming new resources and idea for development. Music industry on Douyin is an extension of its offline counterpart; in addition, it is a transformative version with distict characteristics not typically found in traditional music markets. Specially, digital market forms an ecosystem with its own market base, practitioners, profit models, and user behaviors specific to the digital realm. As a result, the digital music industry presents new opportunities and dynamics, including music resources, talent availability, support structures, and career prospects. In essence, social media platforms like Douyin have given rise to a hybridised music industry that has adapted and evolved within the virtual online environment that have both similarity and distinction among the two. There are crucial connection from online to offline market, primarily through the musicians themselves. Many music practitioners originally straddle both online and offline spaces, serving as bridges that link the two domains. Besides, those internet celebrities such as *wanghong* musicians who has gain their identities on the platform after achieving social status and financial success has become the new entrant to the music industry.

The openness, accessibility, and diversity of the music network within Douyin have the potential to attract a broader demographic to engage in cultural work and foster creativity across various social strata, thereby contributing to the cultural economy. Digital music industry on Douyin shares an ambiguous space with various online entertainment activities and economic practises that integrate music components.

Similarly, music contributions on Douyin can be sporadic and frequently come from general users who are not necessarily tied to the industrial domain. The music ecosystem within Douyin resembles an open network in which a multitude of practises intermittently engage with and disengage from content streamers. In theory, if Douyin were to continue allowing this network to flourish and extend the opportunity for every ordinary user to participate in the algorithmic processes without strict boundaries, we might witness a music ecosystem characterised by a rich diversity of music production and producers. It's important to note that the term 'industry' in the context of digital music on Douyin could be somewhat misleading. Identifying clear boundaries for this industry on the platform is challenging. Music practitioners on Douyin do not necessarily categorise themselves as traditional musicians. They come from diverse backgrounds and engage with music for various reasons. Music performance on Douyin is not limited to musicians; many individuals use music as a means to attract attention, such as during product promotion or audience interaction in live talk shows. Similarly, popular song performances on Douyin may originate from non-musicians who creatively incorporate music elements into their content.

Douyin is well-known for using online traffic to nurture online celebrities and promote popular content. However, the platform tends to give priority to the creation of trending content, concentrating its efforts on elevating a select portion of digital content rather than evenly distributing public attention across a wide range of content. Online traffic plays a pivotal role in Douyin's strategy, as it serves as a valuable resource and catalyst for promoting internet celebrities and attracting higher capital investments. While social media platforms like Douyin have encouraged a diverse

population to express themselves online, leading to a thriving cultural content landscape, it's essential to recognise that the platform possesses significant control over content exposure. This control significantly influences the platform's interests. Douyin excels in creating highly popular content that garners millions of likes and views, thereby giving rise to internet celebrities. These individuals and popular content contribute to the platform's ability to amass large user bases and attract substantial investments. Consequently, Douyin prioritises the cultivation of internet celebrities and the strategic allocation of online traffic to those with higher commercial potential. Ultimately, while the music industrial network on social platforms like Douyin thrives at the production level due to users' efforts, the platform consistently places its own interests at the forefront to potentially maximise its economic gains. These interests primarily revolve around increasing user engagement, attracting investors, and maintaining its status as a leading social media platform.

#### 6.4.2 Liberated economic value for those less recognised

The power dynamics between social media platforms and their content creators have undergone a significant transformation, opening up new economic opportunities for a broader spectrum of ordinary content creators. This evolving economic and social relationship between content creators (streamers) and their audiences is evident in their roles and practises. These changes can be attributed to the distinct social structures and communication methods shaped by the platform's digital infrastructure, which, in turn, have been molded by the collective practises of users over time. Specailly, emerging social groups, such as internet celebrities, professional live streamers (zhubo), major donors (referred to as "Big Brothers" and "Big Sisters" as a



sign of respect), and video bloggers (Shipin bozhu), exemplify the shifting career paths and livelihoods of creative workers in the era of social media. It can be argued that social media, characterised by the democratization of online expression (Loader and Mercea, 2012), has unlocked economic value from a diverse range of social classes, particularly the middle and lower classes (grassroots). In the realm of music, traditional superstars primarily generate income through their popularity and music royalties from major music streaming services, a situation that is mirrored in other major countries (Littlewood, 2019). These major copyright holders typically give less attention to independent or lesser-known musicians, as these platforms tend to prioritise content from major stakeholders who have signed lucrative contracts with well-funded music organizations. However, this dynamic has shifted on social media platforms like Douyin, which align the platform's business interests with a larger number of general content creators rather than solely focusing on superstar figures.

The rapidly evolving landscape of social media has given rise to a blooming market for mass music production, offering greater economic potential for music works to compete with superstar-level popularity. Social media platforms have the capacity to generate trending topics and content that capture significant public attention, and algorithms play a pivotal role in steering online popularity. Douyin's algorithm is designed to be responsive to user interactions and targeted towards specific market segments. Consequently, creative works that exhibit statistically high user interaction tend to receive broader exposure (Zhao, 2021). This process can be likened to market trials, where higher popularity often serves as an indicator of the work's positive commercial potential. In the music realm, online music works that gain popularity are

more likely to attract the attention of music labels. Musicians may then sign contracts with these labels, allowing them to earn income from the music royalties generated by the substantial online engagement and playback rates (Informant XLX, 2022). Moreover, high music exposure also carries other forms of commercial value for musicians' accounts. This is because increased popularity leads to the growth of fan bases and improved account performance. The vast user base on social media platforms, coupled with the strategic efforts of content creators, fosters intense competition for online popularity. Achieving popularity can bring fortune and fame, thereby incentivizing content creators to continually enhance the quality, diversity, and quantity of their creative output. The fast-paced nature of this market acts as an incubator for creative works with high popularity and commercial potential. Consequently, this environment presents investment opportunities with lower risk profiles and the potential for high economic returns. Notably, contemporary music labels may find it more advantageous to sign already popular music from internet musicians and negotiate the terms of copyright sharing, rather than heavily investing in the offline market to enhance the value of copyrighted works. Gradually, the music market has begun to shift, to some extent, from one dominated by a minority of offline pop stars to one that is more evenly shared by a multitude of internet musicians.

The platform's highly monetised channels have effectively cultivated original stars within the digital music industry. Musicians on Douyin can achieve substantial economic advantages that surpass what traditional live streaming services can provide. This shift has opened up new opportunities for independent musicians to thrive in the digital landscape. Traditionally, music companies have held massive

copyright portfolios, and this has been the primary income source for many musicians. However, it's essential to recognise that music copyright alone provides limited income, particularly for less popular indie musicians. Only a prestigious minority of musicians can rely solely on copyright income to make a living. The majority of musicians face income instability and often need to take on multiple gig-based jobs to sustain their livelihoods. This financial insecurity and limited career development opportunities have made Douyin an attractive platform for creative individuals facing similar challenges. Prominent social platforms like Douyin have played a pivotal role in empowering independent musicians to explore their commercial potential and contribute to the "pan-entertainment" industry online, as described by Qu et al. (2021). This term refers to a diverse and all-encompassing entertainment industry that encompasses various forms of media and content and universal users. Douyin adopts a different approach, emphasizing social connections and offering a relatively equal playing field for musicians to seek support and exposure to the digital public (Woods, 2020). The platform has a particular interest in highlighting independent musicians for several reasons. First, Douyin has faced challenges in establishing copyright partnerships with major labels in some areas of its business (36Kr, 2020). To address this, Douyin has implemented policies aimed at incentivizing indie musicians to generate emerging new copyrighted work on the platform, therefore, a strive for the negotiating power from current economic landscape of music labels.

The music industry in China has undergone a transformation due to the influence of powerful technology platforms like Douyin. A notable trend is the shift of social media platforms, such as Douyin, taking on roles traditionally played by music agencies in

terms of music marketing and cooperation facilitation. These new tech giants actively compete for creative talent, users, audiences, copyrights, and market share, challenging the established economic landscape dominated by major music labels and music streaming services. While they do collaborate with major labels on copyrighted content, they also present competition in the digital industry. Music companies find themselves in a competitive market, where the emerging influence of social media platforms is reshaping the industry. They must strive to maintain their economic advantages, which include established musicians, a significant copyright portfolio, and an existing user base. Notably, during more than half of the interviews conducted, musicians reported earning little to no income from copyrighted works. Instead, they rely on various income sources on Douyin, such as live performances, online music training, e-commerce sales, and offers for offline performances received through Douyin. Many independent musicians have explored their commercial value as part-time musicians contributing to the digital music industry while remaining outside the confines of major music streaming platforms. In conclusion, the thriving digital music industry in the era of social media places a spotlight on independent musicians and practitioners, creating a supportive environment for them to realise their economic potential. This phenomenon can be described as a liberation of value from emerging social groups that had previously not gained significant presence and influence within the digital music industry.

#### 6.4.3 Exploration of digital collectivism for culture economy

Social media platforms have introduced a collective approach to music consumption, where paid users subsidise music production for those who cannot afford it, ensuring

free access to digital content. In essence, the cost of creating digital music works is shared among users, with some contributing financially through various consumption ways on the Douyin platform, while others offer their attention, interaction, and feedback. Douyin has established a digital market that requires minimal investment for individuals to produce music, while simultaneously reducing costs for audiences to access digital content. Social media platforms like Douyin, characterised by their large user base and active participation, create an environment conducive to creative production and consumption. This, in turn, has led to a surge in digital content creators in the market, with the potential for higher income. The advent of digital practices has significantly minimised the costs associated with creative expression, including time, energy, money, and social effort. This reduction in barriers has encouraged more individuals to embark on online careers, as they gain greater control over their creative endeavors and reduce reliance on expensive services. Furthermore, the cost of accessing digital content has substantially decreased, with the primary "currency" being the audience's attention. People can access digital content for free, with no monetary prerequisites for consumption. In addition, unpaid contributions possibly play a crucial role in enhancing the exposure of content creators' work on the platform, as their attention contributes to the algorithm's evaluation of the quality of the streamers' accounts.

Simultaneously, this digital collectivism within the music industry maximises streamers' income by providing them with multiple monetization channels and the opportunity to attract an increasing number of paid audiences through the platform's algorithmic reach. Consequently, the income generated from these paid audiences,

drawn from a broad market base, may prove sufficient for musicians to sustain themselves, even those with smaller niches and fewer offline audiences. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the context of China, where the potential audience base is massive, increasing the likelihood of acquiring paid users and larger donations from the collective online public. Many independent musicians have reaped the benefits of Douyin's extensive user population, as it operates as an all-in-one mobile application. They can continue their music careers with the support of numerous major donors. This can also be viewed from the perspective of cultural preservation, wherein Douyin has provided a platform for various niche artistic forms, expanding their fan bases and economic returns. It's important to note that, like many other platforms, Douyin still operates on a winner-takes-all logic, where a select few garner the majority of attention and income. To some extent, the digital market on Douyin practises a form of collectivism in digital consumption, where those who are economically better off support those with fewer resources.

This integration of music into a multitude of creative content and services online has given rise to a new method of conveying cultural works to a broader audience. Music is no longer consumed in isolation; instead, it has evolved into a highly adaptable form of cultural and social symbolism that fulfills various social needs and aids in the delivery of information. This integrated approach to music consumption has led to a deeper connection with other cultural and creative markets on the Douyin platform, resulting in a larger audience base and higher market value than initially anticipated by the industry. Music on Douyin has found a novel way to demonstrate its financial viability by seamlessly integrating itself into various other industries. Music is now

amalgamated with different elements to compose diverse digital works, offering emotional, functional, and creative support to a wide range of digital content that may not be inherently related to music. For instance, music serves as background audio for live streams and video content, and it also facilitates online expression and interaction among individuals in various fields, often without proper recognition of copyright. The network of creative markets on Douyin has made it challenging to trace and measure the economic contribution of a single industry since audiences pay for the final form of the creative work, rather than paying for individual components. Even though audiences may be customers of the music work, they may not consciously realise that they are financially supporting the music. The cost associated with music production has been seamlessly transferred into other creative markets on Douyin, often unconsciously, benefiting musicians through increased exposure and market familiarity.

There has long been a complex relationship between the social and economic value of cultural works, particularly in the context of expanding their reach to larger audiences. Cultural works often strive for broader public attention, while economic production necessitates payment for access to these works. In the past, economic value was relatively assured when cultural content was distributed in physical formats, as access required payment from a larger number of people. However, with the digitization of cultural works in the 1990s, physical and geographical barriers to access became less significant, as digital copies could be easily shared an unlimited number of times. The widespread sharing of cultural content for free online posed a significant threat to the economic sustainability of cultural industries, leading to the introduction

of copyright laws aimed at curbing unauthorised distribution and preserving the industry's financial viability (Leyshon, 2003; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). These copyright laws seek to strike a balance between the transmission needs of cultural works and the economic rights associated with their commercial production (Pang, 2012). They establish guidelines for the proper use and protection of owners' rights during the transmission of cultural works (Pang, 2012). However, the dynamics of cultural transmission often reflect the law of value, where a lower price can increase accessibility, while higher income may necessitate higher pricing. Cultural and creative industries have developed strategies to navigate these pricing conflicts. For example, music box office often offer privilege seats or premium services to individuals willing to make a greater commitment and pay more for access to cultural content. This approach allows for lower entry-level prices to access a wider audience base with a lower down price covered by the premium services.

The organic arrangement of a digital market on Douyin, characterised by audience participation and collective consumption, has provided a possible solution to the long-standing cultural ambivalence of balancing aesthetes value and commercial interest. The platform leverages algorithmic feeds to understand users' consumption patterns, analyzing their content preferences and streamer choices. It offers users various payment options to support their preferred content creators and services. Additionally, the algorithm categorises users using a labeling system, creating precise digital profiles for targeted content delivery. For instance, in Douyin's live streaming services, users are grouped into multiple tiers based on their total online spending, and these tiers come with privileges in live rooms, enhancing user experiences. These efforts



have significantly increased the potential for user-generated consumption on Douyin, leading to a thriving digital market. It's important to note that most consumption on Douyin is voluntary because there is no mandatory cost associated with accessing digital content on the platform. The majority of creative content on social media, including Douyin, is accessible for free. The cost of creating and sharing this creative content is naturally distributed among those who have the capacity to pay, often with the support of major donors covering the expenses incurred by less financially endowed users. In this model, the dissemination of cultural works aligns with economic growth, presenting a win-win scenario and reducing the historical ambivalence between art and commerce. This collective market approach integrated into a broader creative market reflects a trend in the music industry on Douyin and the broader cultural economy. It indicates a shift away from rigid copyright laws and constraints, towards the organic formation of a creative network that mitigates the longstanding ambivalence in balancing cultural and economic value. This approach fosters a broader dissemination of cultural works while maintaining economic sustainability.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This section has discussed the distinctive features of the Douyin platform and its digital creative market, which has witnessed the proliferation of digital creative works and the emergence of *wanghong* streamers. It initially focused on the digital infrastructure and market environment that attract digital entrepreneurial streamers to Douyin. Social media platforms with advanced algorithms and personalised content feeds, such as Douyin, have fundamentally transformed the way information is shared. They have

created highly socialised digital networks where market resources and music practitioners are reorganised, redistributed, and combined to generate new music productions. Douyin's social network is further enhanced by its data-driven approach to understanding user behavior online and connecting digital opportunities across various digital spaces (Qu et al., 2021). The presence of multiple channels for content monetization on Douyin serves as a catalyst for digital entrepreneurship. Users work to standardise their digital content, increasing its market value and potentially generating additional income. Notably, Douyin's business model primarily relies on commissions from general streamers' income in addition to advertising on the platform itself. Therefore, enhancing financial income and improving the overall user experience are essential business practises for the Douyin platform. Douyin encourages a content ecosystem where various streamers can contribute, either by maintaining their fan base or generating income for the platform. The platform appears to carefully balance general user experience, streamer structures, and economic income to ensure sustainable long-term development.

The online traffic and exposure of music streamers to the digital public on Douyin can be influenced by external factors beyond the music industry, given that the music field is just one part of the broader digital landscape on the platform. Douyin may strategically allocate its online exposure and user attention to other fields, such as the more profitable e-commerce industries. However, the digital music industry remains a significant focus for Douyin, thanks to the burgeoning music copyrights from *wanghong* musicians, which hold substantial economic value for the platform. An acquisition of music copyright not only saves licensing costs associated with major

labels but also enhances the Douyin platform's bargaining power in the overall music industry. Douyin has made initial endeavour into the music sector by supporting, promoting, and collaborating with emerging music celebrities and their copyrighted works, offering advantages like increased traffic and other privileges on the platform. While music streamers on Douyin have found opportunities to develop their digital careers, they have also encountered copyright-related challenges. Instances of uncredited work and copyright infringement are not uncommon on Douyin. For example, imitations or remixes sometimes gain higher popularity than the original creators, often without proper credit given to the original streamers and their copyrighted works. Online musicians have explored alternative methods to compensate for their uncompensated creativity and contributions on Douyin. They may monetise their work through various channels provided by Douyin, earning income and potentially receiving additional benefits elsewhere due to increased exposure for themselves and their music, as well as boosted copyright royalties. It's worth noting that less popular musicians with unauthorised copyright may struggle to generate essential revenue and compensation on the Douyin platform, especially when competing with well-funded marketing efforts for popular content in the same field.

This section discusses another prominent factor in sustaining innovative streamers on Douyin: digital collectivism in music consumption. It emphasises how the demarcation of users on social media has empowered underrepresented individuals to become producers of digital popular culture. The broader society contributes in various ways, including financial support, emotional backing, and simply paying attention to digital

content, which enhances its public exposure. Digital collectivism in music consumption exemplifies an organic system of payment and other forms of contribution that help maintain streamers' presence and their ongoing work on social platforms. This collective contribution highlights initial and voluntary ways of supporting cultural and creative work online. Paid users play a crucial role in securing the economic value of a public good, while the distribution of this cultural use is extended to the masses by the broader audiences.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

## 7.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, this research brings together insights from various interdisciplinary fields, including the music industry, economic geography, and media studies, to provide a comprehensive overview of the study. The primary focus is on *wanghong* musicians and their social mobility within the digital music industry. Specifically, this thesis examines the Douyin platform and its significance within the Chinese social context, taking into account the cultural, economic, and political backdrop of China. This research offers a deep dive into China's digital music industry, with a particular emphasis on Douyin, providing fresh perspectives on the emergence of internet celebrities on global digital platforms, drawing from the unique Chinese experience. The study closely scrutinises Douyin's distinctive digital infrastructure, algorithms, and revenue streams, and their impact on the success and sustainability of *wanghong* musicians. It explores how Douyin's algorithms interact with market dynamics, highlighting the pivotal role played by music copyrights held by these influencers in bolstering the platform's position in the broader music industry. In essence, this thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate world of *wanghong* culture, digital entrepreneurship, and the evolving landscape of the music industry in China. Through this exploration, it illuminates both the challenges and opportunities that musicians encounter in the ever-evolving digital era. I will begin by summarizing each of the previous chapters before discussing the theoretical contributions to the related research fields, and limitations.

## 7.2 Summary of Findings

Chapter 1 introduced the context of the *wanghong* phenomenon in China. It discussed the rise of internet celebrities, known as "*wanghong*," in China, particularly on social media platforms like Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). These internet celebrities had gained significant popularity and wealth in recent years but had also faced challenges, including violations of platform rules, legal issues, and political scrutiny. The chapter highlighted the shift in media coverage from traditional elite-focused content to marginalised and underrepresented aspects of Chinese society, contributing to the rise of *wanghong*. It also explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on stimulating entrepreneurialism, with individuals turning to digital platforms for income during lockdowns. The Chinese government had supported online small and micro-businesses during the pandemic, further fostering the growth of the *wanghong* class. The chapter delved into political censorship, emphasizing the Chinese government's influence on digital content for legal, ideological, and moral reasons. It discussed the censorship mechanisms in place, including the Sword Net and the Great Firewall, and how these impacted the content created by *wanghong* celebrities.

The focus then shifted to rising musician celebrities on TikTok and Douyin, with an emphasis on the explosive growth of music on these platforms during the pandemic. Numerous songs had garnered billions of views, and musicians had found new opportunities for exposure and income. Major music labels and streaming platforms had competed for musicians and their creations, shaping the digital music industry in China. The introduction concluded by outlining the three distinct periods in the

evolution of China's digital music industry. Prior to the Digital Music Industry (2000-2006) saw an emergence of internet singers and independent musicians who had used the internet to promote their music. The Long Struggles with Infringement (2006-2014) featured the growth of digital music platforms and the challenges posed by copyright infringement. The Era of Live Streaming (2015-2022) with the rise of *wanghong* singers and the transformation of the music industry through live video streaming platforms, particularly Douyin. Overall, Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the complex landscape of *wanghong* culture, digital entrepreneurship, and the evolution of the music industry in China, setting the stage for further exploration in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 is a literature review that focused on social platforms, their history, and their connection to the development of the digital music industry over the decades. The music industry has undergone a profound transformation in the last two decades, driven by technological advancements encompassing recording technologies, digital music formats, live streaming, and comprehensive social media platforms. These changes have shifted the economic landscape, with IT companies dominating digital distribution, while major labels retained control over music copyright. This digital evolution has brought about a context-based model of music value creation alongside traditional copyright capitalism, empowering the digital music industry through diverse creative resources absorbed from the digital social network. The influence of digital platforms has drawn various economic, capital, and political powers into the concentrated digital market of popular social platforms like Douyin, resulting in complex and intricate interactions. This literature chapter also delved into the concept

of creative capital in the context of platform capitalism. It highlights how digital platforms, particularly emerging ones like Douyin, have shifted their focus towards the importance of creative competence and social skills while reducing concerns about copyright issues. Unlike some other platforms that require users to obtain copyright licenses, Douyin has negotiated agreements with major record labels, allowing users to freely use and remix copyrighted music. This shift has introduced new elements of capital, with creativity and social skills taking precedence over upfront investments in copyright.

The digital music industry has evolved with various business models relying on copyright revenue, user subscriptions, and advertising. Douyin, for instance, has created multiple monetizing channels for its users, including advertising, e-commerce sales, fan donations in live performances, and paid services for boosting traffic. This diversified approach encourages commercial cooperation within the digital market and is based on the platform acting as an intermediary between advertisers and streamers. Additionally, it emphasises the creation of new internet intellectual property (IP) by nurturing internet celebrities, contributing to the platform's sustainability. Besides, this chapter highlighted how musicians and creative workers have faced challenges due to deteriorating financial conditions in the digital music industry. Many have turned to social platforms like Douyin for exposure, job opportunities, and income. This shift has given rise to a gig economy within the industry. However, the study also pointed out that creative labour on these platforms involves a degree of self-exploitation or exploitation due to competition. While maintaining emotional connections with fans can be taxing, it also brings advantages such as fan loyalty and increased income,



particularly in live streaming performances. In terms of economic potential, creative workers benefit from various monetizing channels on social platforms. Beyond direct payments on the platform, their online popularity can lead to work opportunities and increased music loyalty. However, they are issues related to copyright infringement, loss of music loyalty, and the struggle for fair compensation in the music industry. The emergence of superstars through viral content on platforms like Douyin is facilitated by the platforms' terms of service, which allow for the free use of copyright material but often result in incorrect music attribution.

Chapter 3 has detailed the research strategies and methods employed for studying online musicians on social media platforms, with a primary focus on Douyin. The chapter emphasises the integration of ethnographic fieldwork with interviews, participant observation, and digital walkthrough to conduct a comprehensive digital ethnography. The initial phase centred on observing a wide range of musicians on Douyin, primarily during the search and recruitment of interviewees. Digital walkthroughs and participant observation played a crucial role in examining these musicians' digital accounts on the platform. This extensive observation offered valuable insights into the digital landscape in which these musicians operate during their online activities. The subsequent phase of fieldwork focused on conducting in-depth investigations into interviewees who agreed to engage in further discussions. This phase demanded intensive ethnographic fieldwork to prepare for detailed interviews. By extensively observing the practises of diverse musicians within the digital environment and user communities, I gained a broader perspective on their digital practises and a deeper understanding of the challenges they face on Douyin.

This background information proved invaluable in conducting high-quality interviews that benefited both me and my interviewees.

Specifically, digital ethnography serves as the primary framework, generating a wealth of multimedia data, including text, music, videos, and live streaming content. To interpret musicians' background information effectively, the digital walkthrough method is frequently employed during online observations. This combined approach allows for a deeper understanding of musicians' digital identities on social media. Data collection involves the compilation of fieldnotes for each interviewee based on the textual, visual, sonic, and observational information gathered. These fieldnotes serve as crucial references for comprehending musicians' behavior and expressions during subsequent interviews. The semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, are guided by topics developed through prior digital ethnographic research. Digital walkthrough is instrumental in researching visual, sonic, cultural, and contextual materials within musicians' Douyin accounts. It aids in determining potential interviewees and provides a comprehensive understanding of their careers and life statuses. Participation in musicians' live streaming sessions deepens observations and allows for online interactions. Questions posted to musicians are occasionally answered during these sessions, contributing additional data to the study. The 30 interviewees come from diverse backgrounds, encompassing differences in identity, age, gender, style, location, account type, fan base, class, race, ethnicity, and disability, among other factors. Through the integration of these research methods, this study aims to offer a comprehensive interpretation of online musicians in the subsequent data analysis.

Regarding the three research questions proposed in the introduction chapter of this thesis, it would be helpful to provide quick references here before summarizing the main finding chapters.

1. How have musicians' working and living conditions changed since they started their digital career on Douyin, especially those *wanghong* musicians? (Chapter 4)

2. How do popular musicians pursue entrepreneurship for their digital careers, and how have *wanghong* musicians earned and benefited from their entrepreneurial efforts on Douyin? (Chapter 5)

3. How does this platform's context facilitate a digital music market distinct from others, in terms of such as digital infrastructure, platform atmosphere, and algorithm. (Chapter 6)

Chapter 4 is the first finding chapter that delved into the evolving work and life dynamics of musicians, specifically focusing on *wanghong* musicians, as they embarked on their digital journeys on Douyin. Music professionals have increasingly turned to popular social media platforms to cultivate their online careers and augment their income streams. However, the commercialised nature of these platforms has also attracted newcomers, including music enthusiasts and music business owners, to the digital music landscape. This influx of participants became particularly pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic, as individuals and organizations sought additional income sources. To navigate the platform effectively, music streamers have developed strategies that align with Douyin's algorithm-driven environment, embracing the platform's emphasis on fast, entertaining, and creative content. The

Douyin algorithm, shrouded in complexity and unpredictability, has proven challenging to decipher, rendering individual efforts insufficient for securing online popularity. While many digital streamers have endeavored to unravel the algorithm's rules, effective and consistent success has remained elusive. Consequently, online streamers have had to shift their mindsets from lofty ambitions to a more adaptive approach when pursuing digital popularity and career success on Douyin.

Douyin, like other social platforms, provides free access to music for the digital public, with musicians' income hinging on paid fans who utilise online services or make contributions during live performances. Consequently, expanding market exposure to grow their fan base and cultivating a dedicated group of paying supporters becomes pivotal for musicians aiming to monetise their efforts on Douyin. Some musicians may grapple with ambivalence or guilt when receiving unexpected or substantial donations, especially when fans engage in competitive financial support for their favorite musicians. Despite the presence of loyal fans who offer emotional, financial, or attention-based support for their digital careers, musicians also encounter non-fans who can significantly impact their accounts, not always with benevolent intentions. As a result, digital musicians must master the art of effective public relations to prevent harm, mitigate potential negative consequences, and leverage opportunities for their digital accounts. The ability to maintain favourable fan relationships for sustainable digital career development while staying attuned to the online public's sentiment has become an indispensable skill for today's digital laborers on various social platforms.

Digital content creators, including online musicians, tread carefully within the commercialised realms of social platforms like Douyin. They grapple with intense competition resulting from the burgeoning number of practitioners in the online domain and adapt to a market that places a premium on inventive presentations of music over sheer quality. Professional musicians must identify their niche to monetise their content effectively on Douyin, as their uncompensated labour and music posts on the platform yield minimal economic returns, despite the various available commercial channels online. Furthermore, the quality of fan relationships assumes increasing importance for digital musicians in generating income, yet this dynamic often gives rise to nuanced interpersonal dynamics, occasionally leading musicians to confront ambivalence regarding their fans' loyalty. Additionally, musicians may contend with adverse experiences from the digital public, including harassment, hate comments, or grievances that can impact their account's performance. In rare instances, a *wanghong* streamer's digital account may face abrupt suspension due to offenses against public interest or political reasons, culminating in an abrupt end to their digital career. In short, while digital platforms have empowered certain professionals and music practitioners to excel in their field through creativity and effective account management, the career landscape remains characterised by instability and precarity. For the majority of musicians, being *wanghong* musicians on Douyin represents an opportunity for potential rather than a long-term career choice.

Chapter 5 is the second finding chapter. It highlighted the entrepreneurial endeavors of creative professionals as they sought to enhance their market value and advance their careers through their association with Douyin. For many musicians, this

experience represented a significant transformation, with their entrepreneurial practises evolving as they explored their potential on the platform. Douyin's unique digital marketplace underscored the importance of specific skills and entrepreneurial strategies in achieving success in the online realm. These strategies encompassed a deep understanding of platform regulations, innovative approaches to expanding market reach, the ability to enhance market value, and strategic networking within the Douyin community (as noted by Klawitter and Hargittai in 2018). Creativity played a central role in determining the online popularity of musicians, spanning content conception, performance, and presentation. In fact, creativity became such a critical factor that it often surpassed other attributes, such as professional skills and a strong personal brand, in terms of competitiveness in the market. Creative entrepreneurs on Douyin also acquired additional skills related to monetization, contributing to their economic gains and career prospects, ultimately yielding positive results. Those who effectively monetised their accounts and leveraged the resources available within the Douyin network tended to achieve the highest levels of success in their entrepreneurial pursuits, resulting in significant financial returns.

Highly monetised social media platforms like Douyin empowered everyday individuals to generate income through various channels provided by the platform. Douyin earned a portion of this income whenever online streamers monetised their content, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the platform and its users. In essence, the success of streamers translated to prosperity for Douyin as well. Consequently, Douyin tended to favor prolific musicians who excelled at generating income on the platform. These musicians often found it easier to secure additional support from

Douyin. Success on Douyin was a result of both individual efforts and the platform's support. However, striking a delicate balance between the most profitable, fastest-growing, and stable accounts presented a complex challenge, leading to intricate decision-making processes for the platform. These decisions took into account the interests of all stakeholders, including the platform itself. Focusing solely on the most profitable streamers could disrupt the platform's ecosystem and weaken its bargaining power with streamers boasting substantial fan bases (Lu and Wang, 2022).

Consequently, the platform's decisions were not solely driven by financial considerations but rather involved a nuanced interplay of interests among all participants.

Similarly, the social mobility and career stability of musicians on digital platforms were influenced by the broader strategies and platform ecosystems employed by Douyin. This encouraged a diverse range of users to contribute their online efforts, with some reaping economic rewards. Entrepreneurial *wanghong* musicians on Douyin actively adjusted their strategies to enhance their economic, social, and political standing. However, disparities existed in the sustainability of their online presence. Throughout their *wanghong* journey, the Douyin platform retained a pivotal role in determining the success of these entrepreneurial endeavors, aligning with the platform's business interests. While a select few *wanghong* musicians may have discovered opportunities to substantially elevate their careers and financial prospects as they navigated through uncertainty, the majority faced limited long-term prospects, even if they attained the coveted status of internet celebrities.

The Chapter 6 is the last finding chapter that explored the unique characteristics of Douyin, its digital creative marketplace, and the rise of *wanghong* streamers. It began with an examination of Douyin's digital infrastructure and the market dynamics that attracted digital entrepreneurs to the platform. Douyin, like other social media platforms, utilises advanced algorithms and personalised content curation to transform how information is shared, creating interconnected digital networks where market resources and music creators are reshaped and combined to create new music content. Douyin's data-driven algorithm enhances its social network by understanding user behavior and creating digital opportunities across different online spaces. Douyin's diverse monetization channels have acted as a catalyst for digital entrepreneurship. Users strive to optimise their digital content, increasing its market value and potentially generating additional income. The platform's primary revenue model relies on commissions from content creators' earnings and advertising on the platform itself. Therefore, Douyin focuses on improving financial income and enhancing the user experience to ensure long-term sustainability.

The visibility of music streamers on Douyin is influenced by factors beyond the music industry, as Douyin strategically allocates online exposure and user attention across various sectors. Nevertheless, the digital music industry remains important to Douyin, especially due to the valuable music copyrights held by *wanghong* musicians. These copyrights reduce licensing costs and strengthen Douyin's position in the broader music industry. Douyin has supported emerging music talents and their copyrighted works, offering benefits like increased traffic and other privileges on the platform. However, music streamers also face copyright challenges, including unattributed work



and infringement. To compensate for uncompensated creativity, many musicians monetise their content through Douyin's channels, generating income and expanding their exposure. Another significant factor in the success of streamers on Douyin is digital collectivism in music consumption. This phenomenon empowers individuals to become creators of digital culture, with wider society contributing through financial support, emotional backing, and engagement with digital content. Digital collectivism in music consumption involves a system of remuneration and contribution that sustains content creators on social platforms. Paying users play a crucial role in preserving the economic value of public assets, benefiting the broader audience by extending cultural utilization to the masses. Next section of this finding chapter will reflect on the theoretical contribution, significance and limitation of this research.

### **7.3 Limitations and future research**

This research makes several contributions to our understanding of the digital music landscape, with a specific focus on the Chinese context, including platforms like Douyin. Firstly, it offers a concise history of the transformation of internet musicians throughout the evolution of China's digital music industry. In Chapter 1, I introduced the shift in terminology used to describe online musicians, ranging from "internet singers" representing the early pioneers who shared their singing online, to "internet musicians" emphasizing music professionals, and finally to "*wanghong* musicians," the current generation of internet musicians. The term "*wanghong*" highlights the high level of public digital awareness and popularity these online celebrities have achieved. This historical context provides a foundation for understanding the experiences of

online musicians within various social, economic, and political backgrounds. In particular, it sheds light on the development of copyright laws, which coexisted with persistent digital infringement, as well as the technological advancements from the early website era to the widespread use of portable 3G and 4G devices and over for live streaming video platforms. Furthermore, the research delves into the political strategies employed by the Chinese government, including the establishment of the Great Firewall, which serves to separate China's internet ecosystem from the global internet. This separation is driven by both political and economic considerations that for political censorship and crackdown infringed work, meanwhile, contributing to the phenomenal digital *shanzhai* or copycat culture on China's Internet.

This research delves into the social mobility of *wanghong* musicians once they achieve popularity on Douyin. Social mobility here refers to the potential for internet celebrities to maintain their advantages over the long term. While *wanghong* careers are typically brief and uncertain, some musicians can transform their online success into lasting economic stability, social influence, and political competence. This illustrates the possibility of enduring benefits despite the inherently fleeting nature of digital fame. In section 5.5, I present key criteria for assessing the evolving social groups of *wanghong* musicians in relation to their current economic, social, and political standings. I propose the idea that individuals can transition over time between these three classes that music celebrities emerged online, musicians established offline, and gig workers with a advantageous fan base, depending on factors like career competitiveness and economic competence, which play a crucial role in determining one's social status. The dynamic nature of social mobility among internet celebrities underscores their

ability to maintain a competitive edge and economic stability for a more extended career. However, as depicted in the Table 5 below, the career situations and economic revenues of online celebrities tend to be more unstable and short-lived compared to those of musicians with established offline careers. This is because *wanghong* musicians often rely on unpredictable and short-term factors like popularity and online advertising for their social status. Therefore, I posit that most internet celebrities are not sustainable in their current social and economic statuses even though they possess a substantial fan base currently. Those who do manage long-term sustainability tend to be individuals who cultivate identities as music professionals, relying on more stable factors such as professionalism and copyright royalties.

Table 5 Transferable *wanghong* classes with emphasis in career abilities

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Competitiveness</b>	<b>Economic competence</b>
Music Celebrities Emerged Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital creativities</li> <li>• Online popularity</li> <li>• Social connectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online advertising</li> <li>• Significant fan donations</li> <li>• Music shows</li> </ul>
Musicians Established Offline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism</li> <li>• Stable fan base</li> <li>• Peer network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Copyright royalties</li> <li>• Professional performances</li> <li>• Commercial cooperation</li> </ul>
Gig Workers with Advantageous Fan Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time flexibility</li> <li>• Low price</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All gig works available (but in lower quality)</li> </ul>

My research has introduced the concept of digital collectivism in music consumption in Section 6.4, representing a fresh approach to supporting creative streamers from diverse backgrounds and career stages. This emerging economic model challenges conventional notions of cultural economics by emphasizing more inclusive copyright protection and a fairer distribution of income to creative workers through copyright royalties. It also challenges the existing major music streaming subscription model by highlighting the potential for collective support from the digital public, enabling possible lawfully free access to copyrighted music. In Section 6.4, we first explain how Douyin has given rise to a hybridised music industry, one that differs significantly from traditional music markets. This underscores the fact that Douyin has not merely replicated the offline music industry but has created a new ecosystem on it. Within this hybrid music industry, where users collectively support content creators, digital streamers can receive higher premiums, possibly paid by those audiences with greater financial capability to cover the costs of the streamers' work, while still keeping their work accessible to a broader digital public. This practise effectively balances the realms of aesthetics and commerce in the digital creative market. It illustrates how Douyin's collective market approach promotes the wider dissemination of cultural works while ensuring economic sustainability for online streamers, potentially resolving longstanding issues of ambivalence. Furthermore, digital collectivism may extend to music production on Douyin. It highlights how the digital convergence has transformed music production, fostering creativity and innovation within new avenues within the digital social network. In a word, this notion of digital collectivism demonstrates the platform's role in shaping the way music is both created and consumed, contributing to a dynamic and evolving digital music ecosystem.

Moreover, the empirical findings in this thesis provides a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by emerging musicians on Douyin, offering insights into the digital music industry's evolution. The finding on *wanghong* musicians' work situation in chapter 4 and their entrepreneurial practise on Douyin (section 5.3) Offers valuable insights into the strategies and mindset required to succeed as a content creator on the platform, benefiting aspiring influencers. Chapter 4 also addressed internet celebrities' relationships between fans, followers, and the wider online community, providing a comprehensive view of the influencer ecosystem on Douyin. Section 5.4 delved into the financial aspects of being a *wanghong* streamer on Douyin. By exempting the detail earnings potential and revenue streams available to these influencers, it provided a comprehensive overview of the economic opportunities the platform offers. Overall, this thesis serves as a comprehensive exploration of the transformative effects of Douyin and similar platforms on the music industry. This thesis contributes to both academic scholarship and practical understanding of the digital music landscape. As we move forward in this digital age, the insights gained from this research will continue to inform the music industry, digital platforms, and the broader cultural economy.

To provide more empirical evidence from my research for the opportunities and challenges faced by wider creative industries adapted to the latest technologies, the outstanding small and medium enterprises' (SME) experiences on Douyin may offer potentially validated practices. Firstly, those outstood firms have remained updated on new technologies through self-training, hiring, and networking, leading to increased market share and innovation in production. Secondly, SMEs have developed and

continually reviewed their business models and monetisation channels to maintain economic efficiency amidst fast-changing technologies and market conditions. Thirdly, networking is crucial for business development and innovation sustainability, as firms strategically collaborate with others in the broader creative industries, fostering reciprocal relationships and facilitating resource and interest exchange. This network also fosters knowledge exchange and innovative cooperation, fostering creative thoughts and production within the social network at individual and organisational level. Additionally, firms actively welcome creative talents and maintain interdependency and shared interests, particularly leading companies with negotiating power who absorb critical resources and talented workers to maintain dominance in the field. In conclusion, staying abreast of transforming technologies, updated business modes and monetisation channels for business reproduction, and strategic networking and cooperation are vital for cultural and creative to the survival and sustainability amid today's macro uncertainty.

However, this qualitative study also has some notable limitations. Firstly, the study's reliance on interviews with *wanghong* musicians who already have a large fan base may not fully represent those with lower followers on the digital platform. It also overlooks other representative types of musicians and music genres, such as rock bands, offline superstars, and signed musicians, which could offer valuable insights into different aspects of the *wanghong* musicians. Secondly, social media platforms are continuously evolving, with varying technological designs and platform cultures over time. This study's focus on a specific platform at a particular time might not capture the full range of career experiences, privileges, and struggles of *wanghong*

musicians, even within the same platform. This research could have considered extensive cases on today's digital social platforms worldwide to comprehensively engage with the potential diversity in the formation of the digital music industry in the online sphere. Besides, it's important to recognise that my personal background and social identities may influence my interactions with interviewees and how I interpret research data. As a young female international student in the UK, my identity can either attract or deter certain types of musicians. For instance, I've observed that I receive more responses from male interviewees, and my academic background has helped in engaging professor musicians. However, grassroots musicians may be hesitant to participate in academic interviews, perceiving them as too formal and requiring high literacy. To address this, I carefully selected interviewees to ensure diversity in terms of gender and music genre representation. I also sent out more invitations to increase response rates from less represented musicians. Additionally, I emphasise the informal and non-commercial nature of my research to make interviewees comfortable in sharing openly, knowing that their insights contribute to a student's research. I'm aware that my personal background as a Millennial may lead to deeper connections with individuals of a similar age, as we share common social, economic, and political contexts. Having graduated from a music academy, I may feel more confident interacting with fellow musicians who have received formal training in the academic field. However, I acknowledge that my ability to provide in-depth interpretations may be limited when it comes to certain artists, such as rock bands, folk musicians, grassroots musicians, and disabled musicians, due to potential gaps in my understanding of their careers and life situations.

Future studies in this field could investigate the intricacies of "fluid platforms" (Scolere, 2019, p. 1906), which are characterised by ever-changing economic, cultural, and political structures that influence digital labour across diverse domains. Additionally, international researchers may embark on a comparative analysis on Douyin's sibling platform, TikTok, to gain insights into how the different social context shapes users' online behaviors, such as daily use and digital entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the implementation of longitudinal studies can prove invaluable for monitoring the careers and trajectories of digital entrepreneurs on Douyin over an extended period. Such research endeavors hold the potential to shed light on the sustainability and long-term outcomes of online entrepreneurship.



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# Appendix

## Interviewed Thirty Music Streamers (Oct. 2021 ~ Apr. 2022)

Gender	Location	Occupation	Fan base	Age	Music Genre	Live Streaming	Sign	Ethnic	Identity	Full time	Income Level	Main Income Types	Previous Econ	Copyright Income
M	Ningbo	Professional Live Streamer	73.1W	30s	Chinese Pop	Y	GR	-	grassroots	F	Full-time	Livestreaming	Equity + Debt	-
M	Jinan, Shandong	University Professor	50.2W	36	Chinese Pop	Y	indie	-	professional	F	Gain	Livestreaming	Celebrity	-
F	Hebei-Beijing	Professional Live Streamer	3.3W	30s	Instrumental Pop	Y	Un	-	professional	P	Full-time	Livestreaming	Gig	-
M	Xinjiang-Shenzhen	Freelancer	5.2W	30s	Professional Accordion	Occa	Un	Uighur	professional	F	Gain	Livestreaming	Gig	-
M	Liaoning	Intangible Cultural Heritage Erhu Apprentice & Sales	107.5W	36	Imitation Erhu	N	Un	-	professional	P	Gain	E-commerce of physical goods	Fixed Income	-
F	Yiwu-Shanghai	Full-Time College Musician	3.4W	20s	Professional Bel Canto	N	Un	-	skillful amateur	P	Gain	Offline teaching	Fixed Income	-
M	Dalian	Independent Touring Singer	2570	35	Folk Guitar	Y	indie	-	professional	F	Gain	Livestreaming	Gig	M

Continued Page 1: Interviewed Thirty Music Streamers on Douyin from Diverse Backgrounds

Gender	Location	Occupation	Fan base	Age	Music Genre	Live Streaming	Sign	Ethnic	Identity	Work	Income Level	Main Income Types	Previous Econ	Copyright Income
M	Australia and America, Shanghai & Suzhou	Symphony Musician & University Teacher	31.1W	20s	French Horn Pop	Occa	Un	-	skillful amateur	P	Gain	Offline physical goods	Fixed Income	-
M	Shenzhen	Dual-Occupation Self-Media Personality	1.2W	20s	Pop Service	N	Un	-	Business	P	Gain	Service-based e-commerce	Fixed Income	-
M	Qingdao, Shandong	Music Composition Studio	11.8W	30s	Pop Composition	Occa	indie	-	professional	F	Gain	Offline services	Enterprise	H
F	Henan	Professional Live Streamer	394.5W	40s	Chinese Pop	Y	GR	-	grassroots	P	Full-time	Livestreaming with product promotion	Equity + Debt	-
F	Qiqihar	Self-Operated Live House	3.6W	20s	Pop Songs	Occa	indie	-	professional	F	Nearly none	Offline business	Fixed Income	-
F	Beijing	Full-Time Douyin Musician	64.8W	20s	Cross-Boundary Zhongti	Occa	Un	-	skillful amateur	P	Full-time	High-end commercial advertising	Fixed Income	-
F	Henan	Professional Live Streamer	46.5W	40s	Pop + Erhu	Y	indie	-	professional	F	Gain	Livestreaming with offline services	Celebrity	-
M	Unassigned	Self-Operated Talent Agency	3.1W	40s	Pop Composition	N	indie	-	Business	P	Nearly none	Offline company	Enterprise	M
M	Anhui-Shanghai	Freelancer	3.1W	20s	Professional Clarinet	N	Un	-	professional	P	Gain	Offline teaching	Gig	-

Continued Page 2: Interviewed Thirty Music Streamers on Douyin from Diverse Backgrounds

Gender	Location	Occupation	Fan base	Age	Music Genre	Live Streaming	Sign	Ethnic	Identity	Work	Income Level	Main Income Types	Previous Econ	Copyright Income
M	Beijing	Craftsman & Live Streamer	1.6W	50s	Guitar Instrumental	Y	Un	-	Business	P	Gain	E-commerce of physical goods	Fixed Income	-
F	Yunnan-Shanghai	College Student Singer-Songwriter	65.6W	20s	Opera Pop	N	Un	-	skillful amateur	P	Gain	Offline business performance	Gig	-
M	Liaoning	Self-Operated Talent Agency	10.7W	40s	Pop Composition	N	indie	-	Business	P	Nearly none	Offline company	Enterprise	H
M	Beijing	Professional Live Streamer	51.8W	30s	Classic Flute	Y	indie	-	professional	F	Full-time	Livestreaming	Gig	-
M	Xuzhou, Jiangsu	Celebrity Music Studio	99.5W	41	Pop Songs	Y	indie	-	professional	P	Gain	Livestreaming	Celebrity	-
F	Beijing	Dual-Occupation Self-Media Personality	233.4W	20s	Anime & Second Dimension	N	Un	-	professional	P	Gain	High-end commercial advertising	Fixed Income	M
F	Australia and Beijing	Piano Teacher in a Music School	4.9W	20s	Classical Piano	Occa	Un	-	skillful amateur	F	Gain	Service-based e-commerce	Gig	-
F	Australia	Overseas Professional Live Streamer	3.4W	50s	Chinese Pop	Y	Un	-	professional	P	Full-time	Livestreaming	Celebrity	M
M	Yunnan	Part-Time Independent Musician	1.4W	30s	Ethnic Songs	Occa	indie	Lisu	skillful amateur	P	Nearly none	Offline profession	Fixed Income	L

Continued Page 3: Interviewed Thirty Music Streamers on Douyin from Diverse Backgrounds

Gender	Location	Occupation	Fan base	Age	Music Genre	Live Streaming	Sign	Ethnic	Identity	Work	Income Level	Main Income Types	Previous Econ	Copyright Income
M	Xi'an	Individual Guqin Society	30W	40s	Guqin Fusion	Y	Un	-	Business	F	Reinvest	Livestreaming	Enterprise	-
M	Suzhou	Traditional Chinese Performing Arts Professional Live Streamer	4.3W	50s	Traditional Quyi	Y	Un	-	professional	P	Gain	Livestreaming	Gig	-
M	Changchun, Jilin	Self-Operated Homestay Business	28.8W	38	Folk Guitar	N	Un	-	skillful amateur	P	Nearly none	None	Fixed Income	-
F	Guangzhou	Personal Music School + Vocal Teacher	1.4W	29	Cantonese Pop	Y	Un	-	professional	P	Gain	Livestreaming	Gig	-
M	Xiamen	MCNs Music Engineer	60W	20s	Erhu Pop	N	S	-	skillful amateur	F	Gain	Offline work	Fixed Income	-



# Appendix 2

## Interview Questions for Musicians

1. Can you brief yourself and your background related to music?
  - a) music learning background, career developing background, current working/living situation
  
2. What's your motivations for becoming a streamer on Douyin?
  - a) When did you start engaging with Douyin?
  - b) What contributed to your decision-making to engage with Douyin? Any supporters?
  - c) What do you expect from engaging with Douyin?
  
3. What benefit you gained as a streamer on Douyin?
  - a) Financially returns, how do your income increase?
  - b) Are there non-financial returns? How important do you think these non-financial returns?
  
4. How do you operating your channel, from the beginning to the present?
  - a) How did you get your initial fund?
  - b) What developing strategies have you taken for your channel? Eg. on attracting fans, designing the content, self-positioning.
  - c) Are there any significant support or partnerships worth mentioning in the beginning?
  
5. Has your work condition and lifestyle changed after engaging with Douyin?
  - a) What is your typical workday like? What do you like your work and lifestyle now?
  - b) What was your job and life like before you engaging with Douyin?
  - c) Has your offline carrer changed because of the Douyin?

6. Now let's talk about your music video making on Douyin.
- a) What factors would you consider when making/posting a video on Douyin? Will you adopt your video work accordingly to the platform algorithm?
  - b) Do you think it's important to make music work depending on your willingness?
  - c) How do you achieve your composition meanwhile think for the music popularity on Douyin? Please give a specific example.

7. How much does the pandemic impact on your music career?
- a) Has the pandemic had a significant impact on your life?
  - b) How much does the pandemic impact on your music career?
  - c) Have you thought about career plans after the pandemic?

Transition: We've talked about yourself and your participation into Douyin, now let's focus on your relationship with stakeholders.

8. Do you have important collaborators (either individuals or organizations) before and after engaging with Douyin?

- a) What kind of collaboration, and how does it start? Eg. Regular content co-creators, brokers, operations teams.
- b) How does your relationship between your collaborators changed?
- c) What is your ideal partnership? Or, what kind of collaborators are you finding?

9. Do you think you may have potential competitors on Douyin?

- a) Who do you think may be your competitor?
- b) How do you think about these competitive relationships?
- c) Do you have any strategies to maintain your competitive advantage in your specific field?

10. How do you maintain your fan relationship?

- a) Who kind of fans are special or important to you?

b) How do you maintain a fan relationship or respond to fan requests? Eg. Loyal fans, new fans, anti-fans.

c) How do you think about live broadcasting to fans? Is there any strategy for attracting/maintaining fans when going live?

11. How do you think of the relationship between you and Douyin platform?

a) The role of Douyin in your life and work?

b) To what extent do your career/work/life rely on Douyin?

c) How do you think of other similar music platforms? Eg. NetEase Cloud Music/Tencent Music/YY Live/Kuaishou

12. Do you (or your friends) have any special conditions (especially those negative) on the Douyin platform? For example, fans complained, video blocked, banned from broadcasting etc.

a) Why it happened and what was the result?

b) How does these experiences change your view of the platform?

c) How would you adopt yourself to avoid these situations again?

13. Do you have any other experiences that were not mentioned in this interview but are worth discussing?