DIGITAL MUSIC GATEKEEPING

a study on the impact of Spotify playlists and Youtube channels
on the Brazilian music industry.

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the audience growth of some Brazilian musicians belonging to different music genres in a 12-month period and attempts to identify the path taken through the music consumption platforms, such as Youtube channels and Spotify playlists. It also discusses the influence of strategic professionals and advertising pushes towards gaining and sustaining popularity. We rely on contemporary gatekeeping (Wallace, 2017), datacracy (Radfahrer, 2018) and platformization (Dijck et al, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018) theories along with current music business and digitization studies (Negus, 2019; Prey, 2018; Leyshon, 2014; Vonderau, 2019), in order to include new stakeholders of a digitally distributed music landscape and present a proposal of digital music gatekeeping process. The analysed musicians belong to very specific genres and cultural contexts. Nevertheless it is suggested that some of the popularity strategy patterns identified by this research can be easily adapted to other cultural contexts and music genres.

KEYWORDS

Music Industry; Gatekeeping Theory; Datacracy; Cultural studies; Digital Media; Media Industry

INTRODUCTION

The music industry, like most of the entertainment industry, is shaped by its audience, following commercial interests and personal preferences. While the former seem quite straightforward (record labels need to be profitable in order to fund their operations), the latter are quite unclear. Since it seems quite reckless to build businesses upon transient whims, the music industry appears to have been trying to influence mass media audiences towards artists of commercial value.

This "taste influence" makes the entertainment business singular, for it has to blend together and synchronise some interests that may be quite different, even opposite: business executives with tight deadlines demanding commercial results have to negotiate both with artists that may have subjective approaches and creative choices and with media companies that may follow popular demands (together with their own commercial interests) in order to reach more prosperous compromises.

After a lot of trial and error, these parties seemed to have got to some sort of a delicate balance by the end of the twentieth century. A balance which they tried to sustain at all costs, by even attempting to charge royalties from cassette tape manufacturers to remedy the lost sales of copied albums (Drew, 2014). This landscape changed with the popularization of the Internet and social media, leading to a much greater offer of listening devices and services, more music available for the public and more artists with access to recording studios, both professional and home assembled (Leyshon, 2014), and digital music distribution services.

We propose to study how music reaches its listeners through this new streaming environment, in order to trace a path from its production to the listening of it. Until circa twenty years ago, mass media was expansive, originating from a central point (McLuhan, 2001), and our premise is that also was the case with major label produced music. Our communication processes were constrained in what Sauerberg (2009) and Pettit (2012) have named *the Gutenberg parenthesis* – an exceptional period marked by the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg up to the legitimization of sampling, remixing, reframing culture; which then led to what they name *secondary orality*. When applied only to music, it brackets an exception to humanity's natural orality and live music in which our perception of the validness of content derived from the wideness of its circulation. Because they are seen as *official* in the parenthetical

world, larger media outlets got more credibility, just as larger recording companies, also known as *the majors*. The closing of the *parenthesis* made the *secondary orality* possible, in which the sharing of music amongst its listeners is no longer a specificity of rare niches or a special moment such as producing a *mixtape*, but perhaps the main device in the growth of an artist's online presence.

The popularity of the Internet, broadband communications, mobile devices and social media led to a major transformation of the music business environment. It is not an understatement to say that audiences are better connected and more informed, that there are multiple new music outlets, and that artists can now have direct communication channels with their audiences (De Marchi, 2018). Fans are no longer geographically limited as they gather in online communities and exchange musical recommendations (Baym & Ledbetter, 2012), while also pursuing direct communication with their favorite artists (Baym, 2012).

This ecosystem evolution leads to a more complex environment, in which music fans seldom *own* the music they listen to, as they would by purchasing records or digital audio files (Morris, 2015; Vicente, 2012). Big music catalogs are available for personal online streaming through multiple platforms, compelling record labels to adapt their target consumers from record buyers to the much broader group of potential digital streaming listeners (Gurgel, 2016). Music is now offered via digital platforms in what Burkart (2014) presents as the *Celestial Jukebox*. These platforms shift the music market from one that sells plastic products containing copyrighted recordings into one that allows the listening of those recordings as a service, removing the ownership of the physical support from the equation (Anderson, 2013). These digital platforms are created in a way to enable unlimited scalability, and they become more profitable as they gather more subscribers (Vonderau, 2019).

At the same time, music fans gather in social platforms to share their own personal music collections through *playlists*, making the audience itself – whether this choice is filtered by algorithms or not – a major actor responsible for introducing new music genres and performers to their peers. The audience has long been taken into account when studying media and cultural businesses, especially when they are supported by advertising. Philip Napoli (2003) laid ground for understanding the targeted audience as those who purchase the advertised products, and not as the ideal consumers of the provided content. In this case, content is used as a "bait" for

promoting products and services. As micro-targeted advertising fuels the music streaming business, music becomes a means to an end in the business equation and not the other way around, – musical tracks are now better classified as "content" according to Negus (2019), used for attracting users to generate clicks and tracking their preferences to provide accurate consumer targeting. Nieborg and Poell (2018) furthermore consider such content to be "contingent" to platforms' interests.

Platforms track users through *algorithmic individuation*, creating ever-changing *personas* based on their current and contextual musical preferences, their playlists and, in services such as Spotify, their friends' preferences, in order to offer them the most possibly accurate ads (Prey, 2018). Although portable music with earphones has been around since the walkman (Hosokawa, 1984), by listening to music in the cloud users have their listening habits tracked and end up being commodified themselves, as Burkart (2013) puts: "The user-generated content that makes these services appealing to users and investors is unremunerated fan labor" (2013).

While the change from a business focused on selling records to a service-oriented one is not comprehensive, it is gradually becoming natural for music industry players to measure success according to digital ratings (such as *total monthly listeners, streaming counts* and *video views* of individual tracks), bringing data into the musical equation.

This article drafts gatekeeping from a *datacratic* perspective. A *datacracy* is a social regime in which data and algorithms are influencers on how decisions are made, in such a way that algorithms are ranked alongside human experts, with similar magnitudes (Radfahrer, 2018). From this perspective, intertwined relationships among people, algorithms and databases, are increasingly being defined by the machine, which is developing a strong - and growing - influence upon social decision making processes.

The music industry can be understood as a practical application of a *datacratic* regime in itself, for all major strategies – including marketing, investment and even audience interest are influenced by the industry numbers, and this creates an endless feedback loop. An artist's sales or *play counts*, when published, influence their future sales and plays by branding them as successful and interesting.

The reading of music sales data as marketing intelligence is not novel nor a phenomenon of digitization. In 1991 Billboard already used SoundScan, a bar-code based system that tracked

record sales in stores, and its results could unscrupulously determine the rise or fall of artists (McCourt & Rothenbuhler, 1997). This was a change to an industry previously based on "whatever sticks" (Drew, 2014), knowing few of the produced records would turn a profit, but reluctant to study how and why (Straw, 2001). The current access to data, however, is no longer analyzed by marketing executives, and is not gathered only in the final stage of selling the finished product. Programmers in large TV and Radio stations rely on play rankings in order to validate their curatorship according to Playax, a Brazilian company that provides such services and was the primary data source to build this paper. Current data and feedback are available directly to artists themselves during their pre-production, as early as creating music and thinking on what subject to write about for a new unconceived album, as noted by artists interviewed by Nancy Baym about their relationship with fans through social media (2012).

The *phonograph effect* (Katz, 2010) proposes that musical creations are changed by the technologies involved in their making, reproducing and distributing. Just as Katz demonstrates that the invention of the phonograph influenced music to be shorter in length, the rise of streaming services facilitates the release of singles and EPs instead of full albums and, even further, promoting and testing of music through social media and the feedback it generates changes the artistic outcome of the final recording. When analyzing taste profiles assigned to users based on their listening habits, Robert Prey (2017) wonders "how long until music is tailor-made to match these profiles?", questioning how platformization might affect the creative autonomy of musicians. Data-driven customization of culture is already taking place according to Nieborg and Poell (2018). Spotify pays royalties proportionally to track plays of 30 seconds or more, and insightful creatives have figured out that splitting music into shorter tracks generates more revenue. Ingham (2018) exposed a strategy in which playlists were filled with soundtrack-like tracks by seemingly unknown artists, lasting less than a minute. apparently made from scratch to fit specific playlist moods. This specific relationship of data with the artistic creation makes the music industry fit into the concept of a *datacracy*.

In the light of this discussion, we chose to trace the path of fast-rising artists through digital platforms, aiming to identify how different genres may have different relationships with the digital distribution of music to their audiences. Different genres have distinct audiences, as well as independent and *major* financed music are produced in dissimilar ways (Born, 1987;

Negus, 2004). We hypothesize that genres will flow in dissimilar ways from production to listening.

This proposal may be framed as part of a broader perspective, towards setting a basis for understanding the overall impact of digital technology on the communication surrounding musical releases, and the understanding of music as content. Our study is focused on the Brazilian environment, but we believe it can be easily applied to other contexts, taking cultural and market differences into consideration. The model chosen was used as a guide to analyse streaming, broadcasting and social media data from Radio, YouTube and Spotify provided by *Playax*, an audience analysis platform aimed at music industry professionals[1].

ON BRAZILIAN MUSIC INDUSTRY PARTICULARITIES AND ITS GENRES

There has been a struggle concerning forces driven by creativity and commerce in the core of the music industry since the early 1960's, noticed by Simon Frith when he signals that "art discourses were beginning to be applied to 'commercial' sounds" (Frith, 1998). This is also pointed out by Hesmondhalgh and Baker, referring to the use of the term *cultural industries* due to the rising reverence of the concept of creativity in the same decade (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

The concept of popular culture might be explained as a way of mediating class and group values in which genres in popular music bring forward the "issues thrown up by their commodification" (Frith, 1998, page 45). While each music genre brings a different set of values from the sociological point of view, and may be listened to by an audience of similar values, it might as well be consumed as a commodity through a different set of platforms, of which specific audiences are more familiar with. This will be the case with our selected Brazilian genres ahead, which are uniquely local, rooted in Brazilian history and drenched in social clashes.

Besides the adoption of genres as one of the axioms to understand popular music, this research also takes into consideration the characteristics implied by being released by independent labels and major record labels, representing creative and commercial values respectively. Keith Negus makes a compelling argument that independent labels, in comparison

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[1] Available at <http://www.playax.com>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

with major record labels, have more awareness of new trends and are freer from big commercial ties to pursue them, therefore being responsible for releasing to the audiences new music that could not even be recorded if it relied only on major record labels. At the same time, the author makes a reminder not to over-idealize independent labels, since they might act as talent scouts for major record labels, which release following projects of "pre-tested" independents (Negus, 1996).

On the other hand, when major record labels take successful independents and turn into commercial hits, they keep their status as culture setters, as described by Patrick Burkart when analyzing the new digital music environment in the beginning of the transition to a streaming model: "The new oligopoly in the music business continues to exert anti-competitiveness throughout its traditional distribution bottlenecks" (Burkart, 2005). We propose that such bottlenecks can be identified by applying the *digital music gatekeeping* model into music communication, and we begin by testing it in the Brazilian music industry.

While the global music industry grew 9.7% in revenue in 2018, Brazilian music industry stood out with a 15.4% growth, becoming the largest market for recorded music in Latin America and occupying the tenth place globally (IFPI, 2019). Brazilian numbers were driven mainly by the adoption of streaming platforms, which were responsible for 69.5% of total revenue in 2018 and represented a 46% growth year over year (ProMusica, 2019).

Brazil was noted as one of the fastest growing markets of the year by IFPI's *Digital Music Report* (2019). In addition to the noticeable growth of the music market in Brazil, comes the particularity of the domestic genres – most of the music listened to in Brazil is also made in Brazil (Wikstrom, 2009), and the analysis of the two hundred most popular tracks played in Brazilian streaming platforms in 2018 reveals that 84% of them are performed by local artists (ProMusica, 2019). When the same list of tracks is aggregated by its genres, *Sertanejo* shows up as the most popular genre with 44% of them while *Brazilian Funk* is found in second place with 35%. The two genres are typically Brazilian, and will be the context of selection for our 5 cases.

UNDERSTANDING *BRAZILIAN FUNK* AND *SERTANEJO*

We have chosen to work with 5 artists from two of the most popular musical genres in contemporary Brazil, *Brazilian Funk* and *Sertanejo*, which are also typical Brazilian music. What is

called *Brazilian Funk* is very different from what is known internationally as *Funk*, the genre originated in the African-American communities of the USA in the 1960's, popularized by James Brown. *Brazilian Funk*[2] bears no relationship with the international Funk apart from its name, coined in popular parties happening in Rio de Janeiro's favelas in the 1970s, in which international Funk and soul music would also be played (such parties are still going strong today, despite the fact that the music played there changed over time). Widely known for their low-cost tickets, ubiquitous cheap alcoholic beverages, large and loud sound equipment, having their own media outlets (radio, TV and Internet) and a star-system of DJs[3] and MCs[4]. What is called *Brazilian Funk* music is usually derived from one of these three major genres: rap, mash-ups created by DJs and short melodies with double meaning lyrics (Sá & Miranda, 2011).

In the 1990s and 2000s, it was already clear to the *Brazilian Funk* business that having a hit song did not mean boosting their record sales – especially due to the widespread piracy in Brazilian popular music[5]. Having a hit song usually meant boosting parties' attendance profiting from ticket and beverage sales (Sá & Miranda, 2011).

The company *Furacão 2000* was a strong representative of the Rio de Janeiro branch of *Brazilian Funk* by organizing parties, releasing artists and managing media professionals to promote them as early as the 1970s. These days, other producers such as *KondZilla* from São Paulo, a video producer and record label, whose YouTube channel is one of the 10 most viewed in the world[6], are breaking into stardom as well.

Before diving into the case study of five *Sertanejo* and *Brazilian Funk* artists, we will discuss how we can do so by understanding how their communication is spread in order to make them known by their potential audience.

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[2] *Brazilian Funk* is mostly known in Brazil as "Funk Carioca", which means "Funk from Rio de Janeiro", or simply "Funk". However, it has since been produced in many other regions of Brazil and it requires distinction from international Funk, so it has been categorized in our original database as *Brazilian Funk.*

[3] DJ: Disk Jockey, those who play and combine music for people to dance (Sá & Miranda, 2011)

[4] MCs are the Masters of Ceremonies, who write and rap music, just as hip hop MCs (Sá & Miranda, 2011).

[5] Street vendors were common to have CD & DVD stands, offering pirate versions of hit records and their own compilations.

[6] According to YouTube data consolidated by Statista, available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/373729/most-viewed-youtube-channels/>, accessed in 30 Nov 2018. KondZilla had 27 billion views and 54 million subscribers on its YouTube Channel in 24 Dec 2019. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/user/CanalKondZilla>.

GATEKEEPING, DATACRACY AND PLATFORMIZATION

Gatekeeping theory was first presented by Kurt Lewin in 1943 (Lewin, 2014). Originally envisioned under a psychology context, the term described the decision-making process of housewives when purchasing groceries. One of the first implementations of this theory in a communications context was by David M. White (1950), reporting an editor's choice process when selecting the news to be published in a newspaper. Since then, there has been a lot of debate over the depth of the gatekeeping process (Bass, 1969; Bruns, 2003; Singer, 2014).

When discussing cultural products, Paul M. Hirsch supports Brown's broader chain of gatekeepers, by presenting the record label as the first gatekeeper of music – the one which decides what kind of music will be recorded (Hirsch, 1972). Hirsch analyses music gatekeepers in a context of narrower selections of available music, provided by the workflow of major record labels' releases for a physical goods market. These past two decades are typical for broader selections of music made available through digital catalogues, however the clustering of decisions by major record companies and mass media outlets is significant still.

Long tail is Chris Anderson's (2008) designation of the large amount of cultural products that sell in small quantities and therefore were not profitable for large stores to keep in stock in the 20th century. Hirsch (1972) mentions these logistic limitations to less successful music albums. These products, however, with the possibility of being sold remotely and free of geographic boundaries in online shops, are summed up to a large amount of sales and become profitable, according to Anderson (2008). When listening to music through platforms, the audience might encounter tracks that they might not buy, for a number of reasons including that they might not even have heard of such artist. Platformization enables the distribution of *long-tail* selections of independent music and the casual listening of them by those who might or might not become their fans. Streaming platforms create narrow niches of service with extremely curated content according to Morris & Powers (2015), in a way similar to cable TV channels, however generating a large amount of data about users' listening habits. Robert Prey (2016) proposes that this *datafication of listening* gets in the way of that perceived freedom of finding music, since the platforms' *taste profiles* create *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011) around the listeners. Playlists are at the center of these bubbles, as Negus (2019) notes: "In an age of abundance the curator becomes more significant than the creator. The playlist becomes more culturally and commercially important than the idea of the album as artistic statement and

commodity". We will propose further along, in our *digital music gatekeeping* model, that these filter bubbles act as gatekeepers as well, by selecting which tracks go through their gates.

Datacracies can be understood as new social regimes in which data plays the most important role, defining and ruling social interactions (Radfahrer, 2018). We draw from the concept of *datafication* in order to understand how the world becomes quantified in every aspect, through the massive gathering of data from user interaction on digital platforms; which led to the transformation of technology companies business models from technology oriented to data oriented (Dijck, Poell & Waal, 2018). *Datacracy* is an evolution of Neils Postman's *Technopoly* (1993), in which technological tools are used to provide direction and purpose for society and individuals: "a society in which technology is deified. The culture seeks its authorisation in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology and takes its orders from technology."

Datacracy takes on a broader view than *data colonialism*, since it is not restricted to cultural influence and/or domination. When focusing on Brazilian music landscape it is noticeable that local artists and cultural demands play a significant part in music production, from creation to distribution, and we draw on the *datacracy* model to focus on the consumption of Brazilian music by locals instead of the *data colonialism* approach on "predatory extractive" quantification methods (Couldry & Meijas, 2018). In the music realm, it has a *dataveillance* (van Dijck, 2014) view in which its actors swap their roles, albeit this practice monitor and collect online data and metadata through social networks and online platforms, it is not used as surveillance, but as a marketing-based creative tool, which tends to provide consumers with exactly the kind of entertainment they expect.

The music industry has a history of being influenced by market demands, which tend to have a strong impact on creative choices. This information, however, was gathered by research market services, and mediated by editors and labels, in a process that was far from direct. Social media rising popularity allied with the growth of on-demand streaming music services provided artists with direct access to live consumer data through specialized dashboards such as *Spotify for Artists* and *YouTube for Artists*, having detailed fan interaction live data that allows detailed marketing strategies for artists to reach and expand their target markets, demonstrating the direct impact of every creative decision, a process that tends to enhance the influence of market data on creative output.

This scenario fits a *datacracy* context, in which Big Data systems tend to have an increasing influence over the general public. Algorithms, in a *datacracy*, are not simply seen as equations – instead, they match Nick Seaver's (2017) approach as "heterogeneous and diffuse sociotechnical systems, rather than rigidly constrained and procedural formulas". We rely on the concept of *datacracy* as the foundation of our *digital music gatekeeping* model, suggesting that the music industry is in itself a *datacracy*, governed by data while flowing through the platforms.

Patrik Wikström's *Audience-Media Engine* is also taken into account in our proposed model, by including *audience approval* and *audience action* as variables connected to *audience reach* and *media presence*; all of which will together work towards or against the promotion of an artist. While the *media presence* and its resulting *audience reach* might be generated by standard gatekeepers like mass media outlets, *audience approval* and *action* are generated by the listeners themselves (Wikström, 2009). By including them in the loop with the first two, Wikström brings the *Audience* to the same level of importance as traditional *Media* in his *Engine*, and as it loops over and over, the measurements of these audience reactions can become just as important as the reactions themselves. Music industry data becomes a sort of content in itself, and in its *datacratic*-oriented regime, it takes part in determining whether a given artists' loop will go forwards or backwards. For this reason, artists are increasingly concerned not only with selling, but also with rising in the charts, to tell their audience they are indeed well-sold[7]. We propose that the audience factor might be more relevant than the major media outlets in the current system for some genres, and we will return to this when comparing our two selected genres.

Shoemaker & Vos (2009) have also taken the audience into account in their Gatekeeping Theory, even if secondary. As news items are offered by major media on digital outlets, they are ranked according to their popularity among readers. This secondary filter is integrated into their gatekeeping theory in order to explain the reach gap between different news items. The researchers pointed out that "having the capability to access huge amounts of foreign news on the internet does not mean that individuals will read it" (Shoemaker et al., 2010, p. 67).

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[7] The industry seems to be aware of how it is being run in loops by its own numbers, up to the point in which artist DJ Khaled has threatened to sue Billboard for being charted number two in a week in which his own math would make him number one:

"'Monster' US charts fallout: is DJ Khaled about to sue Billboard after missing out on no.1?", in Music Business Worldwide, by Tim Ingham, available at https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/dj-khaled-reportedly-planning-to-sue-billboard-after-missing-out-on-no-1-chart-spot/

Wallace's (2017) analysis of digital journalism in the news media landscape takes into account the rise of algorithms and platforms, introducing new variables to the gatekeeping process, while also demanding a revision of the classical model. Instead of only working with primary and secondary stages of gatekeeping, Wallace proposes a new model for news dissemination made of three consecutive stages in a cyclical iteration: input, throughput and output. His model also suggests four types of gatekeepers acting through the stages as agents of information flow: *journalists*, *algorithms*, *strategic professionals* and *individual amateurs*.

In the Wallace model, *input* stages acknowledge that agents have different levels of access to information. Journalists, for example, can use an organised source structure provided by a news agency, while amateurs might rely on personal information networks. *Throughput* stages consider each information agent's selection criteria. Journalists, for example, tend to check facts and sources aiming trustworthiness, while newsgathering algorithms such as *Google News* redistribute already published news items favouring popularity and other behavioural metrics to increase audience consumption. The *output* stage is defined by the available choices of platforms for content to be published. Once three stages are completed, the resulting publication might be used as an information source for a new cycle.

Wallace's multi-node model is consistent with the shift from two-sided market structures to "complex multisided platform configurations" proposed by Nieborg and Poell's (2018) work on platformization. As essential intermediaries for publishing and distributing content in the digital age, platforms in the Wallace model are considered scenarios containing rules for gatekeeper interactivity on the third stage. Each platform acts in a particular way, offering advantages or disadvantages to information flow, depending on their structure, interface and user interaction. In regard of these characteristics, Wallace's model proposes two sorts of platforms, according to their gatekeeping mechanisms, them being *centralized* or *decentralized*. In centralized platforms, information comes from fewer and more controlled sources (such as newspapers, magazines, news agencies, and newsgathering algorithms such as Google News), which supposedly can vouch for their output and reach the audience more easily. In decentralized platforms anyone is able to publish content (such as social media, blogs and forums), and these items demand a lot of public interaction to avoid oblivion.

Following Wallace's model, algorithms are applied in two different ways. As gatekeeper agents, they harvest and reorganize content previously published by other agents and output them on centralized platforms. Google News is an example of a newsgathering algorithm in which content relevance is mathematically calculated by readers' responses in a massive scale. For our proposal, we understand this type of iteration as the one from algorithm-curated playlists such as the automatic and individual *Discover Weekly* from Spotify. Each user is given a different selection based on their listening history and current trends.

However, algorithms running in social media are understood as structural features of decentralized platforms that build relevance over networked content, and not as gatekeepers themselves. This is the case of the Facebook newsfeed algorithm that controls content availability according to peers interactivity. In our proposal, this type of algorithm would be a mediator of the nodes of decentralized platforms.

A *DIGITAL MUSIC GATEKEEPING* PROPOSITION

Given that music business decisions are increasingly being made following data measurements, we believe that an analysis and better understanding of these processes is essential. Our intent is to make use of an updated framework, grounded on Wallace's *digital gatekeeping* model and the concept of *datacracy*, while also relying on Wikström's *audience-media engine*'s loops, Sauerberg's (2009) *Gutenberg parenthesis* and Eli Pariser's (2011) *filter bubbles*. By taking both human agents and algorithms into consideration, we can understand how they can act together with traditional mass media to influence listener choices.

We propose to interpret music as content in this model, instead of Hirsch's (1972) description of them as cultural products, which would make them nonmaterial goods. This is supported by Negus's (2019) claim that tracks become so when used as a means to generate ad clicks. The audience has – in many cases reluctantly – relinquished ownership of the music products and is now subject to hiring the ability to listen to whatever music is available on a given platform for a finite duration of time, with no guarantee of keeping a specific artist's music in their collections. If an artist decides to leave a platform, such as Taylor Swift has done

after disagreeing with Spotify's remuneration system (MBW, 2014), the artist's fans instantly lose access to their music, even if saved and downloaded in their Spotify collections.

Parallel to that, we suggest to consider all the systems involved in promoting a track as equally capable of influence in a never-ending cycle, constantly fed into itself. Hirsch (1972) delineates gatekeepers in an aura of a few centralized and unreacheable mass media outlets, consistent with the inside of the *Gutenberg parenthesis*. Our proposal is to understand, based on Wallace's model, that any and all nodes in this intricate web are also gatekeepers, potentially capable of as much influence as any other depending on the context – which includes the music genre. The key point in this detachment among all selectors is what kind of systems tracks are published *into*, whether they are centralized or decentralized.

Major record labels have well-equipped marketing and promotion departments as well as larger budgets, features which make them more likely to reach their audience through major media outlets, which is consistent with the bottleneck for major label releases suggested by Burkart (2005). Independent artists, however, mostly depend on aggregators to make their music tracks available in platforms. Once there, their tracks still depend on many interactions to be noticed by recommendation algorithms, human curatorship and finally their end users, in a decentralized manner.

Given their massive audience, we believe that there are centralized and decentralized agents contained in both Spotify and YouTube. While larger channels and curated playlists are centralized, their low-reach user-generated channels and playlists are decentralized. This means that we can no longer consider these platforms as uniquely centralized or decentralized, since they contain both centralized and decentralized processes in themselves. Due to this recursive proposition of subcategorization of agents inside the same given platform, we will further address to the agents involved in letting music pass or not as centralized and decentralized gatekeepers instead of platforms. We propose the following ones to be included in the digital music gatekeeping model (Figure 1):

- **Centralized gatekeepers,** boosting the information through clear strategies, facilitated by filtering algorithms:

    - *Major record labels*, representing a somewhat official source of music tracks;

- ○ *Radio* and other official media outlets;
- ○ *Curated playlists*[8] and *Large YouTube channels*, which are human-updated sources for distribution of new music to previously targeted audiences;
- ○ *Algorithm-curated-playlists*. Non-human playlists, ran by algorithms, such as Spotify's "Discover Weekly" and "Release Radar". These are automatically assembled for each individual user, based on listening history.

- **Decentralized gatekeepers,** influencing information spread through uneven paths, mediated by filtering algorithms:

  - ○ Independent artists, promoting their own music through aggregators and their own media;
  - ○ *Strategic professionals*, being these the ones hired to promote certain contents throughout the media. These include public relations professionals, press agents, independent radio promoters, advertising in social media and platforms, paid placing in strategic spots, and also the practice of *payola*, which is not illegal in Brazil, although it is frowned upon and mostly carried out in non-literal ways such as cultural support for radio stations, gifts, etc.[9];
  - ○ *Individual Amateurs*, which are non-corporate content producers including bloggers, YouTubers, social media celebrities as content prosumers and sharers themselves, and included are fan or artist-based strategies to boost playlists and independent lower-reach marketing efforts;
  - ○ The *Audience* in itself, as unpretentious influencers of their own smaller bubbles.

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[8] Including all kinds of curators, be them music critics, journalists, fans or even brands which might use those playlists to set the mood for their brand image (Drew, 2005).

[9] Revealed by André Midani, main executive of the 1960-90's Brazilian music industry, interview by Pedro Alexandro Sanches. Available at <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u33266.shtml>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.
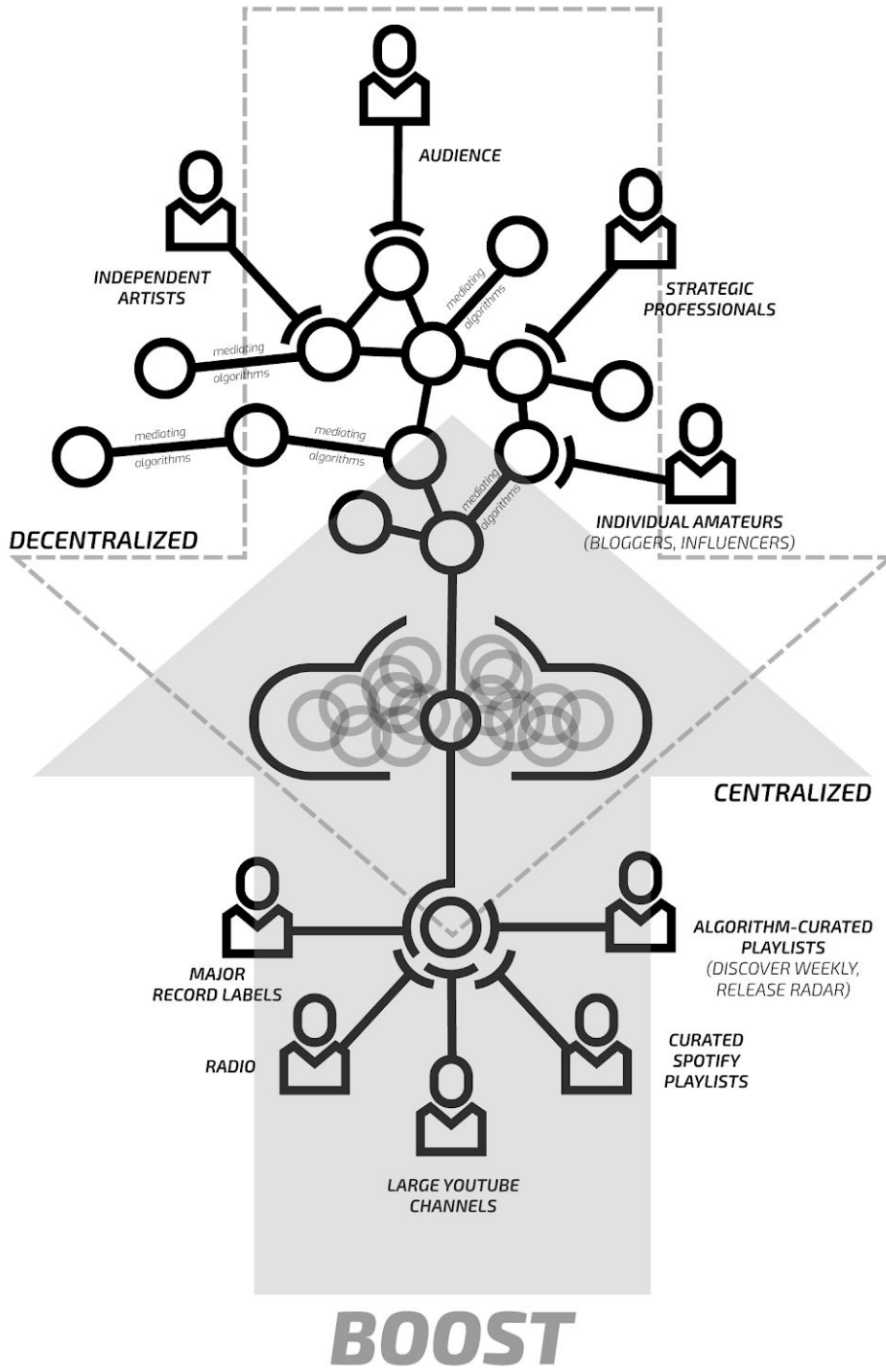
AFFECT

AUDIENCE

INDEPENDENT
ARTISTS

STRATEGIC
PROFESSIONALS

*mediating
algorithms*

*mediating
algorithms*

*mediating
algorithms*

*mediating
algorithms*

*mediating
algorithms*

DECENTRALIZED

INDIVIDUAL AMATEURS
(BLOGGERS, INFLUENCERS)

CENTRALIZED

MAJOR
RECORD LABELS

ALGORITHM-CURATED
PLAYLISTS
(DISCOVER WEEKLY,
RELEASE RADAR)

RADIO

CURATED
SPOTIFY
PLAYLISTS

LARGE YOUTUBE
CHANNELS

BOOST

Figure 1: Suggested model for digital music gatekeeping

We intentionally did not include Spotify, YouTube, social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and other smaller or alternative platforms as Soundcloud, Bandcamp, etc. in this model, understanding that they are platforms and not agents themselves, platforms being the scenario through which agents flow. Throughout each of these platforms we shall encounter different centralized and decentralized agents. Billboard's YouTube channel would be considered a centralized agent in this model, opposed to an independent and little known vlogger using the same platform to promote his musical curatorship, and this vlogger would be considered a decentralized agent.

We also work with two different kinds of algorithms that must be clearly differentiated. Both kinds are human-designed equations that follow the procedures specified by their creators, letting content deemed "interesting" go through and vice-versa, according to their rules (Beer, 2017). Algorithm-created playlists as Spotify's *Discover Weekly*, same as newsgathering algorithms like Google News, are agents in themselves, creating new curated content (playlists) based on a set of rules. Filtering algorithms are those which mediate the centralized and decentralized agents, and its rules of allowing the content to go through or not are central in determining if an agent will be considered centralized or not. Centralized agents are those which benefit from filtering and are able to boost their content through a larger audience, while decentralized ones are those which spread their content through uneven paths and have to survive through filtering to reach their destination.

We further suggest that these processes will vary throughout genres. While *Brazilian Funk* is notable for its audience strength and renegating mass media for its promotion, *Sertanejo* is known for having large and mostly private investors, able to place unknown artists in traditional mass media such as top radio stations through strategies similar to payola. This would suggest that *Brazilian Funk* artists would begin their path through decentralized agents, and *Sertanejo* ones backed by centralized media. We will further study the differences between these processes in individual genres through the gathered play count data ahead.

METHODOLOGY

Playax was chosen as the source for tracking audience data about Brazilian music industry. It is a service that creates a behavioural database by assessing an artist's performance in several platforms, from traditional media broadcasts to digital rental and streaming services, and provides aggregated statistics out of the data gathered. Our initial dataset included Brazilian artists with their respective music tracks and play counts originated on Spotify, Youtube and Radio platforms over a one year period, from November 2017 to October 2018[10]. The standard metric used for comparison among these platforms were *daily counts* of played music tracks.

Our methodology was based on audience behavior towards artists separated by genres, looking consistent growth in music distribution as a premise to identify centralized and decentralized gatekeepers that might be acting on platforms. For example, if there's a growth trend associated with a group of artists of a particular genre originated in a specific platform, that fact was considered as an evidence of a gatekeeping process happening within the platform and associated with that genre. On the other hand, isolated spikes were signaled in the analysis due to the lack of consistency growth that might be explained either by paid media usage to promote new releases or by occasional mass media appearances.

The initial dataset was processed to choose fifty artists with most consistent and significant growth in the twelve-month period analysed. The selection process to achieve that result is described below:

1. *Playax Ranking* is a metric provided by *Playax* which sorts all artists by overall audience in every period. We calculated the year average ranking of each artist from November 2017 to October 2018 in order to assure that growth was consistent, lessening the impact of growth spikes caused by occasional events.
2. For each artist, the year average was compared by subtraction to the artist ranking on November 2017, resulting in a range that was used to identify growth trends over the year. A larger positive range was an indication that the artist had gained popularity during that period.

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[10] In order to foster future debates, we enclose the Playax dataset used for this research (in .csv format) as an appendix to this paper, hoping that it proves itself useful as a testing ground.

3. After that, we filtered only artists who were among the thousand most popular, sorted by the year average ranking. This step in the process assured the removal of artists with large positive growth that are deep down in the ranking (such as raising 100,000% from 3 to 3,000 streams).

4. Finally, after applying the filter, we sorted the artists by their growth trend found in the second step and selected the fifty steeper growth curves.

When analysing the final group of fifty artists, *Brazilian Funk* and *Sertanejo* genres stand out, not only by the amount of artists (11 on *Brazilian Funk* and 7 on *Sertanejo*), but more specifically because of the similar paths followed by their curves. From the original sample, we chose to select the five steepest and idiosyncratic curves of both genres for a more dedicated analysis. Because they are so different in audience and promotion strategy, we believe these two genres will significantly draw visible differences in our *digital music gatekeeping* model.

BRAZILIAN FUNK ARTISTS

KondZilla, an original music video producer YouTube channel, appears to be a centralized gatekeeper in itself. Their reach can be noticed when analyzing the data of artist *MC Loma & as Gêmeas da Lacração*. In Jan 20th 2018 the artist published an amateur self-made music video for the track "Envolvimento"[11]. From then to the first days of February, they rose sixfold, from an average of 500,000 to about three million daily views. However, it was when the same song had a video produced by KondZilla and released in their channel, they peaked 11.8 million views in a single day[12], the first day after the video was published. This one by KondZilla reached 233.6 million views by Nov 2018[13]. But more than just pointing to their peaks, Playax's dataset revealed how that their boost in YouTube views reflected in more Spotify and radio streams in the following months (Figure 2).

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[11] This video totaled 47.5 million views by November 2018. Available at <https://youtu.be/pOpyq-T4fnQ>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

[12] Daily view count obtained from YouTube's own charts, available at <https://charts.youtube.com/artist/%2Fg%2F11f3_q6myo?date_end=2018-11-27T00%3A00%3A00Z>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

[13] Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgJOJAmXlBw>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.
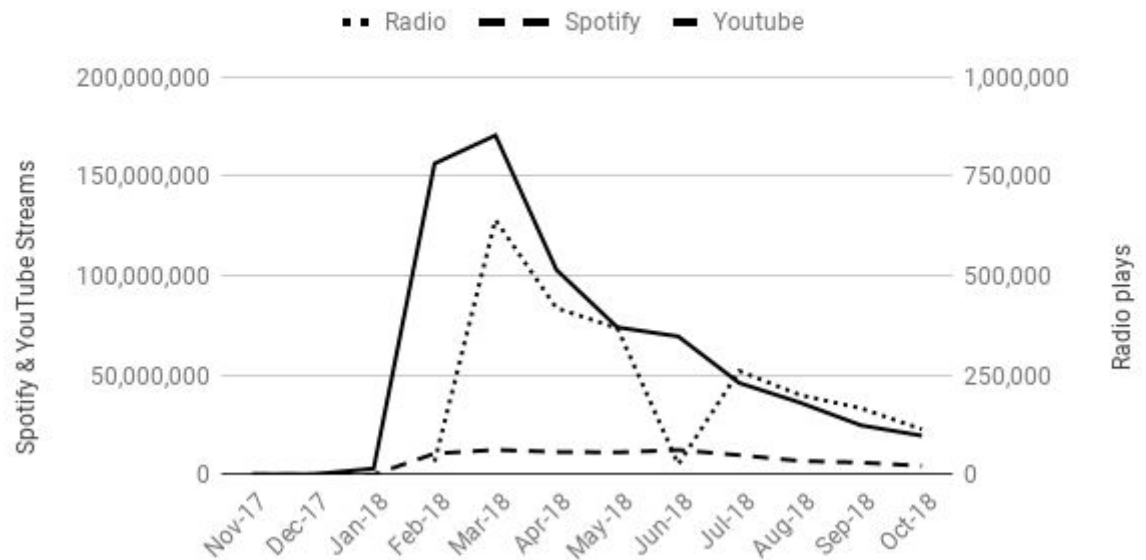
Figure 2: Playax data of artist MC Loma & as gémeas da lacração

From this data, we recognize a path through the gatekeeping model which starts with an independent artist publishing a track via YouTube, this track being repeatedly shared by the audience (Figure 3). Later on the track is published at KondZilla's YouTube channel, a centralized gatekeeper, leading to more sharing and the addition of the track to Spotify curated playlists such as "Segue o baile"[14], "Funk Hits"[15] and "Funk 2018 - Melhores funks 2018"[16]), parallel to the automatic recommendation of the track through algorithm-curated playlists and the extensive sharing by individual listeners.

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[14] "Segue o baile", official Spotify playlist with 431,000 followers. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWWmaszSfZpom?si=M8xJlcSeTZy5D2b-N7wokw> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

[15] "Funk hits", official Spotify playlist with 2 million followers. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWTkIwO2HDifB?si=5GohUbCfS26QAekeRcx5ow> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

[16] "Funk 2018 - Melhores funks 2018", Spotify playlist curated by *redmusiccompany*, 712,000 followers. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/user/redmusiccompany/playlist/0WrqPR7s1X73LBJiW2eRWC?si=aSyO4ndPSsSwt2pb89ac6Q> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.
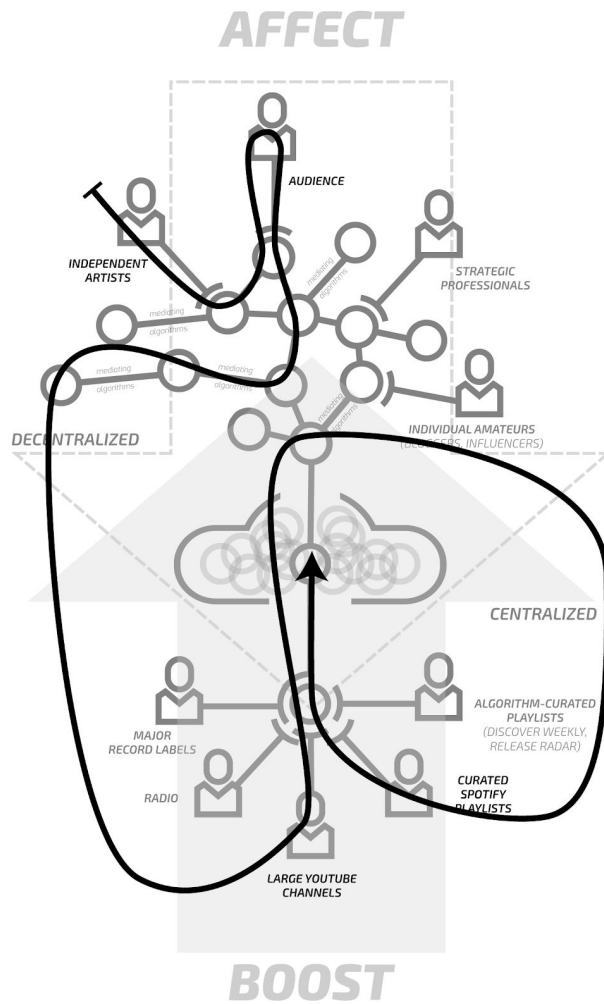
Figure 3: Suggested gatekeeping cycles of MC Loma & as gêmeas da lacração

The same rising pattern through *KondZilla* is seen in *MC Dede*'s data, which holds a similar path through the musical gatekeeping model. On April 21st 2018, when a video was published at the KondZilla channel[17], their daily views peaked to 3.5 million, a huge growth from the day before, an audience of barely 200,000[18]. In the following months, their Spotify presence rises significantly and, although their YouTube presence decreases, their Spotify audience keeps steady throughout a few more months (Figure 4).

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[17] Available at <https://youtu.be/2XHgXfmfsZU> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.
[18] Daily view count obtained from YouTube's own charts, available at <https://charts.youtube.com/artist/%2Fg%2F11b7_v3lwg?date_end=2018-11-27T00%3A00%3A00Z>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.
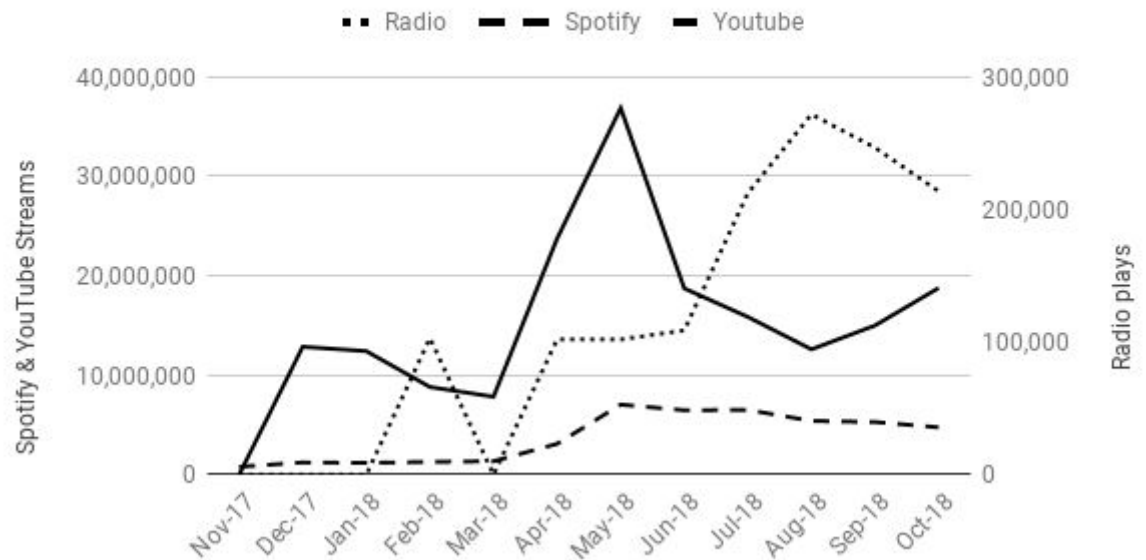
MC Dede

Source: Playax

Figure 4: Playax data of artist MC Dede

SERTANEJO ARTISTS

While *KondZilla* might be one of the major YouTube Channel centralized gatekeepers when it comes to *Brazilian Funk* music, it does not necessarily hold its influence for other music genres. The popular *Sertanejo* genre calls for new insights. Despite being originated from the Brazilian heartland (contrasting with the metropolitan sprung Funk) and sometimes related to Country music genre in the USA, Brazilian *Sertanejo* has a history of its own.

Sertanejo was originally the folk music of Brazilian rural regions, and was quite different from what is heard today. It became marginalized during the second half of the 20th century, and was cast aside by the elites as a lesser musical style (Alonso, 2011). By the end of the century it was rebranded as a new commercial genre, institutionalized and called *Sertanejo Universitário*, meaning it is predominantly made and consumed by college students (denoting elites). Although still being made by mostly duo artists, their lyrics went from complaining about cheating spouses to a constant elevation of love itself and the commemoration of the end of bad relationships. Although *Sertanejo* has risen to the top of most charts above pop music, their artists claim to be different, because they are mostly only affiliated to record labels for distribution, and not for comprehensive deals (Alonso, 2012).

Sertanejo artists' data indicate that they might follow a different path from the one taken by *Brazilian Funk*. We believe that one of their main gatekeeping mechanisms is the Spotify playlist, opening the gates to being discovered and listened in the platform. Artists such as *Lucca & Mateus* begin their trajectory by rising significantly on Spotify, then spreading to YouTube and radio on the following months. Radio plays were also boosted at the same time, however in a much smaller rate, as shown in Figure 5 (please note that Radio plays refer to the right-side axis, in a different scale, in order to reflect the fact that radio plays reach a large number of listeners, while YouTube and Spotify plays reach mostly individual ones).
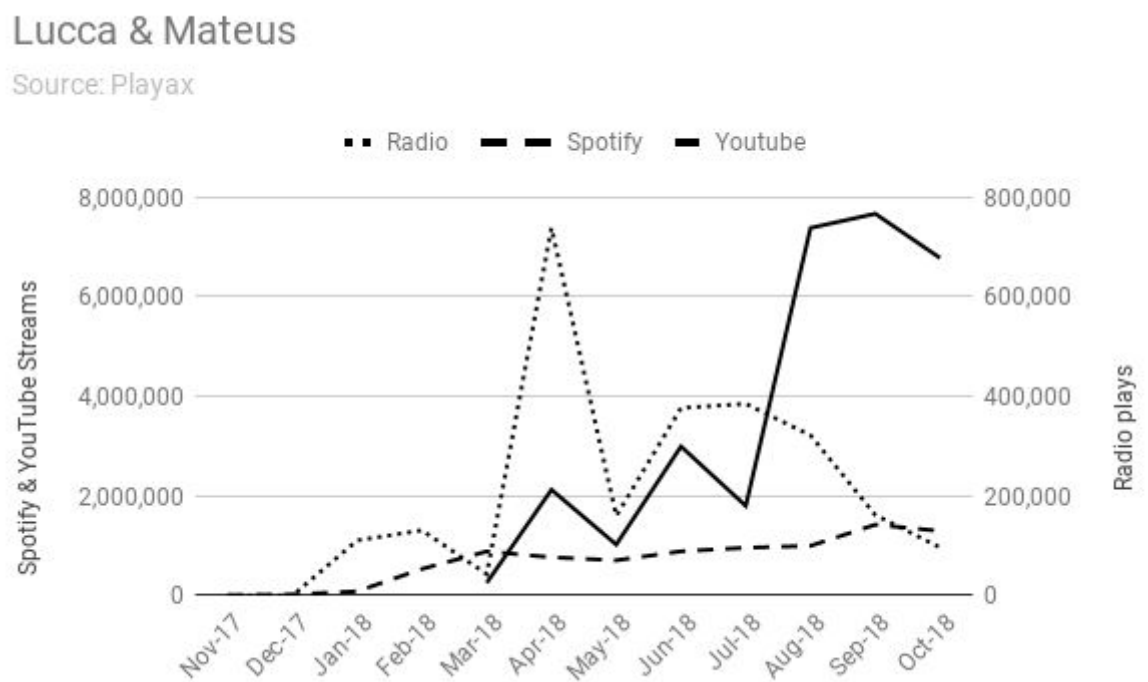

Figure 5: Playax data of artist duo Lucca & Mateus.

Although it is not possible to spot which specific playlists this artist was added to in this specific time frame, due to the platform's analytic restrictions, Spotify states in the artist's profile that they were discovered on playlists such as "Sertanejo no trabalho"[19], "Sertanejo universitário 2018"[20] and "Viagem sertaneja"[21]. This artist seems to have steered through the

[19] "Sertanejo no trabalho". Official Spotify playlist, 330,000 followers. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWUkWvWISwtjS?si=F2z0muFpRnWOa5WzU7TKDA> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

[20] "Sertanejo universitário 2018". Spotify playlist curated by Vinicius Menegola, 99,000 followers. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/user/vini_kam/playlist/4C7la5DHqabGdAaJ3615I5?si=U06dDutdRcSdKt7TY0WJbg> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

gatekeeping model in a different way. While *Brazilian Funk* artists started on decentralized gatekeeping agents and were then re-released on KondZilla's large and centralized YouTube channel, Lucca & Mateus were first popularized on Spotify, suggesting a first point of contact with the audience through centralized outlets such as human curated playlists. In other words, we propose that agents which could generally be considered as decentralized such as large YouTube channels and curated Spotify playlists are in fact centralizing agents due to their facilitation of discovery through the platform filtering. Artist Hugo & Guilherme also seem to reflect Spotify's growth into YouTube, suggesting that their first point of discovery was on Spotify (Figure 6).
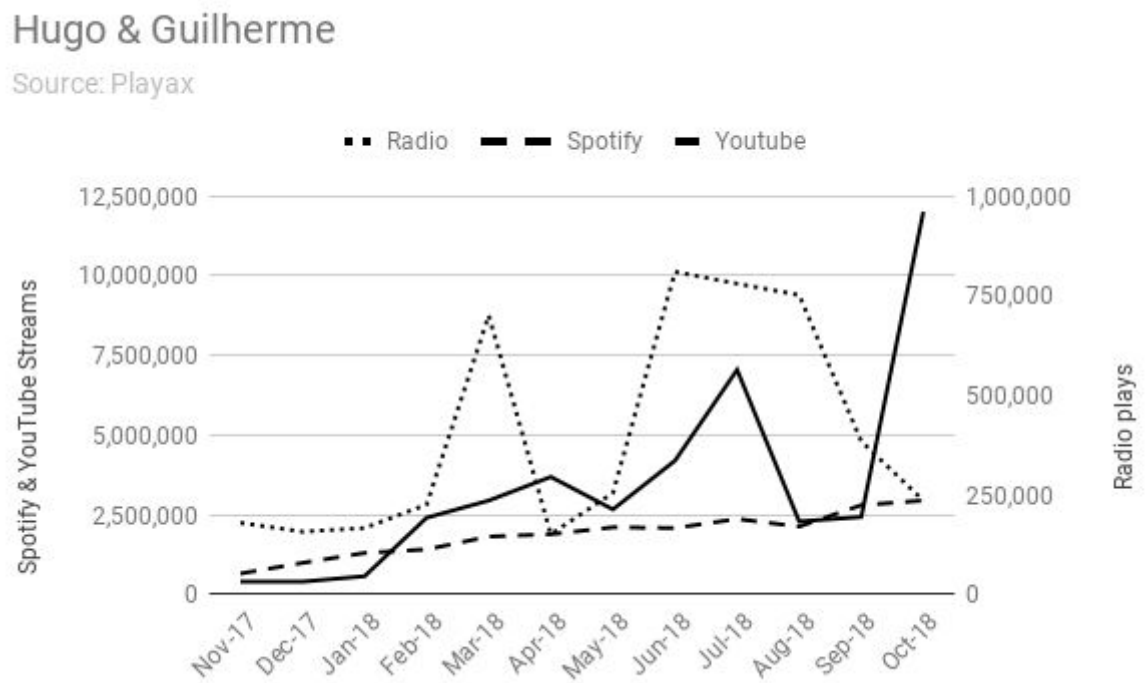

Figure 6: Playax data of artist duo Hugo & Guilherme

However, both Lucca & Mateus and Hugo & Guilherme show steep peaks in YouTube and radio. These quickly rise and fall in a single month, suggesting they might be exceptional situations. Radio and YouTube peaks seem to be exceptions, which may be the quick rise and fall of a hit, but may also be generated by advertising efforts in that month, more specifically YouTube advertising and radio payola in this case. This is consistent with a large peak that does

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[21] "Viagem sertaneja". Official Spotify playlist, (Spotify, 25,000 followers. Available at <https://open.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWUctoXKgeOXv?si=rxBa1mZwTwuGTqTcFyW7mg> . Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

not hold itself in the following months (or at least some of it, as happened with the studied *Brazilian Funk* artists). The strategic investment in artist Lucca & Mateus appears to generate quick vanishing peaks in their visibility, however it does not seem to raise their organic YouTube and radio plays significantly, given that the play counts drop back down right after the month of the boost. While we are limited to the public data of views, streams and radio plays, we are not able to test the hypothesis of them being generated by advertising and payola without inside data on investments. However we can indicate that these peaks are much steeper than the ones in the analyzed *Brazilian Funk* artists.
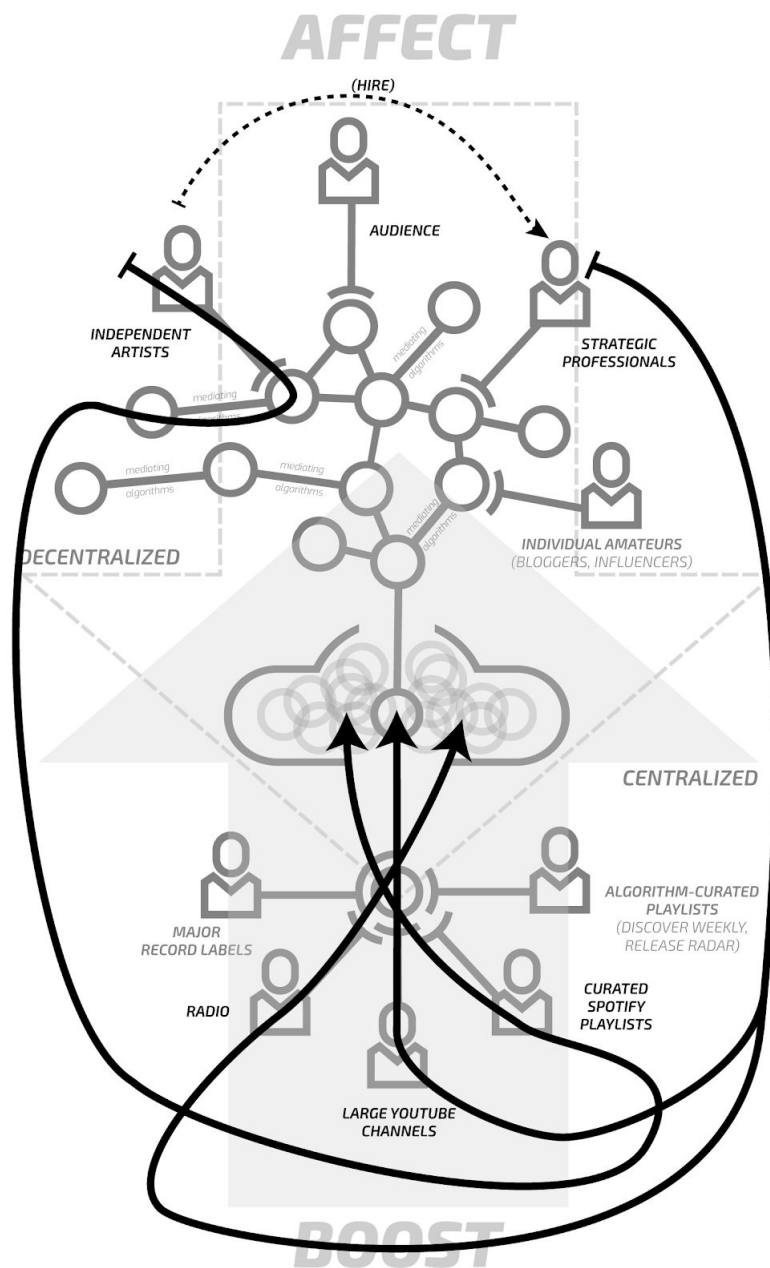

Figure 7: Suggested gatekeeping path of Lucca & Matheus

These peaks become even clearer to point out in artist duo *Otavio Augusto & Gabriel*, whose chart is mainly made of peaks that are not sustained in the following months (Figure 8). Also note that Radio plays in Figure 8 refer to the right-side axis, which now uses the exact same scale of the Spotify & YouTube left-side axis[22].
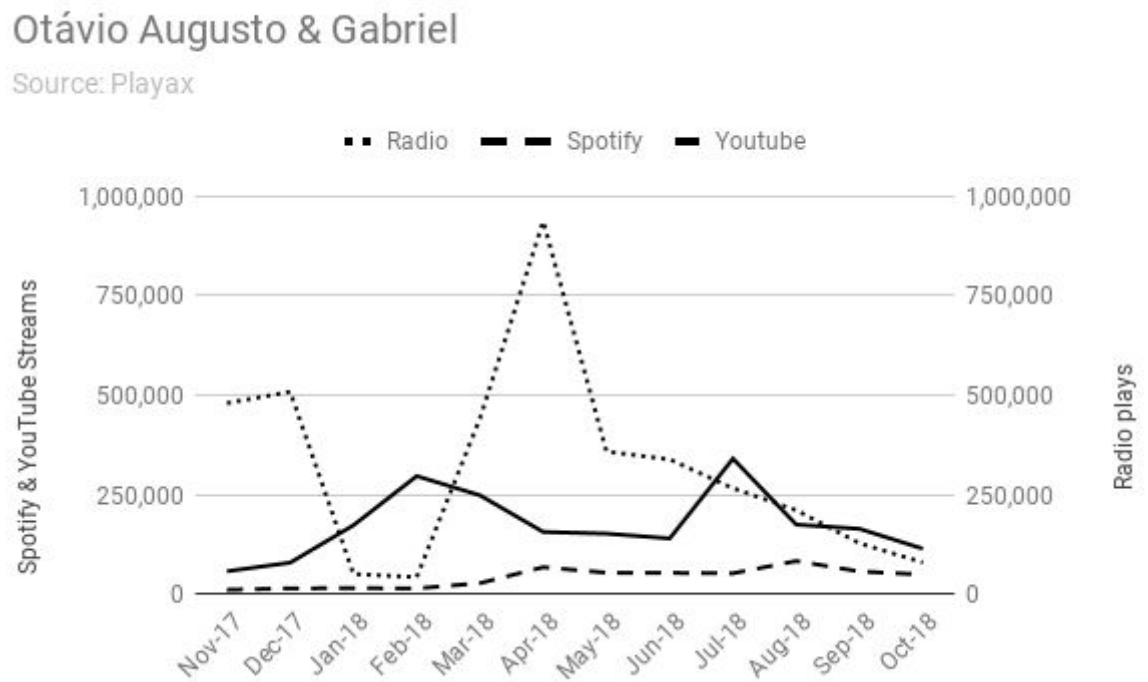

Figure 8: Playax data of artist duo Otavio Augusto & Gabriel

Spotify streaming numbers, however, do not show peaks like these for the analysed artists, sustaining the company's official declaration which states that "you cannot buy your way into a Spotify playlist"[23]. Third-party curated playlists, however, do not always share this same directive, and deals for placing tracks in them might be offered. We infer that this music might have been recommended via algorithm-curated playlists such as *Discover Weekly* to their target users, as well as included in human-curated playlists (whether hired or organic), both centralized agents of the gatekeeping process, in accordance with Robert Prey's (2017) *datafication of listening*. On our goal of identifying which gatekeepers influence other gatekeepers to recommend a

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[22] In this case, we used the same scale on both sides to keep the figure understandable. If we were to apply similar proportions as the other figures, Spotify and YouTube entries would be rendered almost flat at the bottom and would not be discernible for analysis.

[23] Said by executive Meg Tarquinio, 36 seconds into the institutional video on "How to get playlisted". Available at Spotify for Artist's Playlist tutorial, at <https://artists.spotify.com/videos/the-game-plan/how-to-get-playlisted>. Accessed in 30 Nov 2018.

musical track, the Playax data suggests that other efforts on YouTube and radio were not significantly influential to the growth of their listener base on Spotify.

CLOSING REMARKS

Our journey through emerging Brazilian artists shows that there is not a fixed or standard model for promoting music anymore. It might have been the case in the 20th century analyzed by Hirsch (1972), when major labels and major gatekeepers boosted tracks around to the audience through their less resistant pathways. From the optics of a *datacracy* (Radfahrer, 2018), as the data and its processors, the algorithms, become active stakeholders in the gatekeeping path and artistic decisions get made because of such data; we present this *digital music gatekeeping* study, supported by Wallace's inclusion of decentralized platforms in his *digital gatekeeping theory* (Wallace, 2007), Wikström's *Audience Media Engine* (Wikström, 2009) and platformization (Dijck et al, 2019; Nieborg & Poell, 2018) theories along with current music business and digitization studies (Negus, 2019; Prey, 2018; Leyshon, 2014; Vonderau, 2019).

This study attempts to propose updates and extensions to the Wallace *digital gatekeeping* model by applying it into music. Despite being the case related here a very specific case study with a few artists in the very particular Brazilian music genres, we strongly believe that it can be spread to other music genres and cultural contexts, provided that cultural and social attributes are taken into consideration along with similar datasets.

This research is still in its beginning, and demands further explorations to be fully understood. But the unmistakable correlations between YouTube channels activities and radio track plays (from the data gathered by the *KondZilla* influence on the *MC Loma & as Gêmeas Lacração* video) and between Spotify curated playlists and radio track plays (from the data gathered by some *Sertanejo* artists) show that these digital music streaming actors play a strong role as music gatekeepers in this new digital, social media environment. It also raises the question to study whether strategic professionals and advertising are able to influence their results in the same way they were in the 20th century. Despite artists from different musical genres display different patterns in their gatekeeping processes, we strongly believe that

contemporary success strategies depend heavily on gatekeepers acting on digital streaming platforms, in genres as diverse in their musical style and audience as *Brazilian Funk* and *Sertanejo*.

We hope this research contributes with factual data to the present-day debate on the importance and influence of digital platforms in audience choices, encouraging further studies on the field.

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