A JOURNEY WITHOUT A MAP: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR INDIE MUSIC TO CROSS NATIONAL MARKETS

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ABSTRACT

Indie or independent music is created and distributed independently without the intervention of major record labels. The development of the internet and digital platforms provides opportunities for indie musicians to disseminate their work, but they still face difficulties in distribution and promotion to penetrate the national music market. This research aims to identify the barriers to digital distribution and promotion faced by local indie bands and find effective digital distribution and promotion strategies to penetrate the national market. The method used is in-depth interviews with indie musicians, independent label owners, music aggregators, and support staff involved in digital distribution. Qualitative data from the interviews will be analyzed to find themes, answer patterns, and explain respondents' perspectives comprehensively. The results of this research are expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the distribution and promotion problems faced by indie bands and formulate solutions in the form of appropriate strategies to expand their market reach to the national level and increase their visibility and popularity.

Keywords: indie music, promotion, digital distribution, national markets

INTRODUCTION

Indie music refers to a music that is independently produced and distributed without the interference of major record labels. The hallmarks of indie is artistic freedom and complete control over the work and its distribution (Fonarrow 2006: 397). The development of the internet and digital platforms has provided opportunities for independent musicians to upload and distribute their work without relying on mainstream labels (Rogers 2013: 534).

In the beginning, Indonesia's music industry tended to be centralized with the dominance of a handful of giant labels and radio controlling the public's musical tastes. Aryandari (2021) asserts that along with technological advances and social dynamics, there has been a decentralization towards a more democratic and inclusive independent music ecosystem.

NineteennineX, an indie band from Yogyakarta, began to enliven the country's music scene in July 2019. Although their musical preferences are quite diverse, these differences in musical tastes enrich the musical color of an indie band.

NineteennineX's prestige has not been significantly raised in the eyes of the public even though they actively produce products that they upload to the YouTube platform. This is reflected in the lack of invitations to perform on live stages. Apparently, digital platforms are not enough to make an indie band stand out without regular live performances. However, the good impression gained on YouTube made NineteennineX even more determined to continue the creative process.

They released their first original song titled "Salahkah" in 2021. The entire production process from writing to mixing and mastering was done independently. Original works have increased to four singles. To distribute it, NineteennineX collaborates with music aggregators so that it can be distributed on digital platforms such as Spotify, iTunes, and Deezer.

Unfortunately, NineteennineX encountered problems with royalty transparency and the lack of wide distribution of their music. NineteennineX feels aggrieved by the aggregator, which until now has not provided regular reports regarding royalty calculations. These shortcomings have hampered NineteennineX's understanding and revenue from digital distribution. In addition, the limited expansion of distribution makes it almost impossible to reach a wider audience. Limited distribution nullifies the potential success of musicians in the digital era, as streaming revenue is often not worth the effort of indie musicians (Rogers 2013: 535).

Based on this description, it appears that despite significant progress and limited distribution are still problems faced by indie musicians in achieving success. Therefore, this article explores the issue of appropriate distribution and promotion strategies for local indie bands to cross over into the national market.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indie music, as defined by Fonarow (2006), refers to a genre of music that is independently produced and distributed, reflecting artistic freedom and complete control over the work. The development of digital technology, as discussed by Rogers (2013), has opened up opportunities for independent musicians to distribute their work without relying on major labels. Aryandari (2021) observed a similar shift in the Indonesian context, where the music industry evolved from a centralized system towards a more democratic ecosystem. Hracs further explores how digital technology has changed the process of independent music production, allowing musicians such as NineteennineX to produce their works independently (Hracs 2012: 443).

Davis (2016) analyzed the various strategies used by independent musicians to generate revenue, an aspect that is of major concern given the royalty transparency issues faced by many indie musicians. Mills (2020) highlighted the importance of local community support and infrastructure in supporting independent musicians, a factor that is often lacking for emerging indie bands.

Hesmondhalgh (1999) highlighted the issue of musicians' income in the streaming era, confirming the observation that revenue from streaming platforms is often not worth the effort expended by indie musicians. Klein and Meier (2017) provide historical context on the development of music streaming platforms, which helps understand the distribution challenges faced by bands like NineteennineX. Finally, Negus discusses shifts in the post-recording music industry and the role of digital conglomerates, providing additional insight into the complexity of the distribution and promotion landscape that independent musicians must navigate in today's digital age (Negus 2013: 6).

Overall, this literature illustrates a complex landscape for indie musicians like NineteennineX, where the opportunities opened up by digital technology are matched by new challenges in terms of distribution, monetization and audience building. This emphasizes the need for innovative and adaptive strategies for indie bands to navigate the contemporary music industry and achieve sustainable success.

METHODS

This research is descriptive qualitative research using a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach is a method that focuses on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals or groups of people

about a particular phenomenon (Creswell 1998: 59). The most strategic steps used in this research are data collection techniques in the form of observation and semi-structured interviews, The data analysis process in this article follows the steps described by Moustakas, namely Horizonalization (identification of statements from all interview data), Cluster of Meaning (grouping of the meaning), Textural Description, Structural Description, Essence (Moustakas 2011: 120).

DISCUSSION

Post-reform, indie music distribution in Indonesia has experienced significant growth. Advances in internet technology and social media, as well as the increasing accessibility of digital music distribution platforms, provide more opportunities for independent musicians to promote their work independently without relying on major record labels. In the era of digitalization, both major record labels and independent musicians face the challenge of adapting their recording and marketing processes to changes in technology and consumer behavior.

Based on Moustakas's phenomenological analysis framework, the interview data from various indie musicians and industry stakeholders were first analyzed through horizonalization, where significant statements about digital transformation experiences were identified. These statements revealed common challenges across different bands like NineteennineX, Korekayu, and Mahagaza, particularly regarding royalty transparency issues with aggregators and the struggle to monetize their music in the digital age. Through the clustering of meanings, several key themes emerged: the critical role of aggregator selection, the importance of merchandise as an alternative revenue stream, and the necessity of understanding the broader music business ecosystem beyond musical creation.

The textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon further illuminate how indie musicians navigate the digital landscape while maintaining their artistic integrity. The essence of the indie music journey in the digital era reveals a complex interplay between artistic freedom and business acumen, where success is increasingly determined not just by musical talent, but by the ability to understand and adapt to the evolving digital music ecosystem. This is particularly evident in how bands like NineteennineX have adapted their strategy, generating 60% of their income from merchandise sales while maintaining their creative independence through careful selection of digital distribution partners like TuneCore.

Indie musicians can utilize platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and other streaming services to independently distribute their works and reach a wider audience. The consumption of indie music is also made easier by digital access that allows listeners to enjoy indie musicians' works from anywhere. Baym and Burnett (2009) hightlighted that listeners can access indie music catalogs from all over the world with just a few clicks on their devices.

The music infrastructure fuels the growth of independent music in Yogyakarta. Independent recording studios, music producers, and independent record labels have sprung up, providing more opportunities for local musicians to record and distribute their work. NineteennineX is one of the indie bands that have colored the Yogyakarta music scene and formed in July 2019 with the alternative pop-rock music genre. Starting from a youth event in the Demakan Lama area of Yogyakarta, NineteennineX first performed on stage by performing 4 songs. The performance also marked the beginning of NineteennineX's career as a band that chose the ind untukie route.

In 2020 NineteennineX faced a big challenge when they had to leave their keyboardist and bassist. Losing these two key members left a deep impression on their musical dynamics. Nonetheless, they decided to face this change with a positive attitude and strong determination. This process not only tested their cohesiveness as a team but also enriched their creativity with new

perspectives. With strong determination, they made it through this transition period and set out to work with a new formation.

NineteennineX is determined to continue its creative process by creating its first original single that will be distributed through DSP (Digital Service Provider). Not only focusing on making music, they also strive to utilize social media as a tool to continue building and optimizing their branding. The branding process itself is an effort to form an image and create an emotional connection between the creator of the work and the audience, as well as an effort to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Kusumaningrum 2017: 57). Through platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, they share not only their work but also the story behind the creative process through photos and videos that are uploaded regularly every week.

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The band also strengthens their brand through authentic storytelling about their musical journey. For example, they documented their transition period after losing two band members through a series of Instagram Stories titled "The Journey Continues," which resonated strongly with their audience and garnered significant engagement. On YouTube, they produce a monthly series called "Behind NineteennineX" where they share detailed stories about their songwriting process, personal struggles, and musical influences. These branding efforts have helped them build a loyal fanbase, evidenced by consistent engagement rates of 15-20% on their social media posts and a growing YouTube subscriber base that increased from 500 to 2,000 followers within six months of implementing their branding strategy.

The good impression on YouTube made NineteennineX's energy stronger to work, until finally, they managed to release their first single entitled "Salahkah" on DSPs such as Spotify, iTunes, Deezer, Joox, YouTube Music, Tidal, Shazam, etc. Over time, NineteennineX consistently continued their creative process by releasing several singles such as Mengertilah, Menangislah, and Sisi Lain which were distributed through aggregators on DSPs and YouTube Channels. Along the way, NineteennineX began to experience problems that were quite disruptive to the independent music journey. Starting from the transparency of royalties earned to the reporting of royalties agreed to be given periodically every 3 months from the aggregator.

Then in 2023 NineteennineX decided not to continue their cooperation with the aggregator and chose to cooperate with TuneCore as the new aggregator. One of TuneCore's business models is no royalty sharing, which means that musicians have full rights to the revenue they generate from selling and streaming their music, without having to pay royalties to TuneCore. Instead, TuneCore

offers annual subscription plans or one-time fees for each music release, giving musicians full control over their revenue. This makes TuneCore one of the preferred aggregators for indie musicians who want to gain wider exposure and manage their works more effectively in this digital age. Thus, the presence of music aggregators in the current digitalization era greatly facilitates indie bands working independently to develop their careers more effectively and be able to distribute music more widely and with unlimited reach.

Although NineteennineX's works can be easily accessed by audiences through music streaming services, the demand for live performances has not gone as expected. There are still many challenges that NineteennineX has to face in the realm of the music business as a whole. Understanding the music industry is not only about creating good music but also understanding concepts such as marketing, brand management, distribution, and copyright. As expressed by one of the founders of NineteennineX:

> *"We have learned that creating quality music is just one small part of the whole music career journey. Today, we focus on understanding music from various aspects, from the music ecosystem, marketing strategies, and strong brand management, to the right distribution mechanism"* (Wahyu, 2024)

The long and winding journey of an indie band is also felt by Korekayu in pursuing a career in Yogyakarta. Korekayu is an indie band from Yogyakarta that was officially formed in 2012 and released an EP (Extended Play) entitled "Retrorika Metropolitan". The entire creative process from recording studio to digital distribution is done independently. During their career journey, Korekayu has not been able to bring their work to big cities outside of Yogyakarta. The entire production process from pre-production, post-production, and digital distribution is done

independently by Korekayu. The problems experienced by Korekayu with aggregators are similar to NineteennineX, namely the lack of transparency and reporting of royalties from streaming Korekayu songs on DSPs. Overall, Korekayu shares similarities with NineteennineX in their efforts to optimize their music business. They realize how important it is to not only focus on the creative aspect of creating music but also to learn and understand how to manage a music business.

Similarly in Bandung, the transition to digitalization has had a significant impact on the music industry. With the advent of online music streaming platforms and social media, Bandung musicians have wider access to reach a global audience. This was experienced by the music group Mahagaza, a band from the Flower City formed in 2015. Mahagaza chooses an independent path in every creative process, starting from music production, recording, and distribution. In music distribution, Mahagaza also requires an aggregator as a trusted third party to distribute their work.

Along the way, Mahagaza certainly faced various challenges and twists and turns. They face obstacles in reaching a wide audience both online and offline. Mahagaza must fight to get the attention of the listeners they deserve. A concert with HIVI, a popular band with a large fan base, was a rare opportunity for them to expand their reach and increase their exposure in the Bandung music scene. It didn't take long for Mhagaza's Spotify audience to increase quite rapidly after performing with HIVI. However, during its journey, Mahagaza experienced relatively the same problems as NineteennineX and Korekayu, namely related to royalty transparency and reports on the expansion of distribution with aggregators. Finally, Mahagaza decided to collaborate with Believe as the news aggregator. Together with Believe, Mahagaza hopes to achieve more recognition and success in the country's music industry.

Similar challenges and problems were also experienced by one of the biggest indie bands in the country, Rocket Rockers. From 2006 to 2008, Rocket Rockers went through a difficult time in their journey as a major label band. They felt wronged by Sony Entertainment regarding their new album dispute. The unclear release schedule and lack of support from the label created tension and disappointment within the band. Feeling limited and hung up on, Rocket Rockers finally decided to take the step to leave Sony Entertainment.

While digital distribution has opened up new opportunities for indie musicians around the world, the challenge of monetizing their work remains a major issue (Leyshon 2009: 1310). Dredge (2014) points out that many global indie musicians rely on crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter or Patreon to fund their music projects, in addition to relying on revenue from merchandise and gig ticket sales. However, success in the digital world does not always correlate directly with demand for live or offline performances. Indie musicians must continue to build a strong fan base and actively promote their work in order to secure opportunities to perform at various venues and music festivals.

Merchandise sales can be one of the solutions to overcome this. Merchandise has emerged as a crucial revenue stream. This is proven by NineteennineX in the course of their career. NineteennineX generates 60% of its music-related income from merchandise sales, primarily t-shirts and tote bags. They've found particular success with limited edition designs tied to new single releases.

"Our fans may stream our music for almost free, but they're willing to spend Rp150.000-Rp200.000 on a special edition band shirt" (Jati, 2024).

In Indonesia's ever-evolving music landscape, the music industry is entering a new challenge for indie musicians both in Yogyakarta and other regions. Indie musicians are required to no longer focus on building individual skills but must also understand the music business as a whole. Based on an interview with one of the indie music band managers, it was revealed that

"The music industry is a complex ecosystem that includes various aspects of music creation, production, marketing, distribution, and licensing," (Putranto, 2024).

Through this, it can be seen that merchandise sales can be used as one of the solutions and strategies to the problem of digital distribution, which does not always guarantee success for the career of indie bands. Merchandise sold can be in the form of t-shirts, tote bags, or more than that such as hats, bracelets, stickers, and others that are attractive for consumption by the public

In addition, a strategy that can be done is to choose the right aggregator. Choosing the right aggregator can distribute indie band's works to various platforms without harming any party, especially in terms of royalties. Choosing the wrong aggregator can have serious repercussions, such as delayed or failed opportunities, technical issues that interfere with profits, and excessive costs that cut into profits.

Distribution in the independent music industry gives musicians the freedom to produce songs independently, with the flexibility to release them according to their content and wishes. Independent distribution is also faster and more flexible. Musicians can release new songs whenever they are ready, without having to wait for release schedules from major labels that are often set far in advance. They can also easily promote and sell their music online through various digital platforms, without having to rely on limited physical distribution.

In today's music era, a band's success is not only determined by the quality of their music and digital platforms but also by their willingness

and ability to understand and learn the music business itself. In addition to producing quality music, bands must also master business aspects such as marketing, financial management, branding, and copyright. Indonesian consumption patterns in the independent music industry are greatly influenced by the freedom and creativity offered by the independent route. This path allows musicians to produce music according to their ideals, without being limited by the market and big corporations. Through indie labels, musicians can easily showcase their work easily and cheaply. This has also influenced people's consumption patterns by facilitating access to a much wider variety of independent music works.

The ease of access to digital distribution such as streaming, social media, and online music sales platforms also plays a big role in shaping people's consumption patterns. As it becomes easier to find and enjoy independent music, people are more open to trying new genres and genres outside the mainstream music industry. These strategies typically include consistent social media content creation, strategic collaboration with other artists, targeted advertising on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and regular live performances. Ultimately, this freedom to create independent works has shaped a more diverse consumption pattern among Indonesians. They can enjoy more authentic and quality music options, according to their tastes. While the independent route may not provide the financial benefits of a major label, for most musicians, the freedom to create and express themselves is far more valuable. They can build a loyal fan base that loves their authentic works, without having to compromise their artistic integrity for the sake of profit.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the journey that all indie bands go through is diverse and complex, each presenting its unique challenges. Each band faces different challenges, from finding their musical identity and building a fan base to navigating the competitive music market. Based on the analysis of data and facts, this research identifies many factors that contribute to the complex dynamics of independent bands' career paths in the national market. Geographical location, the quality of cooperation with aggregators, the capacity of financial resources, and the level of media exposure proved to have a significant influence in shaping the challenges faced by independent musicians. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of recognizing the diversity and challenges that independent bands face when teaching music careers.0

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