

Original Research Article

Platformed cultural hustlers: social media and entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe's independent music economy

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the influence of social media on music creation, consumption, and promotion in Zimbabwe. It examines how platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have democratised access to audiences, enabling artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and achieve independent recognition. Employing a qualitative approach, the paper draws on publicly available data from social media platforms, online newspapers, personal reflections, and interviews with musicians and industry professionals. Key findings reveal that social media fosters direct interaction between artists and fans, facilitates viral marketing, and enhances creative collaboration. However, while these platforms present unprecedented opportunities, challenges remain, including inequalities relating to digital accessibility, fleeting virality, and economic barriers that hinder long-term sustainability. The paper argues that while social media has reshaped Zimbabwe's music industry, strategic and contextually informed approaches are necessary to fully harness its potential for sustained artistic and economic success.

KEYWORDS: Social media, music entrepreneurship, music promotion, digital transformation, Zimbabwe, music industry

Introduction

Zimbabwe's music industry has undergone significant transformation since the 1980s, due in part to broader socio-political and economic changes (J. T. Mhiripiri 2012; N. A. Mhiripiri 2012; Turino 2000). Historically, colonial legacies, economic fluctuations, and technological advancements have influenced the country's diverse musical landscape, which includes genres such as *sungura*, Zimdancehall, urban grooves, and Afro-fusion. In recent years, the rise of digital platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube has further altered the way in which music is produced, distributed, and consumed. This development has both challenged traditional structures in the music industry and provided new opportunities for artists.

Against this background, this paper explores the impact of social media on entrepreneurship in Zimbabwean music. Focusing on how digital platforms reshape artist–fan engagement, marketing strategies, and career sustainability, the paper investigates the socio-economic realities of being a musician in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The paper is structured as follows: it presents a background of the historical development of Zimbabwe's music industry and the rise of digital platforms. The method section outlines the research approach employed. The discussion examines key themes, including the role of social media in artist promotion, audience engagement, and challenges with monetisation. The paper concludes by considering the broader implications of digital transformation for Zimbabwean musicians and suggests pathways for a more sustainable music ecosystem, such as policy reforms to support digital infrastructure, artist education initiatives, and hybrid online–offline revenue models.

Context

Zimbabwe's music industry traces its roots back to the 1950s, when Gallo, a South African company, opened a branch in the former Rhodesia, today's Zimbabwe. During this period, Black Zimbabweans faced restricted access to urban areas, yet many migrated from rural regions to the cities. Among them were pioneering musicians who recorded locally using the rudimentary equipment provided by the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (Zindi 2015). Over time, the industry underwent numerous developments and encountered challenges, transitioning from being dominated by large corporations to witnessing the rise of small but highly effective studios (Chimbudzi, Muranda and Maguraushe 2021, 2022). However, recording represents only one facet of the music ecosystem that has experienced profound changes in how global music consumption and marketing, and promotion strategies are organised.

Zimbabwe's music industry reflects the nation's complex socio-political and economic landscape through its dynamic evolution and production of diverse genres, from Thomas Mapfumo's *chimurenga* music that soundtracked the anti-colonial resistance (Marara 2023) to contemporary artists such as Winky D, Freeman, and Nutty O, who critique corruption and comment on the economic struggles faced by Zimbabweans due to external sanctions and the internal issues of the national government (Maguraushe, Muranda and Chimbudzi 2022; Mavima 2023). These musical forms simultaneously preserve a cultural heritage while engaging with global influences. They fuel social discourse by addressing issues that range from gender inequality to youth unemployment, often bypassing state media restrictions by using digital platforms. Yet, despite its cultural richness, the industry struggles with sustainability amid Zimbabwe's prolonged economic crisis, which has paradoxically led to increased participation as young artists seek alternative livelihoods in the face of widespread unemployment (Maziriri et al. 2024).

Zimbabwe's informal economic sector is widely reported to employ more than eighty per cent of the population (Magidi and Gwekwerere 2024). Management and economic strategies employed in the music industry have a crucial role in its development. There is a longstanding call for the development of strategies that foster a more sustainable music business environment (J.T. Mhiripiri 2012). J. T. Mhiripiri (2012) further emphasises the need for a robust strategy for the industry in order to foster growth and the importance of intellectual property rights (IPRs) for ensuring that musicians can benefit financially from their work. This point is echoed by Nyathi and Maguraushe (2023a), who discuss the persistent challenges of implementing copyright law, noting that violations of IPRs have hindered musicians from fully capitalising on their creations.

The lack of effective enforcement mechanisms for copyright laws has led to widespread piracy, which remains a significant obstacle for artists. These challenges persist to the extent that many famous musicians in Zimbabwe have not realised sufficient income to sustain their livelihoods (Nyathi and Maguraushe 2023b). This systematic failure disproportionately affects women artists, who face additional barriers in an already male-dominated industry (Katiji and Muranda 2023). Despite these challenges, Zimbabwean musicians demonstrate remarkable resilience by embracing digital innovation.

Recent studies indicate a growing trend among Zimbabwean artists and producers to use modern technologies in their music-making processes, thereby enriching the country's contemporary music landscape (Mutavati and Muranda 2023; Nyahuma 2021). In recent years, music marketing in Zimbabwe has similarly been significantly transformed by the advent of digital technologies and social media platforms (Iliya 2020). The integration of these tools has facilitated the promotion of local music and reshaped the strategies employed by artists to reach their audiences. This transformation is particularly evident in the utilisation of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which have become essential for marketing and engagement in the Zimbabwean music scene.

These platforms enable artists to build careers through direct interaction with their fans, viral campaigns, and personalised content creation. However, while the potential of social media to broaden access to opportunities in the industry is undeniable, this shift raises critical questions. How effectively are Zimbabwean musicians using these platforms to achieve sustainable success? What challenges persist for those who lack access to digital tools or struggle to navigate the complexities of algorithm-driven promotion? Furthermore, to what extent does direct engagement with fans compensate for the absence of institutional support that was once provided by record labels? This paper investigates these tensions and analyses how social media is reconfiguring Zimbabwe's music industry. It critically assesses the digital democratisation of access to audiences while exposing persistent inequities in the evolving ecosystem.

The paper approaches technology as a sociotechnical product that contributes

to change but cannot alone shape and form a new society (Wajcman 2002). It uses the theory of technological determinism to explore how social media platforms have democratised access to audiences, fostered new forms of creativity, and reshaped power relations within the music industry. The theory foregrounds the idea that technology is the force behind any changes that take place in a society, a perspective evident in Zimbabwe, where the rapid adoption of platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook has enabled artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers (Hallström 2022). The analysis acknowledges the limitations of this theoretical stance, recognising that the adoption of technology alone does not account for the complexities of industry transformation. Rather, these outcomes are mediated by factors such as the artists' levels of digital literacy, existing infrastructural limitations, and the broader political economy of creative labour.

This study interrogates the contradictions of social media's promise for musicians through the lens of what I refer to as "platformed cultural hustle", a dynamic whereby Zimbabwean artists exploit digital opportunities while resisting their hidden costs. Where Western scholarship often frames digital platforms as democratising forces (Mjos 2012), the Zimbabwean context reveals a more complex reality. The collapse of traditional music corporations has not eliminated gatekeeping but rather displaced it, as algorithmic curation replaces artist and repertoire executives (Dewan and Ramaprasad 2014), creating new dependencies masked as autonomy.

This paradox manifests acutely in Zimbabwe, where, at times, artists have to navigate conditions of fleeting virality that demand constant reinvention, though without commensurate rewards. At the heart of this hustle lies the tension between participation and exclusion. While digital platforms theoretically enable fan co-creation (Bennett 2012), their material realities remain constrained by what Ntarangwi (2023) identifies as infrastructural stratification. Often, for every well-resourced urban musician orchestrating viral challenges, rural musicians face the enduring dominance of radio due to prohibitive data and internet costs (Chitanana and Mutsvairo 2019). Platformed cultural hustle is a survival strategy in a music industry that has had to deal with the vacuum caused by the concurrent non-existence of corporations and absence of government support for the creative industries. This study applies the "platformed cultural hustle" framework in order to understand how Zimbabwean musicians exploit opportunities on social media while resisting the hidden contradictions and exploitative mechanisms embedded in ostensibly "democratising" digital platforms.

Materials and methods

This article employs a qualitative research approach to explore the transformative influence of social media on music creation, consumption, and promotion in Zimbabwe. The qualitative method was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives while providing

insights into the dynamic interplay between social media and music in the Zimbabwean context. The article draws on publicly available data from social media platforms and online newspapers, as well as on personal reflections and interviews with musicians and professionals in the music industry.

Data collection involved sifting through social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube for publicly available posts, comments, and videos. I also gathered articles relating to the Zimbabwe music industry from online news sources. This article is based on my observations and experiences as a participant in the Zimbabwean music scene and is informed by my work as a music journalist and business strategy consultant. In addition, I undertook conversational interviews with musicians and professionals in the music industry to obtain insights into their experiences of and perspectives on the role of social media in the Zimbabwean music industry.

Thematic analysis involved identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within the qualitative data, such as democratisation of access, viral campaigns, influencer collaborations, and fan engagement. Textual analysis focused on examining the content and structure of communications, including the language, images, and other symbolic elements used in online spaces to promote music and engage audiences.

All participants provided informed consent after receiving full disclosure about the study's objectives and procedures. To protect confidentiality, I anonymised all personal identifiers of all participants, with the exception of the musicians with whom I had personal communication, who provided explicit consent for their identities and content to be used. Content creators, including bloggers and YouTubers whose publicly available pages were used as a data source were not anonymised, as their work is considered a public source and is treated as a citation. While these qualitative findings offer rich insights into Zimbabwe's digital music landscape, their specificity, relating as they do to the experiences of particular artists and to particular social media contexts, limits broad generalisability to the entire music profession.

Democratisation and its discontents: empirical results

The research findings confirm the democratising power of social media, which enables artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers, foster direct connections with fans, and actively engage audiences in the creative process. The following sections provide detailed insights into and examples of how social media is reshaping the Zimbabwean music landscape.

Social media platforms have significantly transformed how musicians connect with their audiences, reducing their dependence on mainstream media. In Zimbabwe, where access to mainstream media often favours artists based in the capital city, Harare, social media offers a necessary alternative to radio, the most

accessible traditional media platform in the country. This shift has allowed musicians outside mainstream channels to gain visibility and recognition independently.

Notably, artists such as Obert Chari and Darlington Mutseta, popularly known as Mambo Dhuterere, achieved their breakthroughs in the industry by way of Facebook. Their popularity grew on social media before radio stations took notice and broadcast their music to wider audiences. For example, in 2018, arts journalist, Plot Mhako, introduced Obert Chari to a broader public through a Facebook video post captioned:

A must play. / *Kwedu hatiende kudhanzi tinoenda kumugidhi* [We don't do parties in our family; we go to church]. Rare, deep, and moving. Please play and share until the spotlight hits this amazing talent.

This post garnered over 2,300 shares, 123,000 views, and 515 comments. Many of the comments lamented the limited exposure artists receive and praised Plot Mhako for increasing the visibility of Chari's work. One commenter, remarked:

Wow, this is a nice track, and it makes me wonder how many more artists are out there not getting exposure. Great sound, great message. I am sharing this, and please send me this one on App. Thanks.

While social media undoubtedly expands the reach of musicians, the impact of the platform depends on the people using it. In many instances, social media reflects the hierarchical structure of the traditional music industry. The case of Obert Chari's "Mebo" reveals the interplay between digital platforms and traditional and industry networks. While Mhako's promotion on Facebook catapulted the song to national attention, its discovery relied on the curation of veteran producer, Peter Muparutsa. The track itself epitomises Zimbabwean *sungura*, a genre rooted in rural working-class experiences (N. A. Mhiripiri 2010), through its fusion of emotional vulnerability, as expressed in Chari's lyrics about unconditional love, and danceable rhythms. This dual trajectory of discovery and digital amplification built upon industry validation illustrates how social media supplements rather than supplants existing cultural gatekeeping. Mhako (2021) recounted how the song initially went unnoticed online:

Here is the short story: sometime in 2018, Peter Muparutsa came across the song Mebo after it had been on YouTube for six months, gathering dust with fewer than 400 views. He instantly recognised its potential, posted a short clip, and tagged me. When I saw the less-than-a-minute clip from the 13-minute song, I was blown away. I shared it and made noise for days. In no time, it blew up. The 400 views turned to 400,000 in a month, and the rest is history.

There is a dynamic interplay between social media promotion and human networks, showing that while social media can democratise access to audiences, the role of individuals within the industry remains crucial. This dynamic has become particularly significant because of a key historical shift: Zimbabwe's music industry currently operates without a fully integrated value chain, a condition stemming from the collapse of major music corporations during the economic crisis that followed

the Fast Track Land Reform Programme in 2000. While conceived as a corrective measure to address colonial land disparities (Mangwanya 2020), the programme's violent and disorganised implementation resulted in international sanctions, hyperinflation, and severe liquidity constraints (Bushu and Kufakurinani 2024). This economic destabilisation effectively dismantled the institutional infrastructure that had previously supported musical production and distribution. This period also saw a surge in music piracy, rendering the music business unsustainable. Established corporations such as Gramma Records, Zimbabwe Music Company, and Record and Tape Promotions, failed to adapt to the digital landscape, rendering their business models obsolete. For decades, these companies had had a crucial role in publishing and promoting Zimbabwean popular music.

The collapse of major record labels created a vacuum temporarily filled by emerging music collectives such as the Chamhembe crew and Chigutiro, whose hybrid urban sound, blending hip-hop, R&B, and traditional influences, dominated the airwaves of the early 2000s. However, as producer Take5 explained in an interview with YouTuber Arnold Chirimika (2020), these groups merely reconfigured rather than reformed the industry's exclusionary structures. Their grassroots marketing strategies, including distribution from vehicles and at flea markets, demonstrated ingenuity but, crucially, replicated gatekeeping practices by privileging artists such as Chamhembe and Chigutiro within their own collectives. The collectives' infrastructure investments, while vital stopgap measures, ultimately sustained the very industry hierarchies they had emerged to circumvent.

Social media has since revolutionised music marketing and promotion in Zimbabwe. Unlike traditional marketing avenues, which required substantial budgets and long planning periods, social media offers cost-effective and adaptable promotional strategies. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube allow artists to engage directly with their audiences, significantly reducing the barriers to admission. This democratisation of access is enabling emerging artists to gain visibility and recognition without the support of established institutions.

In 2017, I was involved in the marketing of SaMukoko's second album, *Keeper Nemukati*. The album has eight tracks, mostly defined by the fusion of mbira with various urban styles. The project resonated with young, urban audiences by blending traditional elements with contemporary influences, showcasing the mbira's adaptability and relevance in modern music. At the time, SaMukoko had relocated from Gweru to Harare, hoping for a long-awaited breakthrough. My task was to market the launch of the album remotely from South Africa, which I achieved through a targeted Facebook campaign.

To build anticipation for the launch of the album, I collaborated with social media influencers who recorded videos of themselves singing along to short snippets of the album's title track. Influencers are individuals who are popular on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok and who have gained online fame through an appealing and attractive social media presence

(Alves de Castro, O'Reilly and Carthy 2021). In this campaign, they strategically posted videos to build anticipation. Additionally, I engaged popular bloggers and arts personalities such as Plot Mhako and @263Chats to share the content, which amplified the campaign's reach and momentum.

The success of the campaign was evident when the launch drew a large crowd, despite being held on a midweek evening. SaMukoko later shared the following in a personal conversation (30 May 2019):

On the day of the show, I noticed many cars parked along the road near the venue. I commented to a bandmate that there must be a meeting nearby, and it might disrupt our patrons, not realising that those cars belonged to people coming to our show!

As an administrator on SaMukoko's Facebook page, I had the opportunity to interact directly with attendees, who shared their feedback. Many affirmed that the social media campaign had delivered on its promise, confirming the power of digital marketing in generating real-world engagement and success.

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook Reels have become powerful promotional tools, enabling independent musicians to reach wider audiences and achieve significant breakthroughs. The visual and participatory nature of these platforms allows content to "go viral", meaning that it spreads rapidly across the internet as users share, like, and engage with it. This is often achieved through influencer collaborations, whereby popular social media personalities promote an artist's music to their followers. Additionally, user-generated trends, everyday users creating and sharing videos using a particular song, dance, or challenge, help to amplify a musician's reach, making their work more recognisable and enabling it to circulate widely.

In Zimbabwe, artists such as Prosper Ngomashi, popularly known as the Comic Pastor, and Felistas Murata, known as Mai Titi, illustrate the potential of the social media to boost careers across multiple creative domains. Both started as comedians who built substantial followings on Facebook before transitioning to music, and both achieved remarkable online and offline success with their releases. Mai Titi has over 1.6 million followers on Facebook, and her most-viewed video on YouTube is of the song, "Mwari Makanaka" (God is good). It had garnered over 2.8 million streams at the time of writing (Mai Tt 2022). Similarly, Comic Pastor boasts 800,000 followers on Facebook, and his most popular song, "Tsamwa", had amassed 5.7 million streams on YouTube (Comic Pastor 2021). These numbers represent the highest-performing content by each artist rather than their full discographies or cumulative streams across different distribution platforms. These examples show the capacity of social media to provide artists with an astronomical reach that was previously unattainable through traditional media alone.

Social media does not only facilitate music promotion but also enables artists to connect with audiences in more engaging, participatory ways. Social media has revolutionised music-making by transforming audiences. Through challenges,

duets, and interactive content, artists can invite fans to become active participants in their creative process rather than being passive consumers. For instance, Feli Nandi invited her fans to an open-verse challenge for her hit song, “Mubaye”, a song about betrayal. The track combines the rich vocal harmonies typical of acapella singing with instrumental backing, blending traditional Zimbabwean rhythms with modern Afro-fusion sounds. This arrangement on social media led to a remix that introduced new performers to the music industry. Mubaye featured TahTah, Sam Koroni, Soulful Leah, Calvin Mangena, and KayC Pricosh, all of whom have since established themselves in the music industry of Zimbabwe.

The remix resonated deeply with fans, not only for its musical quality but also for its collaborative spirit. An anonymous fan on YouTube commented:

Thank you, Feli, for giving the young generation a chance, a platform, a voice. You just gave them the mic on the stage. You are such an amazing soul.

Another participant on YouTube noted the broader cultural significance of the collaboration:

This is more than a remix ... It's more of a union of people from different places united by love and music.

The spirit of the project was also captured in a comment from a fan on YouTube who observed:

A masterpiece, a classic case of united talents and true testimony of what happens when leaders lead. From day 1 of this challenge, Feli made it about these talented young artists. The way she was smiling, acknowledging, and cheering on each artist was just a thing of beauty to see. Now that is what a true artist does. A character moulded by grace, humility, selflessness, and pure talent. This remix is a masterclass.

The transparent design of the open-verse challenge, with fans directly shaping the remix through voting and participation, epitomises how digital platforms can democratise creative ownership. This model fosters collective investment in artistic success, a stark departure from Zimbabwe's pre-2000s music industry, where corporate gatekeepers rigidly controlled production and distribution. While that system ensured adherence to professional standards, its exclusionary mechanisms marginalised independent voices.

Today's landscape inverts this situation: with formal labels dissolved, artists shoulder the dual burden of creation and commercialising their creations. In this vacuum, a grassroots strategy such as a fan-driven challenge has become a vital tool for survival. Visibility now operates as a form of cultural capital. It is no longer curated by institutions but crowdsourced through community engagement. The irony is palpable: where labels once filtered talent, algorithms now amplify virality; yet both systems demand that artists navigate opaque power structures. The open-verse phenomenon reveals a paradox of digital liberation: it redistributes agency but intensifies the pressure to commodify the self.

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have disrupted the exclusionary

model. TikTok's algorithm favours "authenticity" and creativity, enabling lesser-known artists to achieve viral success based solely on the quality of their content rather than their existing popularity or resources. This democratised approach empowers independent musicians to organically build their brands, reach diverse audiences across geographical and cultural boundaries, and remain relevant in an increasingly digital and competitive music landscape.

In addition to democratising opportunities, social media fosters deeper artist–fan connections, encouraging collaborative relationships that extend beyond traditional consumer–producer relations. Feli Nandi exemplifies how these platforms can be harnessed not only for personal success but also to elevate others in the course of cultivating a community-driven music ecosystem that thrives on innovation, inclusivity, and shared passion. The open-verse challenge that led to production and release of "Mubaye" was not only a marketing tactic. It created a participatory space in which fans could reinterpret her work while emerging artists gained exposure as a result of being featured. Feli Nandi demonstrated how digital platforms can convert passive audiences into creative partners by actively engaging with submissions, resharing clips, crediting contributors, and incorporating the feedback of fans into the final remix.

Beyond creating music, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for entertainment entrepreneurs, enabling them to craft and market uniquely branded concert experiences that are able to achieve national prominence. In Zimbabwe, a growing trend involves music concerts, marketed predominantly through dedicated social media pages, curated as aspirational experiences. This approach allows organisers to target specific demographics while packaging these concerts as lifestyle events that fans aspire to attend.

Prominent examples of such events include Alexio Kawara's KuChina, Feli Nandi's A Night with Feli Nandi, Pub Choir ZW's tours, and the Legends Night concerts hosted by the In Total Band. These events owe much of their success to the compelling content and excitement generated by both the performers and attendees, who share their experiences online.

In an interview with Chiwanga (2023), Tatenda Chirisa, a co-founder of Pub Choir ZW, explained that social media was instrumental in building their brand. Chiwanga notes:

Of course, adapting a foreign concept like Pub Choir to Zimbabwe's unique music scene wasn't without its share of challenges. Like all great stories, the journey was peppered with uncertainty and perseverance. They invested in spreading the word through creative social media campaigns, with a little trial and error.

These digital-first strategies also resonate with Zimbabwean communities in the diaspora, who often engage with concert footage, livestreams, and behind-the-scenes content as a way of staying connected to the cultural pulse at home. In many cases, the heightened online engagement has resulted in diaspora-based versions of these events or has inspired artists to include international tour stops to meet

growing demand abroad. A striking example is Madirirano, a music show that brings Harare's ghetto experiences to life. Madirirano shows began in the capital and have since been exported to the United Kingdom (Moyo 2019). The show, a brainchild of Simba "Bodyslam" Chakare, gained popularity through Instagram and Facebook, where raw footage and fan engagement helped turn it into a cross-border cultural phenomenon.

For these entrepreneurs, the influence of social media extends beyond attracting audiences to include the securing of sponsorship deals. The Legends Night concert, for instance, has grown to attract sponsorship from major brands such as Ecobank, Crediconnect, and Triggershot (The Herald 2024). This is a significant achievement, considering that the host band, In Total, is not a dominant name in the Zimbabwean music scene.

Yet the band's strategic use of social media and other online platforms has generated substantial attention, making them an attractive partner for sponsors. For example, their renditions of songs by legendary artists such as System Tazvida and Alick Macheso, uploaded in July and September 2024, respectively, had each amassed over 500,000 views on YouTube by December 2024 (Chinouriri 2024). This level of engagement shows how social media can amplify the visibility of smaller acts, transforming them into viable brands capable of competing in the Zimbabwean entertainment industry.

Social media has fundamentally reshaped audience engagement and attendance at live shows, offering musicians a direct connection to their fans and empowering them with valuable data. In the past, Zimbabwean musicians often operated with limited knowledge of their audience. A rare exception is the late System Tazvida and his band, Chazezesa Challengers, who established the Smoko Fan Club, an initiative whereby they corresponded with fans through letters (NRTV 2024). However, most artists relied heavily on recording companies and retailers to distribute their music and had little to no direct engagement with listeners. This alienation left labels and musicians without critical insights into their audience's preferences, geographic location, or demographics.

The advent of social media has fundamentally reshaped this dynamic, offering musicians a direct connection to their fans and empowering them with valuable data. This shift has transformed marketing strategies and fostered deeper relationships between artists and their audiences. Tinashe Masangudza, member of Gwevedzi Redefined, a contemporary Zimbabwean band, spoke about the importance of engaging with fans:

Social media has allowed us to know our fans in ways that I think were impossible before. We now know who listens to our music, where they are from, and what they love about it. This helps us create music that truly connects with them. We are a niche band. We are content with knowing that not everyone will like our music. However, those who do, we make effort, through social media, to connect and know them as well (pers. comm. 3 May 2025).

Direct interaction fosters a sense of community and loyalty, as fans are seen and valued. Many bands have created terms of endearment for their fans on social media. For instance, Pub Choir ZW refers to its fans as *kazi*, a Shona slang term derived from cousin, which conveys closeness and familiarity, thereby cultivating a familial atmosphere. This approach contrasts with the more formalised fandoms of global artists, such as Beyoncé's Beyhive, where the sheer size of the following can make it harder for individual fans to feel like true insiders. In contrast, Zimbabwean bands often use terms from colloquial, vernacular language such as *magafa* for Winky D fans and *masoja* for Jah Prayzah followers to enhance relatability and intimacy. This strategy of using familial vernacular creates a space for personal engagement, even within a large online community. An example of this interaction can be seen in a typical exchange on the Pub Choir ZW (2025) Facebook page, where a fan was seamlessly integrated into a playful, insider joke, demonstrating a close connection despite the large following of the page:

Fan 1: Ma cousins anga akachena 🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥. But hapazoshaye ana onini vanouya vane zvavo vega 😊 [My cousins are clean. But there will always be those guys who show up with their own thing and miss the theme.]

Pub Choir ZW: Munovaziva wani 😂😂😂. Ndiwo ma cousins aisunga muclass iwayo 🤪🤪 [You know them, right! Those are the cousins who were at the bottom of the class.]

Fan 2: @Fan 1 wapinda mugarden mangu cousin 😊😊😊 [you've just described me, cousin!]

Pub Choir ZW: Hahahahahahahahaha! Ndimi muri kutaurwa here cousin 🤪 [So you're the one we're talking about, cousin?]

These exchanges, rich with humour and cultural nuances, transcend the traditional entertainer–audience relationship. They create a sense of camaraderie. One key nuance is the use of “cousin” as a term of endearment, despite fans being complete strangers. The shared love for Pub Choir ZW creates a bond strong enough that fans and the band affectionately call one another “cousins.” Such empathic interactions contribute positively to show attendance, as fans feel personally connected to the artists. For instance, Winky D, one of Zimbabwe's most prominent musicians, continues to attract capacity audiences at his shows despite facing censorship and limited airplay due to the politically charged content of his lyrics.

Winky D's ability to empathise with the everyday struggles of ordinary Zimbabweans plays a significant role in building a loyal and engaged fanbase, but it is his strategic use of social media to propagate his message and promote his performances that amplifies his reach and influence. Social media's role in bridging the distance between musicians and their audiences has not only transformed how Zimbabwean music is consumed but has also strengthened the bonds between artists and their supporters, ensuring continued engagement and loyalty.

Reintroducing yesteryear hits: digital revival and its discontents

Music from deceased Zimbabwean stars has found a vibrant new audience on TikTok, where classic tracks are experiencing a cultural renaissance. One of the most successful reincarnations of old hits is “Dzandipedza Mafuta” by Simon Chimbetu (1955–2005), a legendary figure in Zimbabwean music often affectionately referred to as “Chopper.” He was the pioneer of the *dendera* genre, which he infused with powerful social commentary, addressing issues such as economic inequality, labour, and nationalism, all while keeping the music irresistibly danceable (Pfukwa 2012). His legacy is carried on by his son, Sulumani Chimbetu, but recent online trends have introduced Simon’s original hits to younger audiences who may never have heard them played live. “Dzandipedza Mafuta”, celebrated for its catchy guitar lines and rich *dendera* rhythms, has been revitalised through a trending dance challenge on the Facebook and TikTok platforms. This revival is not merely nostalgic; it reveals how platforms can democratise cultural preservation. In addition, the resurgence of the song emphasises the timeless energy and groove of *dendera*, a genre pioneered by Simon Chimbetu in the late 1980s that continues to inspire new generations. *Dendera* blends elements of Zimbabwean traditional music with Congolese *rumba* and local storytelling. The genre is named after the ground hornbill (known as *dendera* in Shona), a bird whose deep, resonant call is echoed in the music’s signature basslines and rhythm patterns. This challenge quickly gained traction, fostering widespread engagement across generations, particularly among Generation X (born roughly between the mid-1960s and early 1980s) and older Millennials (early 1980s to mid-90s) who grew up with Chimbetu’s music.

A pivotal moment in this revival came when the Orchestra Dendera Kings, Simon Chimbetu’s iconic band, embraced the trend. They actively participated in TikTok challenges, sharing their own videos, and engaging directly with younger audiences. Beyond the virtual realm, the band incorporated these viral dance routines into their live performances, blending traditional *dendera* music with modern trends.

This phenomenon is particularly significant given that TikTok’s primary audience, Gen Z, individuals in their teens and twenties, might not have witnessed the artistry and magnetic stage presence of Simon Chimbetu when he was alive. The success of “Dzandipedza Mafuta” on TikTok not only reignited interest in Chimbetu’s legacy but also showed how digital platforms can be leveraged to preserve and adapt a cultural heritage for new audiences. The platform, often dismissed as a hub for fleeting trends, demonstrated its potential for bridging generational and cultural divides, offering younger users an entry point into the musical traditions of the past.

Yet this digital rebirth exists alongside new vulnerabilities. Social media’s promise of instant fame often proves fleeting. Fame is a currency that most musicians in Zimbabwe actively pursue, especially if their goal is to achieve commercial success. Social media has the potential to bring instant fame through

viral content. However, this poses two significant dangers. First, sudden fame can be difficult to manage, particularly for musicians who lack professional training or the experience needed to navigate and capitalise on their newfound recognition. Consequently, Zimbabwe has seen the rise of “culture vultures”, individuals who prey on musicians after they produce viral content. These opportunists often present themselves as managers, collaborators, or benefactors, colloquially known as *mbinga* in Zimbabwean street parlance. Many musicians are hoodwinked into leveraging their platforms for the benefit of these “vultures”, often to their own detriment.

Additionally, we live in an era of liquid modernity, where fleeting moments of excitement often take precedence over lasting engagement (Bauman 2013). The average attention span on social media has shortened dramatically, and audiences quickly lose interest and move on to the next viral sensation (Marathe and Kanage 2024). Zimbabwe is ill-equipped to provide musicians with the economic infrastructure necessary to sustain their careers once public attention wanes. As a result, many artists struggle to capitalise on moments of visibility, finding it difficult to sustain and monetise their popularity beyond short-lived viral peaks.

This inability to sustain and monetise the fleeting attention is further compounded by structural inequalities in Zimbabwe, which limit access to the very platforms that could help musicians capitalise on their momentary success. While social media has created opportunities for aspiring artists to show their talent, its impact remains uneven. The situation reflects the broader digital divide in the country; the impact of social media platforms is uneven due to these persistent structural inequalities. Zimbabwe remains a predominantly rural nation, with approximately 70 per cent of the population living in rural areas (Tanyanyiwa and Tongowona 2025). In these regions, internet access is limited by exorbitant mobile data pricing (Ruhanya, Matsilele and Gumbo 2024). Furthermore, those who can access the internet often face high costs and unreliable connectivity or have limited digital literacy.

In view of these challenges, radio continues to dominate as the primary medium for music consumption, particularly in rural areas. Its wide coverage ensures that even communities without internet access remain connected to the national music scene. This creates a paradox in Zimbabwe’s music promotion landscape: while social media has the potential to increase visibility and expand reach, rural artists often lack the resources to leverage these platforms effectively. Those who do achieve breakthroughs online are still constrained by the country’s connectivity issues, which hinder their ability to engage consistently with a broader audience. The role social media plays in Zimbabwe’s music scene requires a nuanced understanding, one that recognises the fact of uneven access to technology, the urban–rural digital divide, and the need for blended promotional strategies that incorporate both traditional and digital platforms.

Discussion of research findings

This paper illustrates the impact that social media has on Zimbabwe's music industry while also revealing persistent challenges and inequalities. Digital media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube have disrupted the hold of traditional gatekeepers, such as record labels and radio stations. These gatekeepers controlled access to audiences for many aspiring performers for many years. Social media platforms have democratised music promotion, enabling direct artist–fan engagement, fostering viral campaigns, and even reviving older music for new audiences in Zimbabwe. However, the shift to digital music promotion is not without its complications. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that considers the socio-economic realities of Zimbabwe while leveraging the potential of digital platforms to create a more inclusive and sustainable music ecosystem.

While social media has filled the vacuum left by defunct music corporations, the transition to a digital-first approach remains uneven. Independent musicians increasingly rely on do-it-yourself (DIY) marketing strategies, but the digital divide, exacerbated by high data costs and limited rural connectivity, prevents equal access to these opportunities (Ruhanya et al. 2024). The article also reveals the ephemeral nature of fame in the era of liquid modernity (Bauman 2013). Viral success on social media can propel artists into the spotlight (Lu 2023), but this fame is often short-lived, and the mechanisms for sustaining and monetising such recognition remain underdeveloped (Nyathi and Maguraushe 2023a). Zimbabwe's economic challenges further complicate this issue, as limited disposable income among audiences restricts the financial support available to musicians (Nyathi and Maguraushe 2023b). Many artists, despite achieving viral fame, struggle to translate their online popularity into lasting careers due to a number of factors, including limited industry infrastructure and monetisation options. This predicament exposes a critical shortcoming in the music industry's value chain.

Another finding of the research is this filling by social media of the lacuna left by large music corporations that used to market and promote music in Zimbabwe. Social media enables musicians to engage in many self-help activities, including the marketing and promotion of their music. Other studies in Zimbabwe report similar findings, with many indicating that there has been an increase in DIY culture in the production, marketing, and sales of music, led by independent “backyard studios”, as well as a shift to social media marketing as an innovative way to fight piracy (Butete 2023; Maguraushe and Muranda 2013; Nyahuma 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, social media is considered the most trusted marketing platform and is credited for positioning independent arts and enabling the promoting and marketing required to build successful careers (Mashau 2022; Nwobu and Onwuekwe 2023).

Using social media, and by extension, the internet, for marketing music represents a transformative shift in the music industry, one that has relegated dependency on record labels to the margins (Baker 2005). Without an effective

marketing strategy, musicians will remain unknown even when their music is well produced and artistically compelling. Studies have shown that social media marketing can alleviate consumer scepticism, particularly for digital purchases, a factor of great relevance for musicians selling their music and merchandise online (Tshuma, Dube and Muchowe 2023). It is therefore essential that artists and their teams devise and implement marketing campaigns that are suited to their context (Gloaguen 2021). Generalised marketing strategies might miss the nuances and fail to work in a country such as Zimbabwe, where, at times, economic and political challenges have extended to the digital space, disrupting the flow of content (Chinyoka 2022). These insights suggest that while social media is a powerful tool, its potential must be strategically harnessed within Zimbabwe's socio-economic context.

Conclusion

Social media has fundamentally reshaped the Zimbabwean music industry, providing artists with new avenues for visibility, engagement, and career development. It has allowed independent musicians to reach wider audiences, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and experiment with innovative marketing strategies. However, this digital transformation has also introduced new challenges, such as fleeting virality, economic precarity, and the digital divide, which limits equitable access. While technological tools can democratise music promotion, success ultimately depends on how artists and industry stakeholders adapt to these changes. Sustainable growth in the Zimbabwean music industry requires not only digital literacy and strategic social media use but also structural support, such as policy reforms, industry networks, and investment in digital infrastructure. This study's contribution lies in framing these dynamics as a platformed cultural hustle, a context-specific mode of entrepreneurial engagement where Zimbabwean artists navigate the paradox of digital opportunity and precarity. This concept challenges simplistic narratives of democratisation, highlighting instead a resilient adaptation to a collapsed formal industry. Moving forward, musicians must balance online engagement with long-term career planning, ensuring that social media remains a tool for empowerment rather than a precarious dependency.

Building upon the insights gained from this study, several avenues for future research emerge. Generally, Zimbabwe has a poor culture of researching the music business. There is a paucity of informed, measured views that are able to predict the future of Zimbabwe's music industry. As such, the recommendation of this article for future studies is to analyse the economic impact of social media on the Zimbabwean music industry, including monetisation strategies, revenue streams, and the role of digital distribution platforms. Equally important is the conducting of longitudinal studies that investigate the long-term impact of platformed cultural hustle on the Zimbabwean music industry, studies that track the careers of artists

and the evolution of digital platforms over time and put together evidence that is able to guide policy development for the growth of the industry.

Author profile

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