1. Introduction

Online live music streaming has been in existence as a practice within the music industries since the late 2000s. Since then, it has grown via social media channels to include professional broadcasters hosting millions of viewers around the world. The largest of these live music streaming professional broadcasters operate largely within the world of electronic dance music. Live music streaming has many positive benefits for the music industries and artists. However, this relatively new practice has already adopted some problematic practices. Leading live streaming platforms and professional broadcasters are working hand in hand, utilising copyright as a means of solidifying their dominance, effectively excluding new entrants into the industry from establishing businesses to rival them. The live music streaming industry is also becoming increasingly intertwined with big business and its interests. Major corporations have a lot of say over who and what is streamed on major broadcasters due to their involvement in the form of sponsorships, which often constitute a large section of a professional broadcaster’s income stream. Whilst professional live music streaming is currently most commonly utilised within the world of electronic dance music, it is only a matter of time before it becomes more common practice amongst other genres of music. Live music streaming is a microcosm for the music industries more generally, and this is evidenced by the fact that within a few years of existence power has already been consolidated within the hands of a select few, an outcome likely to be repeated when the practice migrates increasingly cross-genre.

This article begins by outlining its methodology and defines live music streaming, discussing its history and praxis. Later, the article investigates the benefits that live music streaming creates for stakeholders within the music industries. Indeed, live music streaming increases artists’ visibility and boosts their online profiles, which can result in more offline live music opportunities. Moreover, live music streaming helps promote recorded music, can drive sales and streams and in some cases can highlight niche or obscure folk musics. However, the environment in
which live music streaming operates has resulted in many opaque practices, in particular surrounding copyright and corporate power. The penultimate section will analyse how the market in which live music streaming operates has quickly become dominated by a small number of major players, actively manipulating social media platforms and copyright to cement their dominance. The role that corporations play in live music streaming is then examined, identifying a reliance on such conglomerates by many professional broadcasters in exchange for capital.

This article will conclude by looking to the future. While live music streaming’s largest broadcasters and audiences are to be found within electronic dance music, this is likely to be subject to future change and as such it is important to note the potential issues involved as live music streaming crosses genres and becomes a more commonplace medium through which people discover, listen and watch music.

2. Materials and Methods

It should be noted that the gaming industry has been precursory within the live streaming industry, knowing an assured popularity since the early 2010s and establishing a viable economic model for gaming broadcasters which has proved to be successful ever since (Guarriello 2019; Hamari & Sjöblom 2017; Johnson & Woodcock 2019; Partin 2020; Taylor 2018; Woodcock & Johnson 2019). However, live streaming in the world of online gaming is rather different in praxis, not producing a cultural text or indeed blending them (as in DJing) for entertainment purposes. Consequently, since audiences are different, the culture differs, and therefore both practices should only be compared with critique. While a future article could look at both in a “cultural industries” style analysis to identify similarities and differences, this is not the goal of this work. This article will provide foundational research on live music streaming that can be used as a base on which to model future work in the world of live streaming.

In order to get an overview of the live streaming industry, six stakeholders with different backgrounds were interviewed. Only three interviewees were happy to be named, and the others have been anonymised:

- Craig Massie, a former creative lead working for the professional broadcaster,1 Boiler Room
- Dale Howie and Douglas Paine, managers at Glasgow label Scotch Bonnet Records
- an international DJ who has played for various professional broadcasters (cited as informant 1)
- an employee working in the publishing department of an international collection agency (cited as informant 2)
- a former chief executive of a technology company working with Facebook (cited as informant 3)

Furthermore, five shorter and less in-depth discussions with individuals related to the live streaming industry were conducted through social media and email. This data has mainly been used to verify information provided by the primary interviewees, as well as that gleaned from online sources. Among them can be found three affiliates from European radio stations, an online licensing consultant for “PRS for Music”2 and the manager of an online show that streams live music on social media platforms.

Lastly, observations were conducted in order to confront the realities described by the interviewees.

3. What is Live Streaming?

Live streaming is a digital practice that began at the end of the 2000s. Usable in areas such as the arts, video games or even sports, live streaming is also prevalent in the business world through the broadcast of corporate events and conferences. The practice of live streaming refers to the streaming of a video in real-time online, via the Internet. It is a particular form of streaming, in which the broadcast of the video and audio is simultaneous to its capture. It allows the viewer to therefore live a unique experience; now a viewer can virtually attend an event without being physically present, as well as contribute to a live discussion (and critique) of the event in real-time.

Live streaming has been utilised within the music industries for over a decade (with the first live streaming companies emerging between 2008 and 2010) and has proven to be influential in the direction of many artist’s careers, continuing to solidify the links between aspects of the music industries, large brands, and corporations.

1 The definition of a professional broadcaster will be given in this article.
2 The PRS for Music is the collection society operating in the United Kingdom collecting performing right royalties for its members.
It is utilised most regularly on social media platforms, among which Facebook, YouTube and Twitch are the most popular. Live streaming within the music industries has thus far been utilised to greatest effect within live music, involving broadcasting performances of those performing. It is with live music that live streaming has become most associated, and so-far, it has proved to be the greatest generator of revenue.

Live streaming is used in other forms by stakeholders within the music industries, for example the premiering of music videos. In 2018, Facebook and YouTube opened up the “Premiere” functionality, allowing pages to upload and schedule pre-recorded videos to broadcast live to their followers3 (Cohen 2018; Carey-Simos 2018). BTS’s new track “ON” is a good example of the efficiency of this new type of content. According to Variety (2020), 1.54 million viewers concurrently tuned in for the premiere on YouTube. Moreover, live streams are also utilised for interviews, panels or Q&A as a means of interaction between institutions and viewers. Indeed, these new means of using live content allow for a complete disintermediation between stakeholders within the music industries and their followers. The nature of social media platforms means that during a live music stream, exchanges can take place between those watching, adding real social value to the event. Indeed, such virtual conversation creates a dynamic between the content, fans and artist. This creates a direct relationship (and often an active one) between industry actors and fans, highlighting the disruptive potential live streaming has within the industries.

4. Broadcasters

Broadcasters will be understood here as the entities who broadcast the live streams. Also called “streamers” in live streaming culture, they can be anyone from private individuals to large corporations. The live streaming broadcasters can be separated into three broad categories.

The first category comprises “professional broadcasters”4 for whom live streaming is their main activity and source of income. These handful of broadcasters have millions of fans on their various social networks and operate globally. They collaborate with internationally successful artists and, due to their position within the industry, have access to sites across the world in which to hold live streams, on occasion hosting streams in places other categories of broadcasters would not have access to.5 Their business structure is traditional, the power flows vertically and upward, and employees are departmentalised. They have important means of production allowing them to offer high-definition content both in terms of video and audio.

The second category consists of “semi-professional broadcasters”.6 Live streaming is a secondary activity that can often be linked to their primary output. Among them are: radio stations, bars, record/retail stores, promoters, labels, clubs, established artists and more. They have less technical means than professional broadcasters but enough to offer medium- to high-definition streams. Semi-professional broadcasters use broadcasting of live content via live streams mainly as a promotion vector in order to redirect the audience to their main activity.

Lastly, the third section is composed of “private-individual broadcasters”. For this group, live streaming is a hobby and has little direct commercial purpose other than profile raising.

5. History of Live Music Streaming

Since the mid-2000s, the emergence of participatory web systems such as Facebook, YouTube or Cyworld has allowed for new possibilities regarding the diffusion and promotion of music (Bacache, Bourreau & Moreau 2018: 14). This was eventually seized upon by record labels within the industries as a means of promoting their artists online, incorporating not just social media but also websites, blogs and webzines (Zénouda 2014). Independent artists and musicians also use these platforms to showcase their work and involve fans in their lives and careers (Garcin 2012). The utilisation of social media as well as the Internet more generally has become standard practice within the industry. Scottish singer Sandi Thom rather famously received a major record deal after attracting numbers of up to

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3 While the footage premiered isn’t itself live, the pre-record is being broadcast live and contains some of the cultural aspects of live streaming, including live commentary by viewers and a communal space in which all viewers globally are at that moment watching the stream at the same time, helping to create an online community and a sense of collective fandom.

4 Boiler Room, Cercle, Mixmag and Be-At TV.

5 For example the Great Wall of China, the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, to name a few.

6 Worldwide FM, Le Mellotron, Rinse, Radio Punctum or Phonica Records to name a few.
100,000 people to watch her webcasts, broadcast on her website via her flat in London (NME 2006). Of course, the ability of someone in 2006 to host 100,000 viewers was soon disputed and Thom found herself ridiculed, impacting her career (Sullivan 2008). At this stage online live music streaming was still in its infancy.

Pinpointing the exact moment when live music streaming began to professionalise via online broadcasters is difficult; however, it likely took place in 2008 as an effort undertaken by Be-At TV, a London-based live streaming website specialising in electronic music (Forde 2017). This initial emergence of live music streaming through the nexus of electronic music has resulted in a long-term symbiosis between the two, with live music streaming’s largest broadcasters currently all specialising primarily in electronic music. Two years later in 2010, competitors started to enter the market in both London and Tokyo, with the brands Boiler Room and Dommune, respectively. During the first 6 years of live music streaming, the practice was monopolised by a handful of Internet broadcasters that had the necessary human and material resources to regularly run such performances. At the time, the tools necessary to perform high-definition live streams were equivalent to those used in television studios, and therefore required superior man power and technological proficiency, as well as the financial capital to purchase the equipment needed (Massie 2020).

Regardless of the first live streams taking place on IBM service Ustream, YouTube became the leader for live music streaming at the time, after it offered the live streaming functionality on its platform in 2011. However, with more easily accessible and cheaper technology, two new live streaming platforms were launched in 2015, Meerkat (Wagner 2016) and Periscope (Smith 2020), which opened the practice to the public. Periscope in particular became very successful, attracting millions of users in a short amount of time. Four months after its launch in August 2015, Periscope exceeded ten million profiles, and had two million daily users who among them watched 40 years’ worth of video per day (Norman 2016).

Facebook therefore began to take an interest in this practice due to its potential and in 2015 launched the “live” functionality to certified public figures via the now inactive Facebook Mentions app (Swope 2014). However, it wasn’t until 2016 that Facebook opened up its platform to its billions of users to begin live streaming on Facebook Live (Hern 2017). Anyone is now able to live stream from their smartphone or computer. Facebook differentiated themselves further from Periscope and Meerkat by offering the possibility to encode streams from third-party live video streaming production software (such as OBS Studio, Wirecast and X-Split), in order to create high-definition live streams whilst enjoying the social reach of its network. This resulted in an alteration in the hierarchy of live streaming platforms, with Facebook as a live streaming platform increasing rapidly in popularity.

Today, the leading platforms for live music streaming are Facebook, the most popular social media platform, and YouTube, the predominant video publishing platform. While no market share is available to quantify the economic hierarchy of existing major live music streaming companies in electronic music, those with the most social media followers, both Facebook and YouTube followings combined, are as follows: the British Boiler Room, Mixmag7 and Be-At TV with 5.5 million, 3.3 million and 1.3 million followers, respectively, and the French Cercle, with 2.8 million followers.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected the music industries with the cancellations of physical shows across the world. As a result, numerous stakeholders have turned to live music streaming as the easiest way to perform and reach audiences. This has drastically increased the number of live music streams currently on social media. At the time of writing, in late 2020, the practice constitutes the largest audience of live music consumption across the world. This rise of popularity has intensified the disparities between professional, most semi-professional and private-individual broadcasters in two ways.

Firstly, in terms of aesthetic quality. Based on observation, the already established live music streaming broadcasters are more likely to produce higher quality content. Indeed, many streamers lack the necessary human, technical and economic resources that major companies have. Secondly, many streamers are facing copyright infringement issues on Facebook, the platform terminating videos while they are live. Major broadcasters, however, remain unaffected.

7 Mixmag, an electronic dance media brand and magazine, is included within the professional broadcaster category. In an interview, Mixmag’s CEO, Jerry Perkins (2015), claimed that 85% of revenue comes from events and collaborating with brands, leaving it a reasonable assumption that branded live music streaming events are an important source of this revenue.

Live streaming provides many opportunities for the various sectors of the music industries. It is a great promotional tool, has revenue generating potential and emphasises the appeal of live music with its videos of engaged audiences and impressive artistry. If digital platforms such as Facebook or YouTube hold a tremendous power over users (broadcasters and consumers) through the sole governance of their services (Srnicek 2017: 6), live music streaming has disruptive potential, allowing direct-to-fan access for independent artists and bypassing the conventional music industries’ intermediaries (labels, managers, agents, etc.).

6.1 Promotion

Video is very effective in terms of reach and engagement on Facebook (Hsiao 2019), which is the number one platform for promotion regarding musical events (Samandel et al. 2018). As such, it is extremely useful for all those within music to create regular video content. The reasoning behind this is two-fold: number one is that more content being created by artists will allow them to increase their audience engagement. Number two is that social media platforms push video content to the fore. It is important to note that the main income for these platforms is the sale of advertising spots and data collected on their users (Johnston 2020; Statt 2020). For example, in 2016, 96.6% of Facebook’s revenues came from advertisement (Srnicek 2017: 53). Therefore, platforms have a high interest in increasing the time users spend on their services. Live videos are the type of content that most increases the audience retention (Petrov 2020); these contribute to the improvement of platforms’ statistics and data collection, making them more attractive to advertisers, which ultimately increase their revenue. This results in a symbiotic relationship between platforms and broadcasters.

Live music streaming is unique in that it is a moment of real-time viewing and interaction between fans, and in certain circumstances, even the artist. The greater the interaction from those viewing the video, the more likely the video is to be viewed by others. This not only acts as a means of gaining more viewers and possibly fans in real-time but also allows for the video when finished to be shared across various social media platforms and private messengers to widen the potential net of fan capture. The Canadian DJ, Peach, can be taken here as a good example of the potential impact that a live stream can have on a career. Although difficult to directly attribute to a live music stream, it seems interesting and relevant to put in perspective the evolution of the artist’s career with the latter. Indeed, based on Facebook referencing, Peach performed at 17 events in 2017. Between the 1st of January and the 26th of May 2018, she performed at 12 events. Based on the beginning of the year, it could have been expected that she would perform between 15 and 20 shows in the second half of the year. Peach’s Boiler Room took place the 31st of May the same year, and has since been referred to as one of the best Boiler Rooms of all time (Harries 2020). Subsequently, Peach performed at 40 gigs between the 1st of June and the 31st of December, totalling 52 shows in 2018 (a 205% increase between 2017 and 2018). And for 2019, the number rose even higher with 95 shows played from the 1st of January to the 31st of December, which is an 85% and 458% increase compared to 2018 and 2017, respectively. Similar career rises can be seen to have taken place after popular live music streaming videos were aired with other artists, namely Sherelle, Courtesy and Octo Octa & Eris Drew. It is worthy of note here that all of the aforementioned DJs and producers are cis or trans women, rendering live music streaming as a particularly effective means by which women performers can gain a foothold through live streaming into an industry that has traditionally seen an imbalance between male and female artists, particularly in the world of electronic music and DJing.

Electronic musicians traditionally receive the majority of their income through live performance (Steele 2019). As such, a successful live music streamed performance can be very lucrative for both artists and their agents, who often act as the sole representative of the artist in the world of electronic music. Agents earn 15% of the artist’s fee, attached as an extra cost (not taken from the artist’s share), and as such can reap large sums with artists who are playing live often. Artists who are booked often may then see corporations offering to sponsor them, as the visibility that comes with a live music performance or a collection of bookings is invaluable. Despite its disruptive potential, live music streaming, just as any other form of popular music, is being produced not only as a commodity

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8 It is also true for other social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram.
9 This last point will be developed further in this work.
10 This link between women DJs and live streaming success is a topic the authors of this article are planning on researching further in the future.
11 Managers are a rarity in electronic music. Only artists who have reached a certain level of fame within the industry enlist or even need the assistance of a manager.
“but as a form of promotion intended to help sell other products, services and brands within the capitalist system” (Meier 2018: 12). For example, South Korean female producer and DJ, Peggy Gou, who counts more than two million Instagram followers, has a fashion label, Kirin, in association with now deceased Virgil Abloh of Louis Vuitton, and was the face of Nike’s 2019 “Just Go Bigger” campaign. She also curates her own mini-festival in London in partnership with Krankbrother, one of the UK’s leading organisations in electronic music (Cliff 2019).

In the world of electronic music, to perform a set on one of the large livestream broadcasters is seen as a badge of honour – much in the way a recording contract has been viewed in the world of rock and pop (Osborn & Greenfield 2007). It is highly sought after, rendering such appearances to become increasingly exclusive and indeed elusive. The potential benefits to an artist from appearing on a live music stream are potentially career changing, as Informant 1 affirms:

“I would’ve preferred to do this at a later stage in my career, having my own productions and found ‘my specific sound’ which I am still crafting. But of course, the opportunity was too big to miss as it helps with exposure of course. Many see a Boiler Room as a CV or a Visa/Passport to help with new opportunities locally and abroad (Informant 1 2019).”

They then confirm that “in this era of social media it is a goal for artists nowadays to be broadcast on big live stream series such as Boiler Room or Mixmag Lab” (ibid). Therefore, such live music streaming companies offering this kind of exposure hold a tremendous amount of influence within the electronic music scene.

Artists will earn money from their performance depending on their relative stardom. Top tier artists, who will bring more benefit to the broadcaster and corporation than these institutions may necessarily bring to the artists, will be paid a fee for their performance. For those artists who will ultimately (in the eyes of the broadcaster) gain more from their appearance on a live music stream than the broadcaster, they will likely not be paid (Massie 2020). While artists at earlier or less successful stages of their career may benefit from exposure despite not being paid, this arrangement highlights aspects of the uneven distribution of financial resource within live music streaming. This uneven distribution may in future migrate to other live music streaming genres when this practice ultimately becomes more commonplace within differing music scenes.

For an artist, securing a large broadcasting live music stream will also lead to more people viewing other content made by the artist. Each broadcast will be fully linked to the social media profiles and musical content of the artist in question. This is an undeniable path through which to grow a following, leading to increased live bookings and sales. Indeed, a social media platform’s algorithm may even play another video by the artist after their live stream is complete, leading again to greater views, traction and potential monetary gain. This potential vast increase in fan numbers can directly result in greater sales and streams of an artist’s music, as well as an increased likelihood of an artist being booked to perform live.

Even for venues themselves, securing a prominent live streaming event is a way to reach a wide audience and advertise. For a venue to secure a live streaming event places them in a particular echelon of electronic music venues, resulting in increased cultural capital and a means with which to advertise future events.

6.2 Live Music Streaming and Recorded Music

Due to the nature of DJ sets in electronic music, the actual recordings that are streamed will often not be solely the music of the performing DJs themselves (although this does also happen). The potential exposure that would come from having a track included in a DJ set on a live streamed broadcast places a lot of capital on having a track used. A good example of this is when DJ and producer Len Faki played a song named “Bring” by the artist Randomer during one of his Boiler Room performances in Berlin. This song has been described by Edward Collins, a journalist at the influential publication Mixmag, as “most famously known for being the main feature in Len Faki’s Boiler Room in Berlin” (2019). Here a track is described as being mostly recognised within the electronic music community within the context of another DJ’s live music streaming performance.

Live music streaming can therefore result in an increase in sales, not only for the performer but also for the artists who have their music played. This is also a benefit to the record labels that release their music, encouraging labels to become involved in live music streaming, either via label showcases12 or by pushing artists with whom they have a relationship to play music released on their label to gain further exposure and potentially sales, as shown

12 A label showcase is an event, live streamed or not, in which a selection of artists who have released on a label perform at a branded event associated with the label.
in the previous examples. This raises the interesting possibility of a form of neo-payola. Record labels, artists and agents would all stand to benefit if a well-known DJ played a track by an artist either released or represented by one of these industry actors. The unregulated nature of live music streaming leaves open the possibility of a form of payola (be it monetary or favours) taking place, further solidifying the dominant nature of certain industry players.

Moreover, these live stream videos can also bring back to the public consciousness some songs that had faded into obscurity. This was the case with the song “That Friday Pay (Eagle Flying Day) Part 1” by disco artist Sonny Jenkins and the New York Potpourri Strings. This song was used by Motor City Drum Ensemble at the opening of his DJ set on the Boiler Room stage at Dekmantel in Amsterdam in 2014. During this performance the crowd visibly reacts to the song when it is played, creating what appears to be an energetic atmosphere in the venue that can be seen when viewing the video online. After this performance this song began to see hundreds of thousands of streams on streaming platforms. The vinyl copy of this song was found on the “wantlist” of several thousand users (and only had 65 possessors) on the second hand record website Discogs, subsequently raising its price to several hundreds of pounds sterling (Thompson 2016). The label Stout has since repressed the E.P. twice in 2014 and once in 2016 (Discogs 2021a), and the release has been blocked from sale in the Discogs marketplace almost certainly to prevent a buying-reselling phenomenon. This shows the impact that just one live streaming session can have on the promotion of a song as well as record sales, even if the song in question is decades old. Further examples are numerous, notably the case of Escape From New York “Fire In My Heart”, a Disco/Boogie song from the 1980s played by DJ Harvey at Boiler Room in Milan in 2015. This increased the song’s popularity, encouraging the Australian record label “Isle Of Jura Records” to repress the vinyl in 2016 (Discogs 2021b).

It is worth noting that all of this also takes place within a live paradigm. This further promotes the very concept of attending a live music event. Often live streaming videos have an audience on camera, and involve some of the most recognisable stars in contemporary electronic music. As such, live music streaming in a broad sense promotes the concept of live music, associating it with a particularly “cool” form of jouissance. Such promotion of the very concept of live music is to the benefit of those involved in the live music industry.

6.3 A Platform for Non-Western Live Music

It is also interesting to note that live streaming can offer a global viewership to more localised musical genres that have traditionally struggled to reach larger, international audiences. This is the case for music from developing continents such as Africa, South America and Asia. Indeed, in these regions the access to new technologies is delayed compared to that of developed regions (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020). Consequently, it is more difficult for artists from these areas to broadcast their music around the world. Professional broadcasters can therefore play a vital role in helping these artists to promote their music, offering them an international audience through their live streaming channels.

This was the case for Moroccan Gnawa musician Maalem Mahmoud Guinia, who was broadcast on Boiler Room in 2014 and who had never been filmed before (Bellville 2016). Or indeed the group Phurpa, a Russian based clan of ritual musicians upholding performative practices from the religion Bon, one of the oldest socio-cultural traditions from Tibet (Boiler Room 2015). Such performances not only provide a platform for musicians of hyper-local, ageing or niche musics (something of interest to ethno-musicologists) but also act as a means of conservation. These artists would likely otherwise have struggled to gain such an international audience. Indeed, due to their highly subscribed and international channels and as it is relatively inexpensive for these professional broadcasters to travel to other countries, they are able to broadcast shows from across the world in a way that would be out of reach to any local TV or radio stations (Massie 2020). This benefits not only musicians but also record labels who sign/release or reissue music from these previously unexploited parts of the globe.

This section has laid out the positives for artists, labels, audiences and the music industries more generally. However, live music streaming and its increasing popularity has raised some problematic issues associated with the practice.

7. Live Music Streaming: The Problematisation

Live music streaming has essentially mirrored the live music industry more generally, in which a number of transnational entertainment companies have come to dominate (Frith et al. 2021; Anderton, Dubber & James 2012: 125), on occasion utilising murky practices to do so (Holmstrom 2019). In a remarkably short period of time, the
world of live music streaming has come to be dominated by a small number of major players utilising opaque industry practices to consolidate their position. Primarily, these involve copyright and the role of international conglomerates.

7.1 Copyright

Live streaming broadcasters lived for a long time in a grey area in terms of copyright (Massie 2020). However, the leading platforms Facebook and YouTube have hardened their copyright infringement policies over the years due to pressure from major rights holders (Informant 2 2019; Informant 3 2019). Litman (2006: 80) writes, “copyright today is less about incentives or compensation than it is about control”. These words echo with the recent and rapid expansion of live music streaming. Indeed, the democratisation of the practice has raised further concerns about copyright and its utilisation as a system of restriction rather than one that benefits the majority of artists and consumers.

Firstly, it should be mentioned that YouTube has a system capable of distributing the correct income to rights holders. Indeed, as of 2007, Google (which owns YouTube) has been developing and refining its “Content ID” technology (King 2007), and so the platform draws on a database which is established and constantly updated by the rights holders or the entities managing their rights. This means that copyright owners can use this system to easily identify and manage their content on YouTube. Videos uploaded to YouTube are scanned against a database of files that have been submitted to the platform by copyright owners. Submissions are uploaded by private individuals or indeed music distributors such as Believe Music or CD Baby who act on behalf of copyright owners when such companies are utilised for distribution. These distributors are utilised by small-to-medium sized labels or independent artists, as opposed to major labels, who utilise their own distribution services. Those owners then get to decide what happens when content in a video uploaded to YouTube matches a work that they own.\(^\text{13}\) They can choose different actions to take on the material that matches theirs: block a whole video from being viewed, monetise the video by running advertisements against it (in some cases sharing revenue with the uploader) or track the video’s viewership statistics (Support Google, 2020). The efficiency of YouTube’s copyright technology can be confirmed by the figures provided by the platform: more than $3 billion was paid to rights holders in 2018 (Manara 2021). To give an idea of what this represents, and even though this figure also includes non-musical rights holders, it is superior to that of the worldwide revenues generated by musical digital downloads ($2.8 billion) in 2017 (IFPI 2018).

Facebook, more recently involved in music streaming, launched its “Rights Manager” technology in 2016 (Tamayo Keef 2016). Their technology works in the same way as YouTube’s Content ID, i.e. a database generated by rights holders. Facebook for Business (2021a) says that “Rights Manager” works by detecting matching audio and video content based on rules and conditions set. A user uploads reference files and indicates whether they own the rights to the video, audio or both the video and audio. “Rights Manager” then finds matches and applies the rules and conditions the user sets. Facebook, which until recently allowed only Facebook Partners to use the Right Manager functionality, is trying to compete with YouTube, and as a result has allegedly opened up the functionality to “any” “creators and publishers who have a large or growing catalog of content that people love to share” (Facebook Rights Manager 2021). However, the platform reserves the right to accept users for this program, as content creators have to expressly request access to this functionality (ibid). Moreover, both “Rights Manager” and “Content ID” have a very interesting feature: pages can grant permission (blanket permissions) to certain people, pages or accounts so that they can use content from their catalog, referred to within the streaming industry as whitelisting (Facebook for Business 2021b; Ciampa et al. 2015). This is where the fundamental difference between “professional”, “semi-professional” and “private-individual” broadcasters can be found. Indeed, professional broadcasters have agreements in place with large licence holders (BMG, Sony and Warner to name a few) that give them a whitelisting to use their music (Massie 2020). This gives them the possibility to broadcast and monetise videos with licensed content both on Facebook and YouTube. According to Massie (2020), “professional broadcasters” pay these licence holders a flat fee every year; this figure however is not publicly available. For the other semi-professional and private-individual broadcasters, there is no option to do this. On YouTube, videos are either demonetised or blocked whilst on Facebook they are taken down and muted so that they have no sound when replayed after the stream has ended. Even though Facebook has a license in place with large licence holders that covers their copyright owners (Lunden 2018; Welch 2018), Informant 2 (2019) and Massie (2020) assert that this is rendered useless as the

\(^{13}\) In practice this isn’t as straightforward. Due to many distribution companies and record labels being the entity that enforces copyright, it is rendered difficult for an artist to move through the bureaucracy of the companies involved in the release of music to approve any use of their music that they are in favour of.
platform does not yet have the technology to share the money out of the live streams. Artists therefore receive no remuneration whilst they see their music being blocked on the platform, and so consequently miss out on potential promotion. On the other hand, major labels receive the money paid by professional broadcasters who buy free passes to use their catalogs. Therefore, the integrity of these practices can be questioned, especially in the case of Facebook, where the broadcast of copyrighted music is not possible without obtaining a blanket permission. Therefore, “semi-professional” and “private-individual” broadcasters suffer from a lack of regulation from Collective Rights Organisations, who leave the entire management of the practice in the hands of private entities which put the market in a state of unfair competition. Here, superior finances and opaque industry connections maintain the dominance of established professional broadcasters through exploitation of copyright.

It is interesting to refer here to the case of the Glaswegian record label Scotch Bonnet. This Dub/Reggae label and collective was established in 2005 and have produced more than a hundred releases (Discogs 2021c). Nevertheless, they confirm facing issues when going live on Facebook as they cannot play their own music on the platform even though they own the master rights (Howie & Paine 2019). Scotch Bonnet is a record label, but within a live music streaming paradigm they are also a “semi-professional” broadcaster. As of 2019, Scotch Bonnet did not meet the necessary conditions to access the “Rights Manager” platform; thus, they could not whitelisting themselves and therefore were unable to broadcast tracks for which they own the master rights (ibid). Subsequently, they stopped doing their live music streaming sessions. To summarise, when a DJ or musician attempts to play released music they own the copyright for, Facebook shuts down their live stream for copyright violation. However, when a professional broadcaster plays this very same music, it is allowed even when they do not own the master or publishing rights. This is a concrete example of how an unregulated practice can disadvantage up-and-coming artists and labels, while reinforcing the power of larger actors within the music industries. It is possible that the agreements between professional broadcasters and major licence holders allow them to broadcast music the copyright of which is not owned by the said large licence holders. From interviews conducted for this project with an artist who has performed live streams on Facebook for professional broadcasters, it can be confirmed that they were neither asked to play nor indeed not to play any genre or tracks in particular (Informant 1 2019). A quick overview on professional broadcasters’ archives shows that they have never had any of their live streams affected on the platform. However, if this isn’t the case, then it suggests hidden agreements between Facebook and professional broadcasters. Three theories can be posited regarding why this may be the case. Firstly, as previously seen, these professional broadcasters value the platform by bringing back viewers and increasing their retention time; thus, Facebook does not have any interest in blocking the live streams which bring in such traffic. As highlighted by Nieborg & Poell (2018), advertisers bring money to digital platforms and not necessarily content. However, it is fair to say that this in itself is a symbiotic relationship as large corporations will want the largest or indeed coolest audience to advertise on. Preventing established professional broadcasters from operating properly on their platform is not in the financial interest of Facebook. Secondly, these broadcasters are now established cultural institutions (within electronic music in particular), and platforms do not want to receive bad publicity from the broadcaster communities that would support them. Lastly, broadcasters have financial agreements with Facebook. Each of these three theories would put the potential to gain a whitelisting from any of the major live streaming platforms out of the reach of those at the bottom or even middle of the live music streaming ladder. This in turn cements the dominance of the live music streaming companies that currently dominate the market. It also makes it extremely difficult for new players to enter into the live streaming market successfully, since a large amount of music is outside their grasp. This very much chimes with Smiers and van Schijndel (2005) when they write, “copyright has thus become a mechanism for a few cultural conglomerates to control the broad terrain of cultural communication”. Copyright’s inherent bias towards those with money and power is demonstrated amply through live music streaming.

7.2. Corporations

Companies all around the world feel driven to patronage as an effect of the virtuous competition on corporate social responsibility (Mohr, Webb & Harris 2005). This is why large companies such as the British multinational men’s fashion retailer Topman, or multinational Coca-Cola, to name but a few, are actively involved in the financing of live music streaming (Elder 2016; Meunier 2018). Present on a worldwide scale, these niche initiatives provide prime conditions for deploying a branding strategy in order to reach a specific audience. Most of the time, these patronages take the classic form of sponsoring, as partnerships are transferable across different industries, such as a product

14 This could not be confirmed by our interviewee at Boiler Room.
placement noticeable on the live music streaming video, the logo of the brand embedded during or at the beginning or end of the video (live and on-demand), or indeed acknowledgements in the description. These investments, although discreet, represent real exposure for brands. Indeed, with some videos reaching dozens of millions of views, advertisers benefit from this global yet targeted media exposure. In the same way brand-curated music festivals are less risky investments than record labels for consumer brands seeking to invest in music (Meier 2018: 108), live music streaming enables them to position themselves as headliners at a reduced cost and minimal effort.

Moreover, some brands, such as the giants Budweiser and RayBan, are embarking on tailored events. In these cases, brands often delegate the creative construction of these events in order to gain from their affiliate’s localised expertise in this area. Brands that want to have a hard-hitting impact usually have large budgets that can reach huge sums of up to hundreds of thousands of dollars (Massie 2020). A budget is provided by the advertiser for the completion of the project, as well as a marketing brief which outlines where the event will take place, where the brand will be visually highlighted in the room, and other specifics of the video that will be live streamed and available on-demand. In this situation, brands fund the production of big shows that directly benefit both themselves and the broadcaster.

To go even further and push the boundaries of these events, some advertisers engage in sustainable and deeper relationships with broadcasters. This is the case of the Scottish whisky brand Ballantine’s, which created the True Music campaign in partnership with Boiler Room in 2016 (Benjamin 2019). The goal was clear: to highlight underground music culture and link their brand to it through live music events, forums and various online content. The collaboration proved to be successful, resulting in dozens of live music streams produced around the world, from Brazil to Russia through Africa and Europe. Ballantine’s has a dedicated section on Boiler Room’s website where articles, videos-on-demand, forthcoming shows, mix series and more content can be found. This echoes with the words of an anonymous advertising strategist quoted in Meier (2018), who argues that brands are stepping away from being commercial to try to feel more authentic to consumers, aiming to elevate a brand to the status of a cultural symbol, something that Holt (2004) calls “cultural branding”. Indeed, thanks to this partnership, Ballantine’s locates itself in local underground cultures while strengthening its worldwide impact.

Currently, professional broadcasters are dependent on these brands, which provide their main source of income. Smith (2017), founder and CEO of Be-At TV, publicly acknowledged that without sponsorship his company could not exist. While sponsorship in and of itself isn’t negative, professional broadcasters’ reliance on the money of corporations to survive does place them in a weakened position, meaning major capitalist organisations have huge bargaining power within live music streaming, contributing to the commodification of music.

Moreover, if an artist disagrees with the appearance of a conglomerate’s logo on their potential live stream, they may then lose the chance to perform and therefore lose a potentially career-making opportunity. It is worthy of note that Boiler Room themselves had attempted to move away from a reliance on such branded events for these exact reasons. Massie (2020) stated that, “in order to circumvent the restrictions placed on us by brands we sought to shift our revenue stream in favour of a more traditional ticketed event model, thus removing the amount of agency large corporations could have in our programming.”

This recognition of problematic corporate agency by Boiler Room demonstrates quite clearly that the reach of corporations over the world of live music streaming is large and can have censorious implications. In the past, according to Massie (ibid), certain plans for live music streams have been radically altered due to being warned by brands that certain events (in one particular case a proposed hip-hop event) could not have any reference to sex, drugs or violence due to the negative connotations it may have for the brand in question. Therefore, this close link between live music streaming broadcasters and corporations is having a direct impact on the content being (or not, as is the case here) broadcast. As live music streaming grows and shifts across other genres, this power wielded by major corporations will only increase, potentially leading to further sanitisation of music and certain topics or themes being rendered unsuitable for major broadcast and all that such parameters contain.

It is interesting to note that broadcasters can adopt radically different strategies in terms of content creation, therefore positioning themselves in different ways, economically and culturally speaking, in order to increase their commercial potential and differentiate from their competitors. The comparison between two leaders of the market, Boiler Room and Cercle, can be used here as an example. Cercle produced 23 live streams in 2019. On average, the artists who played on these streams have 342,000 likes on Facebook, the median value being 174,000. On Boiler Room, based on the calculation of the first 400 live streams of 2019 (out of more than 700 in the whole year), the average artist likes is 45,000, with a median value of 3,400. In terms of views, Cercle attracts on average 2.9 million views per show while Boiler Room receives 33,000. It is clear that Cercle is more sensitive to an artists’ bankability
and relies on fewer videos with a higher number of views to sell advertising spots. On the other side, the historical leader, Boiler Room, relies on a greater number of shows, as well as its capacity to reveal talent and drastically increase the overall variety and volume of consumption. These differing forms of business operation make each professional broadcaster attractive to different corporations depending on the kind of live show they want to become affiliated with. Cercle with its less regular but larger shows may appear more attractive to corporations looking to reach a larger audience at a particular time, while Boiler Room with their smaller but more frequent shows offer a potentially lower economic bar to entry for corporate sponsorship.

8. The Future?

As has been discussed throughout, live music streaming has its largest audiences within electronic dance music. This is due to the fact that technological concerns make it easier for DJs to broadcast through social media via an audio interface than for a four-piece rock band to channel their instruments through a Public Address System (PA) before being streamed. However, the global lockdown due to COVID-19 has seen an increase in live broadcasts from bands and artists in other genres. As technology advances and becomes cheaper, and as the effects of the global pandemic place limitations on the live music industry for potentially years to come, there is likely to be an increase in live music streaming across genres. This will be of a benefit to many of those who operate in the industry for reasons listed previously. However, it will also increase the relationship between broadcasters and corporations. The reliance many broadcasters have on corporations will place an increasing amount of power over the process and performance of live streams in the hands of these large capitalist enterprises in the future. The problematic issues identified in this article may also come to have an effect on live streaming across genres, with artists performing live versions of their own music potentially having their live stream terminated by social media platforms due to copyright issues. With live music streaming’s ability to help launch careers, it will increasingly be in the interests of invested parties to push their artists onto live stream performances, increasing the cultural and economic value of the said appearances. This will shift the power relations within the industry and has the potential at least for different forms of opaque practices to be utilised. It is with this in mind that the often murky world of live music streaming should be further explored within the academy, as a means to watch in real-time the growth of a new form of music performance and broadcasting, and to observe the means by which this practice grows and operates within the contemporary music industries. This, we suspect, may tell the world a lot about how the contemporary music industries operate more generally.

9. Conclusion

Live music streaming is a practice that is likely to grow and spread across musical genres in the years to come. It offers an interesting glimpse into the contemporary music industries and their operation, with the ownership of rights and their enforcement becoming increasingly central to the means by which money is made or lost by interested parties. The large role that major corporations play in the funding of professional broadcasters demonstrates the power and influence they hold, and the result of this situation is that live music has undergone increased commercialisation through the vehicle of corporate sponsorship. Indeed, the power wielded by such corporations has a direct effect on the content that can or cannot be broadcast on some of the world’s largest professional live music streaming broadcasters. Live music streaming also clearly demonstrates the inequalities in the copyright system. Those with the most power and influence are seemingly immune from social media censorship while many non-professional broadcasters have their attempts terminated. Needless to say, however, live music streaming does have democratising potential, allowing direct access for new or established artists to reach fans, sell records, promote their live sets and increase their chances of being booked to play at a concert. The future of live music streaming will inexorably be tied up with the future of the music industries more generally, and with that it is up to those of us in the academy to keep a spotlight on its practices, those in full view and those not.

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15 This may happen if the artist has previously released the song via a distributor and plays a version too closely resembling that release.
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