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Climbing the Platform Ladder: A Conceptual Model for Understanding Musicians' Pathways in Peripheral Contexts

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Abstract

Digital platforms have become central to the music industry, shaping how artists distribute, promote, and professionalize their work. While existing studies emphasize multi-platform strategies and the affordances of individual platforms, most focus on resource-rich contexts where artists engage with several platforms simultaneously. Less attention has been given to smaller or peripheral contexts, where musicians often face infrastructural and cultural constraints that make platform use more gradual and sequential. This article introduces the Platform Ladder Model (PLM) as a framework for understanding these pathways. The model integrates insights from platformization, affordance theory, and research on creative careers. It proposes that musicians experience platforms as rungs in a ladder: beginning with local base platforms, moving to YouTube as a global entry point, engaging audiences through social media, and aspiring toward professionalization via streaming services and industry networks. Each stage offers distinct opportunities but also presents barriers shaped by inequality and limited resources. Developed from the case of Mizoram in Northeast India, the PLM extends platform studies with a developmental perspective and provides a transferable tool for analysing creative practices in other global South contexts.

Keywords: Platformization, Creative Careers, Digital Music, Mizoram, Affordances

Introduction

Globally, the production, distribution, and consumption of music have all changed as a result of the quick development of digital technologies. Artists now rely heavily on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Spotify to reach fans and further their careers. Platformization is the term used by scholars to characterize this trend, in which the logic and infrastructure of digital platforms increasingly influence cultural creation and daily behaviours (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Smaller or peripheral contexts have received less attention than larger markets and worldwide participants in the majority of platformization and music business study. Nonetheless, these settings offer valuable perspectives on how artists manage various platforms in the face of scarce resources, linguistic quirks, and regional cultural customs.

One such setting is the tiny state of Mizoram in northeastern India. In the absence of a robust local music industry infrastructure, Mizo musicians have resorted to internet platforms in recent years to maintain their creative practices as well as to increase their visibility. While other sites like Instagram and TikTok are used for promotion and fan interaction, YouTube has become the primary medium for distribution. At the same time, locally specific alternatives are being attempted by local digital projects like Darbu and Thulkhung, which follows a one-time purchase model where audiences can buy music or albums of their favourite local artists at a minimum price. Despite these advancements, conceptual frameworks that describe how artists navigate platforms, bargain for opportunities, and deal with constraints are still lacking. The Platform Ladder Model (PLM), a conceptual framework for comprehending musicians' multi-platform techniques in places like Mizoram, is introduced in this article. The PLM is predicated on the notion that artists advance through phases, or "rungs," of digital involvement, beginning locally and progressively making their way to greater recognition and professionalization. The PLM stresses a progressive and developmental process, in contrast to current paradigms that frequently characterize platform use as simultaneous or fragmented. It is particularly pertinent to non-dominant music ecologies since it also draws attention to the institutional obstacles and unequal access that influence this growth.

Therefore, this work has two goals: first, it presents the Platform Ladder Model as a contribution to the study of music and digital media; second, it uses the example of Mizo artists to demonstrate the model. The talk will demonstrate how the PLM may assist explain career routes in a digitalized music industry, how it can make sense of the affordances and constraints of various platforms, and how it might be adapted outside of Mizoram to other regional or global South contexts. By doing this, this

study aims to expand platformization discussions and offer a conceptual framework that is both empirically supported and conceptually beneficial.

Digital Platforms and Music Practices

Over the past 20 years, a lot of research has been done on the connection between digital platforms and the music industry. In these discussions, the idea of platformization is crucial. Platformization is the term used to describe how the governance, economic models, and infrastructures of online platforms are progressively influencing everyday activities and cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). Artists, fans, and organizations now rely on platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and TikTok for interaction, promotion, and distribution in the music industry as a result of this change. Platforms impose limitations including algorithmic visibility, commercialization guidelines, and unequal access to resources in addition to offering new opportunities. Thus, it is crucial for research to comprehend how these dynamics function in certain settings.

Scholars have demonstrated the many functions that platforms play in the global music economy. For example, it has been said that YouTube is the easiest way for musicians, both professional and amateur, to display their work (Burgess & Green, 2018). Artists from a variety of backgrounds can access audiences thanks to its low entry barrier, yet visibility is mostly dependent on computational logics and advertising-driven models (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). On the other hand, TikTok and Instagram are more concerned with audience engagement and short-form content. These platforms encourage artists to project a more personal or everyday image while also promoting branding and audience interaction (Leaver et al., 2020). Though they need institutional support like label partnerships, distribution networks, and marketing tactics, Spotify and other streaming services are linked to professionalization and worldwide recognition (Morris & Powers, 2015). These studies show that artists frequently use multiple platforms, each with unique affordances and limits.

The significance of multi-platform tactics in the creative industries is emphasized by another body of literature. According to Cunningham and Craig (2019), in order to thrive, digital producers need to be active across several channels. Accordingly, musicians are not only artists but also content producers who are always modifying their methods for various platforms. Nevertheless, rather than being sequential, the literature frequently characterizes these tactics as simultaneous or fragmented. In other words, it frequently presumes that artists use several platforms simultaneously rather than alternating between them. This presumption might be true in

environments with plenty of resources, but it fails to adequately represent the realities faced by artists in smaller markets, where advancement may be slow and reliant on resources, opportunities, and skill sets. Research on the cultural and creative industries has extensively examined the concept of career advancement. For instance, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) demonstrate how precariousness, networks, and institutions determine the uncertain career routes that creative labor frequently takes. Banks (2017) explains how artists progress through several levels of opportunity and recognition using the concept of "creative careers." These models offer helpful analogies for considering how musicians progress in a digitalized setting, even though they are not particularly about digital platforms. Such growth is frequently compared to a ladder, where each rung entails increased resources, duties, and obstacles.

There are still gaps in the body of literature despite these contributions. Large markets with comparatively robust infrastructures and resources, like the US, Europe, or East Asia, have been the subject of the majority of research. Peripheral or small contexts, like Mizoram, where linguistic, cultural, and infrastructure factors differ greatly, have received far less attention. More research on the effects of platformization on regional music scenes and the global South has been demanded by academics (Lobato, 2019). Such research can offer new perspectives on the unequal dynamics of digital culture around the world. In this sense, conceptual models that capture the sequential and developmental nature of platform use in smaller ecologies are necessary in addition to describing multi-platform activities. The Platform Ladder Model (PLM), which is proposed in this paper, fills that gap. Although it adjusts them to the realities of non-dominant contexts, the PLM builds on insights from platformization, multi-platform strategies, and career progression research. It implies that artists advance via platforms in a manner like to a ladder, beginning with accessible or local bases and working their way up to greater recognition and professionalism. The PLM thus offers a paradigm that can explain the disparities and opportunities in the digital music market.

Conceptual Foundations of the Model

Platformization, affordances, and career advancement in creative sectors are the three main theoretical pillars around which the Platform Ladder Model (PLM) is based. These conceptual frameworks clarify why musicians' usage of platforms can be viewed as a ladder-like path, exposing both disparities and opportunities.

First, platformization describes how digital platforms are becoming more and more dominant in the creation of culture (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018).

For distribution, promotion, and interaction, musicians now rely on YouTube, Instagram, Spotify, and other platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The PLM concentrates on the user perspective, demonstrating how musicians in smaller contexts view and use platforms as stages in their careers, whereas a large portion of this study emphasizes systemic changes. Second, platforms are experienced differently at each level, which can be explained by the affordances idea. The possibilities for action that an environment offers are known as affordances (Gibson, 1979). In digital media studies, these possibilities are used to illustrate how characteristics can facilitate or limit behaviours (Boyd, 2010). For instance, Instagram allows branding but requires regular activity, whereas YouTube offers low-cost worldwide access but limits monetization. These affordances combine with particular cultural and infrastructure factors in peripheral locales like Mizoram to influence musicians' strategic usage of platforms.

Last but not least, studies on professional advancement in the cultural sectors emphasize the ladder as a representation of ambiguous and uneven paths (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Banks, 2017). New networks, abilities, and recognition are needed at every stage. This concept is modified by the PLM, which frames platforms as rungs on a career ladder. This demonstrates how digital logics and cultural disparities interact to shape artistic trajectories, bridging the gap between theories of creative labor and platform studies. By integrating these viewpoints, the PLM enhances career studies by positioning platforms at the core of advancement and adds a sequential dimension to platform studies. It is applicable to different regional or global South contexts and provides a descriptive account of the practices of Mizo musicians.

The Platform Ladder Model

The Platform Ladder Model (PLM) is a conceptual paradigm that explains the sequential and developmental movement of artists across digital platforms in tiny or peripheral contexts like Mizoram. The ladder metaphor is used in the model, with each rung signifying a distinct degree of digital involvement. Even though musicians occasionally use several platforms at once, their career paths frequently exhibit a pattern of steady advancement, with each stage building upon the one before it. The realities of resource limitations, infrastructure restrictions, and strategic decisions that influence artistic activity in non-dominant ecologies are highlighted by this contrast with models that presume simultaneous presence across platforms.

Local base platforms, YouTube as a worldwide access point, social media engagement, and professionalization through streaming and industry integration are

the four key rungs of the PLM. Every rung has unique obstacles in addition to offering particular affordances. Access to technology, cultural capital, networks, and institutional support are some of the factors that influence movement between rungs; it is not a random process. As a result, the model is both diagnostic and descriptive; it identifies structural disparities that hinder upward mobility for certain artists while also describing how musicians generally advance.

Local Base Platforms

Local media and digital channels are the first rung of the ladder, providing musicians with a place to start. These include traditional distribution channels like local radio, television, and live events, as well as community-focused platforms like Darbu and Thulkhung in Mizoram. These venues offer early exposure to a local audience, frequently fostering a sense of recognition and community support. Their accessibility is what makes them affordable; in comparison to worldwide platforms, they require fewer resources and less technological know-how because they are near the artist's direct cultural and language surroundings. Local base platforms can have some serious drawbacks, though. They typically only reach a small audience and don't have the global visibility, monetization tools, or algorithmic amplification that larger platforms provide. Local platforms provide more as a proving ground or stepping stone than as a stable foundation for a career for many Mizo musicians. Although they rarely result in more extensive chances, they can assist artists in gaining self-assurance and recognition within their communities.

YouTube as a Global Entry Point

YouTube, the second step on the ladder, has emerged as the most crucial medium for Mizo singers to connect with fans outside of their surrounding area. Because it enables anyone with rudimentary internet access to contribute content without the requirement for expert industry help, YouTube is commonly seen as accessible. It serves as the hub of the Mizo YouTubesphere by giving musicians a platform to perform for both local and diasporic audiences. Low entry barriers, worldwide accessibility, and the potential for publicity through shares and recommendations are just a few of YouTube's obvious advantages. Additionally, it acts as a digital archive, extending the life of music beyond live performances. But there are drawbacks to the platform as well. High views and subscribers are necessary for monetization, but these are hard to come by in a tiny language market. Certain genres and styles are favored by algorithmic visibility, which frequently forces musicians to modify their work to suit fads rather than follow their own creative instincts. YouTube is both empowering and limiting in this way. It makes it possible to enter a transnational

media landscape, but it also exposes musicians to systemic injustices and competitive pressures.

Social Media Engagement Layer

The third rung consists of social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which are mostly used by musicians for fan interaction, branding, and promotion. Although the primary material is typically not disseminated on these platforms, they are essential for increasing visibility and preserving connections with audiences. For instance, musicians might post a music video to YouTube but utilize TikTok videos and Instagram posts to promote it, engage with fans, and establish their personal brand.

Social media's intimacy and immediacy are its affordances. They enable artists to maintain interest in between big releases, build a relationship with followers, and reveal behind-the-scenes stuff. They also give musicians the chance to try out short-form formats that might not work with conventional methods used in the music industry. But the restrictions are just as severe. The constant activity required by social media networks can be taxing and divert attention from creative endeavors. Likes, shares, and follows are indicators that put pressure on users to obey platform guidelines. The effectiveness of these platforms is further influenced by Mizoram's uneven smartphone access and inadequate internet infrastructure. Because social media interaction frequently builds on content that has already been shared on YouTube, it is positioned after that platform in the PLM. Although musicians may create social media profiles at an early age, if they have a YouTube following, they often use these channels more strategically. This illustrates how distribution leads to involvement in a ladder-like fashion.

Professionalization and Industry Integration

Professionalization, which is represented by the fourth rung, happens when musicians join international streaming services like Spotify, Apple Music, or regional counterparts and when they are able to access industry networks like labels, sponsorships, or institutional backing. Increased visibility, possible income streams, and admission into international recognized circuits are all linked to this stage. Reaching this level frequently necessitates substantial outside assistance for Mizo musicians, such as distributor agreements, international artist collaborations, or interventions by local artist organizations like the Music Domain Mizoram (MDM) or the Mizo Zaimi Insuihkhawm Pawl (MZI).

Potential income, professional validation, and a wider audience reach are the affordances at this level. It is the most challenging rung to reach, though. Lack of awareness of distribution channels, a lack of funding for advertising, and systemic prejudices in international platforms that favour prevailing languages and genres are some of the obstacles. Despite having skill and local backing, many musicians are unable to make the whole leap to professionalization and are caught between the second and third rungs.

Movement and Barriers on the Ladder

Additionally, the PLM highlights that movement between rungs is irregular and influenced by a variety of circumstances. Not every artist moves smoothly from one level to the next. Some would spend their entire careers in the top two rungs, while others might advance thanks to institutional support or viral success. Not everyone can climb the ladder equally due to obstacles including inadequate infrastructure, limited funds, and cultural exclusion. However, the model also acknowledges that the ladder is not linear. Even after becoming successful on YouTube or streaming services, some musicians could stick with local outlets to stay in touch with local audiences. Others might be heavily active on social media before building a solid YouTube following. The basic trajectory of growth and artists' perceptions of varying degrees of professionalization and visibility, however, are captured by the ladder metaphor.

Summary of the Model

All things considered, the Platform Ladder Model highlights four primary rungs of digital engagement for musicians in non-dominant contexts: professionalization through streaming and industry integration, social media involvement, YouTube as a global entrance point, and local base platforms. Movement between the rungs is influenced by structural disparities, and each rung offers distinct affordances and restrictions. The model offers a means of comprehending how musicians envision and strive for professional advancement in a platformized setting, in addition to how they use platforms. As a result, it serves as a diagnostic tool for examining the difficulties of cultural production in smaller media ecologies as well as a descriptive framework for contemporary activities.

Discussion: Pathways, Inequalities, and Wider Relevance

By providing a sequential viewpoint on how artists use digital platforms, the Platform Ladder Model (PLM) adds to the body of research on platformization and the creative industries. The significance of multi-platform strategies has frequently been emphasized by previous research, wherein creators are required to simultaneously

maintain a presence across many platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Leaver et al., 2020). The experiences of producers in resource-rich settings, where using YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Spotify all at once is more practical, are reflected in these accounts. On the other hand, the PLM implies that musicians frequently take a more methodical, step-by-step approach in smaller or resource-constrained settings. The ladder metaphor highlights advancement by illustrating how artists usually begin with easily accessible platforms and work their way up toward greater recognition and professionalization.

The PLM builds on previous work on platform affordances in this way. Each platform has unique features and constraints that influence creative activities, according to previous research (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). While adding a temporal and developmental dimension, the PLM does not contest this. It illustrates how platforms' affordances are not only unique but also ordered in a perceived hierarchy of desire and accessibility. Although they provide less visibility, local base platforms are simpler to access. YouTube's global reach and openness are limited by algorithmic logics. Although social media sites offer chances for relationships, they also demand regular participation. Although they are aspirational, streaming services and industry integration are challenging to obtain. This sequential structure provides a clearer understanding of how artists perceive and prioritize their platform use, especially in contexts where resources and infrastructures are uneven.

Theories of professional advancement in cultural and artistic activity are likewise in line with the PLM. According to scholars like Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) and Banks (2017), artists frequently follow shaky and unpredictable career routes that are influenced by networks, opportunity, and institutional support. In these talks, the ladder metaphor has been used for a long time, but primarily to illustrate career paths in general rather than the usage of digital platforms. The PLM links discussions on platformization and creative careers by implementing the ladder to platform participation. It implies that platforms are stages within larger career trajectories rather than merely tools, and that each is connected to particular types of legitimacy, visibility, and money. The PLM's focus on disparities in advancement and access is another contribution. Not all musicians have equal access to the ladder. Who can go higher is mostly determined by structural hurdles including language, geography, financial means, and institutional assistance. For instance, Mizo musicians could become well-known on YouTube but find it difficult to transition to streaming platforms since they have few relationships with distributors or major players in the international market. This demonstrates how platformization is inequitable and frequently reinforces preexisting inequalities rather than creating an even playing

field. The PLM offers a more nuanced perspective of creative work in the global South by highlighting both opportunities and obstacles, avoiding overly hopeful myths of digital liberation.

Crucially, the PLM is not limited to Mizoram. Although this particular scenario served as the basis for the model's development, it may find use in other small-scale or peripheral media ecologies. Similar ladder-like paths may be followed by musicians in places like Nagaland, Bhutan, or portions of Africa and Latin America, beginning with local platforms and working their way toward international ones with differing degrees of success. As a result, the PLM provides a framework that can be used to compare digital music practices in a variety of settings. However, its focus on sequential progression could not work in many settings, especially in densely populated urban areas where concurrent multi-platform use is more prevalent. This suggests that the model should be applied with sensitivity to local conditions, serving as a heuristic tool rather than a universal law. Lastly, the PLM has real-world applications for educational institutions, legislators, and teachers. Through the identification of the ladder's stages and obstacles, the model can assist stakeholders in creating focused interventions. Cultural groups may, for instance, provide training, resources, or distribution networks to help artists transition from YouTube to streaming services. Programs for education can concentrate on getting musicians ready for the needs of social media advertising. By defining their function as stepping stones, local platforms could better position themselves inside the ladder. Thus, the PLM is a useful instrument for bolstering creative ecosystems in smaller areas as well as a theoretical contribution.

In conclusion, the conversation demonstrates that the Platform Ladder Model contributes in three key ways. First, it enhances current descriptions of multi-platform tactics by bringing a sequential viewpoint to the study of platformization. Second, by emphasizing how platforms shape artistic trajectories, it links discussions of platform affordances with theories of career advancement. Third, it emphasizes issues of unequal access and inequality, which makes it especially pertinent to the analysis of creative labor in ancillary contexts. These additions establish the PLM as a valuable foundation for upcoming studies and policy initiatives as well as an innovative conceptual model.

Conclusion

The Platform Ladder Model (PLM), a conceptual framework for comprehending how musicians in tiny or peripheral contexts utilize digital platforms, was presented in this research. According to the model, many artists proceed through the platforms in a

step-by-step manner, much like climbing a ladder, as opposed to using them all at once. The PLM illustrates the opportunities and challenges that influence artistic careers in the digital age. These include starting with local base platforms, expanding into YouTube as a global entry point, creating social media promotional strategies, and aiming for professionalization through streaming services and industry networks.

There are three primary areas where the PLM contributes. First, by stressing sequential advancement over instantaneous presence, it gives platform studies a developmental component. This makes it easier to comprehend how musicians choose platforms in settings with constrained infrastructure and resources. Second, it links theories of platform affordances to more general discussions about professional advancement, demonstrating how platforms are stages in a musician's journey rather than merely tools. Third, it draws attention to the ladder's uneven accessibility, highlighting the structural obstacles that keep many artists from climbing higher. The PLM provides a more impartial explanation of platformization in this way, taking into account both inequality and empowerment. Although the Mizoram scenario served as the basis for the model's development, its applicability is broader. Other global South and regional contexts are probably home to similar ladder-like progressions, where musicians start with easily accessible platforms and aim for worldwide recognition. While acknowledging that not all environments follow the same trajectory and that certain contexts promote simultaneous rather than sequential platform use, the model should be implemented flexibly.

Lastly, the PLM is useful in real-world situations. It gives politicians, educators, and cultural groups a diagnostic tool to create tailored support for artists by highlighting the ladder's rungs and obstacles. This entails resolving access disparities, bolstering regional infrastructures, and assisting artists in moving between platforms. By doing this, the model provides direction for creating more inclusive creative ecosystems in addition to advancing theoretical discussions on platformization.

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