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**How does underdog Bandcamp fit in and improve
amongst Spotify and other streaming titans?**

Abstract

Purposes: The purpose of this study is to find out the reasons why individuals choose a certain music platform over another. In particular, I tried to focus on the platform Bandcamp, and see what it could do to improve its user numbers, and also see if its executives are content with a loyal, albeit much smaller user base than Spotify or other streaming platforms

Literature Review: There is a wide range of research done on the modern music industry, from streaming to music piracy to downloading, but less done about how smaller platforms stack up against the streaming giants, and what this can mean in terms of their popularity/improvement

Methods: The methods used for research were a survey which was distributed amongst my personal Facebook community, as well as various music communities on Reddit.

Results/Discussion: Most survey participants did prefer streaming over downloading/purchasing, and in particular those who listened to music less at a daily rate generally preferred to stream their music (casual listeners). Those with more hours of music listened to daily had more thought-out responses, and didn't mind paying a monthly fee for streaming or purchasing their music. Community, which seemed more in-tune with Bandcamp's ideals, seemed in some ways to be more prevalent with Spotify, at least in terms of its community features being all within the platform itself.

Conclusion: While Spotify and other streaming platforms offer convenience and ease of accessibility, Bandcamp and other downloading/purchasing platforms offer more control and sense of ownership to a user's music; a user's listening habits and specific preferences determine which type of platform/mindset will fit them best.

Keywords: music platform, streaming, downloads, music piracy, Spotify, Bandcamp

Introduction

In today's modern age, the way a person consumes or listens to music has become both simpler and more widely accessible when compared to 15 or 20 years ago (Hesmondhalg, 2019). There are apps and platforms that make only a computer or phone the only necessity to be able to access a nearly endless limit of music. However, this freedom has created challenges to not only the industry at large, but to consumers and artists alike. There has been plenty of research done on the music piracy boom of the 2000's (Tepper, 2009) and its effect on the industry, as well as how streaming similarly changed the industry (Trefzger, 2015), but there is need to figure out where smaller and more niche music platforms, in the case of this paper, Bandcamp, fit in amongst the streaming giants (Spotify, Apple Music, etc.) Bandcamp has thousands of users, but its numbers are largely dwarfed by Spotify's. Being such a user and artist friendly platform in comparison (Costa Gomes 2021), it seems like Bandcamp

should be much more well-known and popular than it is. The questions that I am asking are: 1. Why or what makes music listeners prefer one music listening platform/service to another, and 2. What can Bandcamp do to improve its user numbers, or is it content with its niche yet loyal user base?

Literature Review

Research conducted on music platforms in the past 10 years has largely been done on shifts of legal purchasing, to piracy, to the dominance of streaming today. As Spotify and Apple Music are widely used and popular, the amount of research done on Bandcamp is less, or is focused in more niche ways that don't look at the bigger picture of it versus the streaming juggernauts, or how it can improve its user base.

However, user base in general is something looked at in certain ways for all of these platforms. Community is a big part of bandcamp (Hesmondhalgh, 2019), and the platform works to have the artist and the user at a level of connectivity that feels akin to classic DIY music communities present in life outside of online. This is heightened by integrated online stores that let artists sell physical media and merchandise directly to their listeners. This "direct-to-fan" approach is present in all types of modern media/social media platforms (Costa Gomes, 2021), where content creators are able to so closely and easily connect with their fans. Comment sections, polls, and even livestreams; and while feedback can be positive, negative, constructive etc. the fact remains that fans, and in the case of music platforms, listeners, feel more than ever the need for these perceived "close" relationships with the artists they enjoy. However, Bandcamp still takes a different approach from the most popular social media platforms, because it does not rely on a metric system of measuring success (Hesmondhalgh, 2019), eg. a like-based system. While Bandcamp's executives might shrug off some criticisms that the lack of these popular measurability of success systems make it a less desirable platform for music listeners (Cirisano, 2021), there still could be some thought that this is why Bandcamp has not rocketed to the top of modern music platforms in terms of user popularity such as a service like Spotify.

This leads me to look into the popularity of Spotify. Spotify is the leading music platform; in 2020 it had 300 million active users (Dewhirst 2020). One of the biggest reasons for its success is the ease at which listeners can access and consume music. In the mid to late 2000's, music piracy nearly drove the industry as it was known to its deathbed (Aguilar, 2017). With the digital revolution of the 2000's, the idea of music and art being free to the consumer slowly integrated itself into the collective mindset of much of the population; certainly the youth, who had adapted new ways to not only listen to music, but to discover it as well (Tepper, 2009). This need for the ease of consumption was perfect for Spotify to latch onto, as streaming technologies (initially watch services such as Netflix) started to become readily available to the population. As well, those in the music industry, particularly those executives concerned with loss of revenue, realized they needed to work with the new mindset, rather

than rebel against it (Sinclair, 2016). In fact, Sinclair and Green's study of music pirates, both former and current is a good analysis that offers insight into what listeners think of music piracy, and why they might turn to it. There were a large section of subjects who, while they pirated because of the ease, felt some form of guilt as a result of stealing from artists. Again, Spotify and other streaming platforms provided a way to create that same sense of easy accessibility, but in a form that uses ad revenue to compensate the artists for their work. From a certain point of view this is a win-win situation; until you look into the small amount of revenue artists receive from these services, in comparison to pre-streaming and pre-piracy record sales (Kallas, 2021). The model works for major label artists, who not only generate more streams but also are on huge record label deals, but independent artists cannot make a sustainable living on solely music streams, and must rely on more reliable and traditional means of making money, such as touring and merchandise sales. But streaming services are also beneficial for higher-ups because they fit into the previously mentioned ideas of modern business models for entertainment. Spotify offers users the option to pay for premium, which for a monthly fee gives them an ad-free experience. This is the subscription model of today's streaming services in action for the music industry (Trefzger, 2015). Therefore, Spotify does fit into the metric, number based ideals of modern business models. Going further, Spotify offers users the chance to observe their own statistic in terms of the amount of time (measured in hours) they've listen to certain artists with their end of the year, built in "Spotify Wrapped" service. This also lets artists do the same, showing how much they were streamed any given year, and allows them to share this with their fans, creating that sense of community that Hesmondhalgh lauds Bandcamp for. So, there certainly are some connections between the two platforms, from that sense of community driven mindset. The research then leads to, what else does Bandcamp do to separate itself as an alternative music platform, and one that focuses on and benefits the little guy?

Bandcamp offers users an easy to operate experience, where listeners can not only stream but also purchase music, and display said music on a profile to share with others (Maftai, 2016). This again helps create a sense of community. Artists and labels can also customize their own page, which is something prevalent in the days of Myspace, and something that separates the platform from Spotify or Apple Music, which are strictly limited visually by the appearance of the app or website. But, while much research has been done on how each platform operates and the benefits to users, there is context lacking of why users specifically prefer one platform to another. Yes, Bandcamp is user friendly and creates a sense of community while creating greater monetary support, but why specifically do its users choose it over Spotify or Apple Music? Furthermore, why would someone choose Spotify over Apple Music or even Amazon if all function essentially the same? What about people who only listen to music via physical media, CDs and vinyl? The research available flirts around these ideas in specific context to each individual platform or method, but rarely compares them at a 1-to-1 level. By comparing users mindsets in terms of choosing a music platform, trends should appear and then be usable to the people in charge of the platforms to make improvements. In particular for Bandcamp, as it often is either unknown, overlooked or ignored when put up against the streaming giants. Bandcamp also further expands the idea of eliminating a mediator (Carr, 2022). The ease of music accessibility not only is good for listeners, but creators as well. With less middle-men, artists can get their music out faster, with the

distribution hurdles of old media nearly absent in today's age. Furthermore, with the lack of ad-revenue/corporate mindset, and even further looking at the artists best interest (Bandcamp takes only a small 10-15% cut of artist revenue), Bandcamp comes ahead of Spotify and other major streaming services in this regard. Yet, still artists seem to gravitate towards streaming as their main source of promotion. Many bands/artists do not even list Bandcamp on their Linktrees, a website that collects all of an artists' links in one easy to find spot. So, as Bandcamp is the more artist-friendly platform (Kallas, 2021), there needs to be further research done as to why many artists ignore these benefits.

Another gap to look at is the mindset of Bandcamp executives and employees and where they see the platform going. Based on interviews like Cirisano's, you can see a level of contentment from the leaders of Bandcamp; however since then the company was purchased by Epic Games in 2022 (Peng, 2022), there seems to be evidence of some desired growth. Co-founder Ethan Diamond on the purchase said, "Over the years we've heard from other companies who wanted us to join them, we've always felt that doing so would only be exciting if they strongly believed in our mission, were aligned with our values, and not only wanted to see Bandcamp continue, but also wanted to provide the resources to bring a lot more benefit to the artists, labels, and fans who use the site. Epic ticks all those boxes." Is Bandcamp content with its well established niche, or do they want to see growth to reach the same level of popularity as Spotify? Diamond's statement seems to show a desire for both, but further research needs to be done to try and hone in on the future path of the platform. Bandcamp clearly desires some sort of change, or the purchase by Epic Games never would have taken place. But the direction of the platform is still unclear, so more research/interviews with employees/higher-ups will need to be conducted. This, combined with the research to do on music listeners platform preferences will hopefully paint a clearer picture of how Bandcamp can improve while still holding its core values of being a DIY, artist friendly platform (Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

Methods

For this research, I conducted a survey that analyzed different music listeners' preference of music platform that provided some information on why they have gravitated to said platform. Based on responses, the success of each platform or lack thereof helped provide a picture of what people look for when listening to music online, and the level of importance for different aspects of music platforms.

The best method to conduct the research needed to determine why an individual chooses one music platform over another was a survey. As Sinclair and Green proved in their study (Sinclair, 2016), people are more than willing to give information on their music listening habits, as it is a fairly simple activity/hobby. One thing I had to keep mind when writing survey questions was the fact that many of these people may have not even thought about why they chose one platform over others. Therefore, the survey questions were written in a way to ease them into giving the information that is needed. First, a very general question with three answers: "Do you prefer to stream music, purchase/download music files, or listen to physical

media?” This will fit the respondents into two categories: streamers and those who don’t stream. From here, it’s easier to ask the follow up question which is “What main platform do you use to listen to music?” Then, a few general questions like age and amount of time listened to music, estimated at an hourly rate daily. The questions about which platform the respondents use were framed in a multiple choice format. The choices included: Spotify, Apple music, Amazon, Deezer, Bandcamp, Youtube/Youtube Music, physical media, and other, requesting the respondents to name what “other” they use. The participants were allowed to pick more than one of these choices at a time, as I assumed there were plenty of music listeners who used multiple platforms. Following this were the more open-ended and free-written response questions. The general questions helped to ease the respondents into the more specific ones, and the hope was that they would help the participants to have an understanding of what the survey is trying to get at by that point. These specific questions included, “Why do you use this platform instead of others?” “What features and/or aspects do you like about this platform?” “What features and/or aspects do you dislike about this platform?” And then, one that puts the comparison in full focus, “Briefly describe why you prefer this platform/method versus others listed above. In particular if you prefer streaming over purchasing/downloading (or vice versa) explain why.”

The survey was constructed and presented through Google Forms. Using the program, it was easily accessible and distributed. The next challenge was to figure out where the best places/communities for survey to be distributed to were. First I used Facebook. I have over the years cultivated enough personal relationships, and many started by or blossomed through music. I felt confident that these relationships would yield good and thorough results. The only problem I foresaw was not having enough diversity in answers, as knowing these people I’m pretty sure I will get mostly answers for the streaming aspects of the survey. However, I do know that many experienced the various shifts of the music industry, in particular the shift to streaming’s dominance, therefore their reasons as to why they switched to streaming I felt would be vital. However, as stated, a more diverse sample size was still needed. This is where I turned to Reddit communities. The challenge here was to find certain subreddits that would allow for a sizeable and diverse sample size, while also being a tightknit enough community that the survey would still be able to be seen and circulated; eg. the r/music subreddit was a bit too popular for a post to get seen by enough people and probably would have been pushed down the page in a matter of hours. After some research, r/LetsTalkMusic (a smaller music discussion subreddit) and r/listentothis (a sharing community for lesser known music) seemed to fit the bill of smaller but still very active communities. In fact, circulating the survey on Reddit matches with the DIY ethos of Bandcamp mentioned earlier (Hesmondhalgh, 2019) and therefore I felt would prove a good community with enthusiasm for sharing information and experience. And because these communities were general enough, the age range was still diverse and were also communities I thought would include some people who only knew streaming, some who were old enough to still be holding out on streaming, and those who experienced the shift from downloads to streaming.

Results

For this proposal, I am looking at why people choose a certain music platform over another; what aspects of listening to music or technical components of platform affect a user's preference in terms of music platforms. The results of the survey distributed amongst Facebook and Reddit communities were slightly varied but did trend in certain directions.

Firstly, in terms of the age range of the participants, this section had the most variety. There was a majority of 45.7% who fell into the 29-38 age range, but every other range was fairly evenly distributed. Because of this, no noticeable trends seemed to present themselves in terms of age range and the long form questions. It appeared to have no bearing on why someone chooses a particular platform over another. However, moving on to the amount of time listened to music, some connections and trends took shape. The majority of responses at 42.9% said they only listened to music for 0-2 hours a day, with 37.1% following in the 2-4 hour range. These results were followed up by the question of what platform/method of listening to music one uses the most; a large majority of 65.7% percent preferred to stream their music, while only 17.1% said they downloaded or purchased music digitally and listened on a platform like iTunes. The question of what platforms did people use gave participants the ability to choose more than one of the given platforms; Amazon, Apple Music, Bandcamp, Deezer, iTunes, physical media, Spotify, and Youtube/Youtube Music (users were also given the choice to write in another platform not listed, but none of those got more than one selection so are mainly irrelevant). Spotify led the way with 47.1% of participants claiming use, with Youtube coming in close behind with 35.3%. Meanwhile, the purchasing platforms of Bandcamp and iTunes fell behind the streaming platforms with 20.6% each. The biggest trend that was noticeable was that, while people who used streaming as their main method of listening to music's amount of time listening to music ranged across the board, those who only listened to music for 2 hours or less almost exclusively picked streaming as their main method.

In terms of the longer form questions, there were some similar answers to each question that should be noted. The biggest and most common answer was those who said they preferred streaming to downloading because they found those platforms to have the best ease of use. They also said that they liked that those platforms had everything you could want in one easily accessible place for free. Creating playlists that could be shared was another answer that came up multiple times, so the connection between friends and other users was an important aspect to those participants. The largest negative aspects of streaming for the participants tended to be advertisements (which only are negated by paying a monthly fee), and also that the revenue that artists earn from the streaming services are very small when compared to digital purchase sales. They also said that streaming services would sometimes remove certain music with no explanation, as well as sometimes not having a certain artist or album at all. As for the participants who preferred downloading/purchases digital files, the lack of ads was a big reason for their preference, not to mention the ability to listen to music without relying on an internet/Wi-Fi connection. They also liked the feeling of ownership when it comes to digital files; streaming felt more like lending to those users. There wasn't a noticeable common thread as to negative aspects for the downloading/purchasing group; one user said the space files took up, another said finding consistency across apps, while another

said having to pay for individual songs, but that lack of commonality was something to make note of.

Discussion

As mentioned above, most participants in the survey who only listened to music 2 hours or less per day preferred to stream music. I consider and file these people into a “casual listener” group. These are people to whom music is an occasional pleasure or something to put on in the background. Therefore, the conclusion I’ve taken from those results is that the convenience and cost-effectiveness of streaming, particular the free platforms like Spotify and Youtube, are most attractive to this type of user. Why would they want to invest any money at all into an activity that is more of an afterthought? Often these participants had the most casual and simple answers as well. I found that as the amount of time spent per day listening to music rose, the answers to the long form questions were better thought out. These users thought about things like wanting to listen to music without a Wi-Fi connection or using data, something purchasing or downloading music is preferable for. In comparison, many users who listened less claimed that streaming services offered a wider variety of music, which isn’t necessarily the case. In fact, all the platforms listed in the survey have generally the same music available, and even some Spotify users commented that Spotify in fact doesn’t have everything. This kind of mindset pairs with users choosing the most well-known/most convenient platforms; so less thought put into which platform to use and more just immediately wanting to jump in and start listening. Since these casual listeners don’t spend as much time listening to music, the main negative aspect of the streaming services, which was ads, didn’t seem to deter them from the positive aspects of convenience and lack of payment. Many of these casual listeners also seemed to struggle to answer to final question of the survey, asking to compare what they liked about their platform of choice as opposed to the others. In fact, many admitted to not ever even having used another platform. Again, this notion of convenience and ease of use seems to be synonymous with preference to streaming and also amount of time listened to music daily.

In terms of aspects of streaming, and in particular Spotify, there were definitely certain trends that appeared that could be mirrored against how Bandcamp works as a platform. As mentioned in the literature review, Bandcamp is seen as a platform that tries to form an old-school DIY mindset, where community and connectivity is held with high importance. However, many Spotify users said a positive aspect of the platform was that they could make playlists and share them with other users/friends, not to mention to ability to have a friends list built into the app that lets you track what they are listening to. While Bandcamp does have the option to add and follow friends and artists, there isn’t as direct of a way to share music and see what your friends are listening to in real-time. There are websites such as Last.fm that allow you to do this, and music players such as iTunes allow one to create playlists from music they might download from Bandcamp, but Spotify encompasses all of this singularly on the platform. As well, when a user is notified that a friend bought new music, it goes to the email address linked with their account, rather than showing up in the Bandcamp app. So, Spotify is much more appealing to people who want every function conveniently in one space, rather than

Bandcamp's more traditional form of purchase and download to different apps/platforms. Furthermore, while Bandcamp does offer the streaming capabilities of Spotify and Youtube, every album and artist has its own direct page, with little function giving to making any sort of playlist within the website/app. This limits that aspect of in-app connectivity between songs and albums by different artists.

Something else that was brought up multiple times was the fact that Spotify and other streaming services do not yield a lot of revenue for the musicians that put their music on the platforms. This was the most common negative aspect for users who chose streaming services as their main platform of choice; similarly some users who chose Bandcamp or another platform that let you purchase music liked that they were more actively supporting their favorite artists, not to mention the in-app store options where users can purchase vinyl and other physical media/merchandise directly from the artist or record label. However, the fact that streaming users had these thoughts of not paying artists being a negative aspect, yet still chose to use these platforms just reveals that these users still don't consider it a big deal in terms of affecting their listening habits. It seems like a personal decision that affects some people while others very little, and further research/questions would have to be compiled in order to get a clearer reason as to why people feel the way they do about supporting artists more or less through streaming revenue.

Finally, there was one trend that was worth noting when it came to the downloading/purchasing platforms. While these users had various reasons for preferring these platforms rather than streaming, it all came down to having a sense of control over their music libraries. Whether it was being able to listen to music without a Wi-Fi connection, having a sense of ownership to the music they've purchased, or not having to worry about music being taken off of their platform, these aspects all boil down to that sense of control. These users found Spotify and the streaming services to be limiting in those ways, and didn't mind having to worry about memory space or having to sync their libraries to different devices, as long as they felt that they were in control. This to me is the fundamental difference between the two types of platforms. Streaming, that sense of free content and easy access, is indicative of how the world works today; again looking at things like Netflix and subscription services. Meanwhile, purchasing your music through Bandcamp or iTunes represents a relatively older way of thinking and ownership, but to those users it remains very important. Bandcamp has played into that mindset, not only by offering music to be sold at the artists' discretion, but allowing them to sell physical media, merchandise, etc.; essentially a "you decide when and how much you want to support" kind of mindset. In this way, it does retain its ideals of community that it prides itself on.

Conclusion

This study/research was conducted to find out what makes a music listener prefer one music platform to another, and in particular streaming music versus purchasing/downloading digital music files. I found that users who preferred streaming really hold convenience and the feeling of music being free at a high level of importance. It also became apparent that those

who listen to music less at a daily rate tend to drift towards streaming, for those reasons stated. Conversely, those who listen to music more frequently either prefer music to feel owned through the purchase of digital files, and if they do stream they don't mind paying a monthly fee to eliminate the common negative aspect of advertisements playing in between songs. In terms of what Bandcamp as a hybrid streaming services with digital and physical media purchasing options can do to grow its user base, it is possible that improving on those streaming capabilities by creating a sense of sharing and community via sharable playlists and more active friend lists like Spotify has could be helpful

However, there were several limitations to this study. First, being a small pilot study, the survey sample size was lacking. While I knew going in that taking a random sample size would have the results trend to more streaming answers (as that is universally the more popular method), getting more answers from users who download/purchase files would have helped get more perspective from that side of things; eg. why those users prefer those platforms/methods to streaming. Since I wanted the study to find reasonable improvements to the Bandcamp platform, finding survey participants who exclusively use the platform would have been highly beneficial; ideally a survey specifically given to Bandcamp users. Furthermore, more qualitative and personal interviews need to be conducted to really focus on the final survey question I posed, which was why the user preferred their platform of choice in comparison to others. While some participants said why they liked streaming over purchasing, rarely did they hone in on their specific platforms versus others, even if they had the same functions.

Finally, because I wanted to focus on Bandcamp's improvement/direction, further research could have been done by interviewing some employees of Bandcamp. There wasn't enough time for a small pilot research proposal, but those views would have been highly valuable, and still would be in future study. As stated in the literature review, I know that Bandcamp does want to improve in some way, as evidence by the purchase by Epic Games, however those directions of improvement are still unclear to me. I have not seen in my personal use of the platform any radical changes, nor did any service participants mention any big changes of note. That would be valuable information to have in a future study and something I would be interested in continuing.

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