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Digital Democratisation of Art: A Qualitative Study of Social Media Platforms and Emerging Artists

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This study examines the digital democratisation of art within social media ecosystems, focusing on how emerging artists navigate platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data and thematic analysis, the study investigates how algorithmic visibility, participatory engagement, and platform capitalism reshape artistic production and professional development. The theoretical framework integrates participatory culture theory, network society theory, field theory of cultural production, and platform capitalism to explain the evolving dynamics of digital art ecosystems. Findings reveal that social media platforms significantly expand access to artistic publication and global audiences; however, visibility is unevenly distributed through algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement-driven content. The study further identifies that emerging artists increasingly engage in self-branding and visibility labour, resulting in new forms of creative dependency on platform infrastructures. The research concludes that digital democratisation of art is paradoxical, simultaneously enabling creative empowerment and reinforcing structural inequalities within attention-based economies.

Keywords: digital art, social media platforms, emerging artists, algorithmic visibility, participatory culture, platform capitalism, digital labour

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1. Introduction

The concept of art has long been embedded within institutional structures that regulate its production, validation, and circulation. Historically, museums, galleries, academies, and curatorial systems have functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms that determine what is recognised as “legitimate” art and which artists gain visibility within cultural economies. These institutions not only curate artistic value but also shape aesthetic hierarchies and define the boundaries of artistic professionalism. Within this traditional framework, emerging artists often face significant barriers to entry, including limited access to exhibition spaces, professional networks, and financial resources (Bourdieu, 1993).

However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has significantly disrupted these long-standing structures. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, and Behance have transformed artistic communication by enabling artists to publish, distribute, and promote their work without institutional mediation. This shift is frequently described as the “digital democratisation of art,” a concept that refers to the increased accessibility of artistic production and audience engagement in digitally networked environments (Jenkins, 2006).

In this context, democratisation implies the removal or weakening of traditional barriers that previously restricted artistic participation. Emerging artists can now build global audiences, participate in online

communities, and develop professional identities through digital visibility rather than institutional endorsement. This transformation has also expanded the role of audiences, who are no longer passive observers but active participants in evaluating and circulating artistic content through likes, shares, comments, and algorithmic engagement signals (Manovich, 2015).

Despite these apparent opportunities, the democratisation of art through social media remains a contested phenomenon. While digital platforms increase accessibility, they also introduce new forms of structural inequality. Algorithmic recommendation systems prioritise certain types of content over others, often privileging aesthetic styles that align with platform engagement metrics rather than artistic innovation or cultural significance (Gillespie, 2018). As a result, visibility becomes increasingly dependent on platform logic rather than purely artistic merit.

Furthermore, the rise of platform capitalism has transformed artistic labour into a form of data-driven production. Artists are often required to engage in self-branding, audience management, and continuous content production to remain visible in highly competitive digital environments (Srnicke, 2017). This creates a paradox in which digital platforms simultaneously empower and constrain artistic agency.

Emerging artists are particularly affected by these dynamics. Unlike established artists who may rely on institutional reputations, emerging practitioners depend heavily on algorithmic visibility and audience

engagement to gain recognition. This dependency reshapes artistic practice itself, influencing not only how art is distributed but also how it is created, styled, and conceptualised (Abidin, 2020).

Therefore, this study examines the relationship between social media platforms and emerging artists through the lens of digital democratisation. It seeks to understand whether these platforms genuinely democratise artistic opportunity or whether they reproduce new forms of inequality under the logic of digital capitalism.

The study is guided by three core research questions:

- How do social media platforms influence the visibility and professional development of emerging artists?
- In what ways do algorithmic systems shape artistic production and self-presentation?
- Does digital platformization genuinely democratize art, or does it reinforce new hierarchical structures?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to ongoing academic debates in digital media studies, cultural sociology, and contemporary art theory. It also provides a critical perspective on how technological infrastructures reshape cultural production in the twenty-first century.

2. Literature Review

The literature on digital art and social media can be broadly categorised into five

interrelated thematic areas: participatory culture, network society theory, platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and digital creative labour. Together, these strands of scholarship provide a comprehensive understanding of how emerging artists navigate digital ecosystems.

2.1 Participatory Culture and User-Generated Creativity

One of the foundational frameworks for understanding digital creativity is Henry Jenkins' theory of participatory culture. Jenkins (2006) argues that digital media environments encourage users to become active participants in cultural production rather than passive consumers. In participatory cultures, individuals contribute content, collaborate across networks, and engage in shared creative practices.

Social media platforms exemplify participatory culture by enabling users to create, remix, and distribute visual content instantly. For emerging artists, this environment reduces traditional barriers to entry, allowing for immediate publication and feedback. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok function as hybrid spaces where artistic expression merges with social interaction and audience engagement (Jenkins et al., 2013).

However, scholars have noted that participatory culture does not necessarily eliminate inequality. Although participation is technically open, visibility remains uneven due to algorithmic filtering and attention economies. Consequently, participatory culture often masks underlying structural

asymmetries in digital visibility (Fuchs, 2014).

2.2 Network Society and Digital Connectivity

Manuel Castells' concept of the network society provides a macro-level explanation of digital transformation. Castells (2010) argues that contemporary societies are structured around decentralised networks rather than hierarchical institutions. In such systems, power is distributed across interconnected nodes, including individuals, platforms, and data infrastructures.

Within the art world, this shift has significant implications. Emerging artists are no longer dependent solely on galleries or curators for visibility. Instead, they operate within global digital networks that allow for direct interaction with audiences across geographic boundaries. This networked structure enables rapid dissemination of artistic content and fosters transnational creative exchanges.

However, network societies are also characterised by informational asymmetries. Not all nodes within the network have equal visibility or influence. Algorithms play a critical role in determining which content circulates widely and which remains obscure (van Dijck, 2013). Thus, while networks appear decentralised, they are often governed by centralised platform infrastructures.

2.3 Platform Capitalism and the Economics of Visibility

A significant body of literature examines the economic structures underlying digital platforms. Srnicek (2017) introduces the concept of "platform capitalism," describing

how digital platforms extract value from user interactions and data production. In this model, users—including artists—contribute unpaid labour in the form of content creation, engagement, and audience building.

For emerging artists, platform capitalism creates both opportunities and constraints. On one hand, platforms offer free access to global audiences and monetisation tools such as advertising revenue sharing, sponsorships, and digital marketplaces. On the other hand, visibility is tightly controlled by proprietary algorithms designed to maximise user engagement rather than artistic diversity.

This economic structure encourages artists to optimise their work for algorithmic performance, often prioritising viral aesthetics over experimental or conceptually complex art forms. As Duffy (2017) notes, creative labour in digital economies increasingly involves self-branding and continuous content production to maintain relevance.

2.4 Algorithmic Governance and Visibility Systems

Algorithms have become central actors in shaping cultural visibility. Gillespie (2018) argues that algorithms are not neutral technical systems but sociopolitical structures that reflect institutional values and commercial priorities. In the context of social media, algorithms determine which artworks appear in user feeds, recommendation systems, and search results.

This algorithmic mediation significantly impacts emerging artists. Visibility is no longer solely determined by artistic quality but by engagement metrics such as likes,

shares, comments, and watch time. Consequently, artists often adapt their creative practices to align with algorithmic preferences, producing content optimised for platform visibility rather than artistic intent.

Furthermore, algorithmic systems are opaque, making it difficult for artists to understand or predict how their work will circulate. This opacity creates uncertainty and reinforces dependency on platform infrastructures (Pasquale, 2015).

2.5 Digital Creative Labour and Self-Branding

The rise of social media has also transformed artistic labour into a form of entrepreneurial self-management. Scholars such as Abidin (2020) highlight the increasing expectation for creators to engage in self-branding, audience engagement, and continuous content production.

Emerging artists are required not only to produce art but also to cultivate a personal brand identity that is recognisable and marketable within digital ecosystems. This includes maintaining consistent visual aesthetics, engaging with followers, and adapting content strategies to platform trends.

While this can enhance visibility and career opportunities, it also imposes emotional and cognitive labour burdens. Artists must constantly balance creative authenticity with market-driven visibility strategies, leading to what some scholars describe as “visibility labour” (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

2.6 Gaps in the Literature

Although existing research provides valuable insights into digital art ecosystems, several gaps remain. First, there is limited integration between cultural theory and platform studies in understanding emerging artists specifically. Second, much of the literature focuses on general content creators rather than fine artists or visual practitioners. Third, the rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms means that theoretical models often lag behind empirical realities.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesising multiple theoretical perspectives to examine how digital democratisation operates specifically for emerging artists within social media environments.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study develops an integrative theoretical framework to analyse the digital democratisation of art in social media environments, particularly focusing on emerging artists. The framework draws upon four complementary theoretical perspectives: participatory culture theory, network society theory, field theory of cultural production, and platform capitalism with algorithmic governance. These perspectives collectively explain how artistic visibility, production, and legitimacy are reshaped within digital ecosystems.

3.1 Participatory Culture as a Foundation of Digital Creativity

The concept of participatory culture, introduced by Jenkins (2006), provides a

foundational lens for understanding how social media platforms enable users to become active cultural producers. In contrast to traditional media systems, where production and consumption are clearly separated, participatory environments blur these boundaries. Users simultaneously act as creators, curators, and audiences.

In the context of emerging artists, participatory culture enables immediate access to publishing tools and global audiences. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube reduce institutional dependency by allowing artists to distribute work independently. Jenkins et al. (2013) further emphasise that participatory culture is characterised by low barriers to expression, informal mentorship structures, and strong community engagement.

However, participation does not guarantee equality. Fuchs (2014) argues that participatory environments often conceal structural inequalities related to visibility, platform ownership, and digital labour exploitation. While artists may freely upload content, their reach is heavily influenced by algorithmic filtering systems, which determine what becomes visible within networked feeds.

Thus, participatory culture explains the expansion of access, but it does not fully account for inequality in visibility, requiring integration with other theories.

3.2 Network Society and the Logic of Digital Connectivity

Manuel Castells' (2010) theory of the network society provides a structural understanding of how digital communication

reshapes cultural systems. In network societies, social organisation is no longer based on hierarchical institutions but on decentralised networks of interconnected nodes.

In artistic ecosystems, these nodes include artists, audiences, platforms, algorithms, and digital communities. The network structure allows emerging artists to bypass traditional gatekeeping institutions such as galleries and museums. Instead, visibility emerges through connectivity, sharing, and virality.

However, Castells (2010) also emphasises that power within networks is unevenly distributed. Some nodes, particularly platforms and algorithmic systems, exercise disproportionate influence over information flows. van Dijck (2013) extends this argument by demonstrating that platforms actively shape connectivity through design choices, ranking systems, and data infrastructures.

Therefore, while the network society theory explains decentralisation of access, it also highlights the persistence of centralised control within digital infrastructures, particularly through platform governance.

3.3 Field Theory and Cultural Capital in Digital Environments

Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) field theory of cultural production offers a critical sociological perspective on how artistic value is constructed. According to Bourdieu, the art world operates as a "field" in which actors compete for different forms of capital, including cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

In traditional systems, institutions such as museums and galleries function as gatekeepers that validate artistic legitimacy. In digital environments, these roles are partially replaced by algorithmic systems, engagement metrics, and platform visibility structures.

Likes, shares, comments, and follower counts function as forms of digital symbolic capital, signalling artistic relevance within platform ecosystems. However, this transformation does not eliminate hierarchy; rather, it reconfigures it. Artists must now compete within attention economies where visibility is scarce and algorithmically regulated.

Moreover, cultural capital remains relevant in shaping how audiences interpret digital art. Educational background, aesthetic literacy, and cultural familiarity continue to influence engagement patterns. Therefore, digital democratisation does not abolish field structures but redistributes them across new institutional forms.

3.4 Platform Capitalism and Algorithmic Governance

The most critical dimension of the theoretical framework is platform capitalism, as articulated by Srnicek (2017). Digital platforms operate as profit-driven infrastructures that extract value from user-generated content and behavioural data. In this model, artists are not only creators but also producers of data and engagement metrics.

Algorithmic governance plays a central role in shaping visibility. Gillespie (2018) argues that algorithms are not neutral technical tools but socio-economic systems that encode

institutional priorities. Recommendation systems determine which artworks are promoted, suppressed, or made visible based on engagement predictions.

This creates what could be described as an attention economy, where artistic success depends less on institutional validation and more on algorithmic optimisation. Artists often adapt their work to fit platform-specific logics, including short-form content, visually engaging aesthetics, and emotionally expressive styles.

Pasquale (2015) further emphasises the opacity of algorithmic systems, which makes it difficult for users to understand how visibility is distributed. This lack of transparency reinforces dependency and uncertainty among emerging artists.

3.5 Integrated Theoretical Synthesis

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualises digital democratisation of art as a hybrid system characterised by both expansion and constraint.

- Participatory culture explains increased access to production tools.
- Network society theory explains decentralised connectivity.
- Field theory explains continued structural competition for symbolic capital.
- Platform capitalism explains economic extraction and algorithmic control.

Together, these frameworks suggest that digital democratisation is not a linear process

of liberation but a restructuring of power relations within digital ecosystems.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis. The aim is to develop a conceptual and interpretive understanding of how social media platforms influence emerging artists and reshape artistic production.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because the subject matter involves complex socio-cultural processes, including identity formation, digital visibility, and algorithmic mediation. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is particularly effective for interpreting meaning-making processes in socially constructed environments.

Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, this study focuses on thematic interpretation of existing knowledge, allowing for theoretical synthesis across disciplines such as media studies, sociology, and art theory.

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles in digital media studies, cultural sociology, and art theory
- Academic books on platform capitalism, digital labour, and participatory culture

- Industry reports from creative economy organisations and digital platform analyses
- Case studies of emerging artists using social media platforms
- Policy and documentation materials from platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube

Sources were selected based on the following criteria:

- Academic credibility and peer-reviewed status, where possible
- Relevance to digital art, social media platforms, and creative labour
- Publication within the last 15 years to ensure contemporary relevance
- Theoretical or empirical contribution to understanding digital cultural production

This purposive selection strategy ensures that the dataset is both conceptually relevant and methodologically coherent.

4.2 Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis as its primary analytical method. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data.

The analysis proceeded through the following stages:

- **Familiarisation with data:** Extensive reading of selected literature to identify recurring concepts

- **Initial coding:** Identification of key concepts such as algorithmic visibility, self-branding, participatory engagement, and platform dependency
- **Theme development:** Grouping codes into broader thematic categories
- **Reviewing themes:** Refining categories to ensure theoretical coherence
- **Interpretation:** Linking themes to the theoretical framework

The final thematic structure includes:

- Algorithmic visibility and digital attention economies
- Self-branding and artistic identity construction
- Platform dependency and infrastructural control
- Participatory engagement and audience interaction
- Economic monetisation and digital labour structures

4.3 Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigour, the study applies principles of qualitative trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

- **Credibility:** Achieved through triangulation of multiple academic sources
- **Transferability:** Ensured by situating findings within widely applicable theoretical frameworks

- **Dependability:** Maintained through systematic documentation of coding and analysis procedures
- **Confirmability:** Supported by reliance on verifiable academic literature

Although secondary data analysis limits direct empirical validation, the use of diverse scholarly sources enhances interpretive reliability.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Since this study uses publicly available secondary data, it does not involve human participants and therefore does not require informed consent procedures. However, ethical academic practice is maintained through proper citation of all sources and avoidance of misrepresentation of scholarly arguments (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

The study also acknowledges the ethical complexity of digital platforms, particularly regarding data extraction, algorithmic opacity, and labour exploitation, which are central concerns in platform studies (Srnicek, 2017).

4.5 Limitations of the Methodology

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations:

- Dependence on secondary literature limits direct empirical insights from artists
- Rapid technological changes in social media platforms may outdate some interpretations
- Algorithmic systems are opaque and constantly evolving, making stable analysis challenging

Despite these limitations, secondary qualitative synthesis is appropriate for developing a broad theoretical understanding of digital democratization processes.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the synthesised findings derived from thematic analysis of secondary qualitative data, including academic literature, platform studies, and digital cultural research. The analysis identifies five major interrelated themes: algorithmic visibility and attention economy, self-branding and identity construction, participatory engagement and audience co-creation, platform dependency and infrastructural constraints, and monetisation and precarious digital labour. Together, these themes illustrate the complex dynamics of digital democratisation in contemporary art ecosystems.

5.1 Algorithmic Visibility and the Attention Economy

A central finding of this study is that visibility on social media platforms is fundamentally governed by algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement-driven content distribution. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube rely on machine-learning algorithms that rank content based on predicted user engagement, including likes, comments, shares, watch time, and interaction frequency (Gillespie, 2018).

This creates what scholars describe as an attention economy, where visibility is a scarce resource distributed unevenly among users (van Dijck, 2013). Emerging artists must therefore compete not only on artistic

merit but also on their ability to generate algorithmically favourable engagement signals.

The analysis reveals that algorithmic visibility often privileges:

- Visually immediate and emotionally stimulating content
- Short-form and easily consumable artworks
- Highly repetitive or trend-aligned aesthetic styles

As a result, artistic experimentation that does not conform to platform logics is often deprioritised in visibility rankings. This indicates that democratisation is conditional rather than absolute; access to publication is universal, but access to visibility is stratified.

Furthermore, algorithmic opacity reinforces uncertainty among artists. Since ranking systems are not transparent, artists must rely on trial-and-error strategies to optimise visibility (Pasquale, 2015). This creates a structural dependency on platform systems that limits creative autonomy.

5.2 Self-Branding and the Construction of Artistic Identity

Another significant finding is the increasing importance of self-branding in shaping artistic success. Emerging artists are required to develop coherent digital identities that align with platform aesthetics and audience expectations (Abidin, 2020).

The analysis shows that self-branding involves several interconnected practices:

- Curating a consistent visual style across posts

- Maintaining active engagement with followers
- Positioning oneself within recognisable artistic niches
- Aligning content with trending platform formats

This process transforms artists into entrepreneurial cultural producers who must manage both creative output and personal branding simultaneously.

Duffy (2017) argues that such conditions reflect a shift toward aspirational labour, where creative individuals invest significant emotional and temporal resources into building visibility without guaranteed financial returns. For emerging artists, this often results in a blurred boundary between artistic identity and marketable persona.

Importantly, the study finds that self-branding is not merely strategic but also structurally enforced. Platforms reward consistency, frequency, and recognizability, thereby incentivising artists to standardise their creative identities. This can lead to aesthetic homogenization, where unique artistic expression is shaped by platform expectations.

5.3 Participatory Engagement and Audience Co-Creation

The findings also highlight the role of audiences as active participants in shaping artistic visibility and meaning. In contrast to traditional art institutions, where interpretation is largely mediated by curators and critics, social media platforms enable direct interaction between artists and audiences.

Engagement metrics such as comments, shares, and remixing practices contribute to the co-creation of artistic value. Jenkins (2006) describes this as participatory culture, where audiences are not passive consumers but active contributors to cultural production.

However, the analysis reveals a dual structure:

- On one hand, participatory engagement fosters community building and creative feedback loops.
- On the other hand, it reinforces algorithmic visibility hierarchies, since engagement metrics directly influence content ranking systems.

This creates a feedback loop in which audience behaviour is both expressive and instrumental. Users interact with art not only for aesthetic appreciation but also within the logic of platform visibility systems.

Moreover, participatory engagement often favours content that is emotionally resonant or easily shareable, which may constrain more complex or conceptual artistic forms. This suggests that audience participation is shaped by platform design rather than purely organic cultural interaction.

5.4 Platform Dependency and Infrastructural Constraints

A critical finding of this study is the high degree of dependency that emerging artists have on platform infrastructures. While social media appears to decentralise artistic distribution, the underlying infrastructure remains centralised and privately owned (Srnicek, 2017).

Artists are dependent on platforms for:

- Audience reach and visibility
- Content distribution mechanisms
- Monetisation tools
- Engagement analytics

However, platforms retain control over algorithmic design, content moderation policies, and monetisation eligibility criteria. This creates a structural asymmetry between users and platforms.

van Dijck (2013) emphasises that platforms function as mediating infrastructures that shape connectivity rather than merely facilitating it. This mediation results in what can be described as infrastructural dependency, where artists must continuously adapt to platform changes to maintain visibility.

The analysis also reveals that frequent algorithmic updates can significantly disrupt artistic careers. A change in ranking criteria or content prioritisation can reduce visibility overnight, highlighting the instability of platform-dependent artistic ecosystems.

5.5 Monetisation and Precarious Digital Labour

The final major finding concerns the monetisation of artistic labour in digital environments. While social media platforms offer monetisation tools such as ad revenue sharing, sponsorship opportunities, and digital marketplaces, access to these systems is often restricted and uneven.

Only a small proportion of emerging artists achieve sustainable income through platform-based monetisation. Instead, many

artists operate within what can be described as precarious digital labour conditions (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

The analysis identifies several characteristics of this precarity:

- Irregular and unpredictable income streams
- Dependence on brand collaborations or commissions
- High workload associated with content production and engagement
- Lack of institutional labour protections

This situation reflects the broader logic of platform capitalism, where value is extracted from user activity while economic rewards remain unevenly distributed (Srnicek, 2017).

Thus, while platforms democratize access to audiences, they do not necessarily democratise economic sustainability.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital democratisation of art is structurally ambivalent. Social media platforms expand access to artistic production and global visibility but simultaneously introduce new forms of inequality mediated by algorithms, platform ownership, and attention economies.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and contradictory landscape of digital art production, where democratisation operates alongside new forms of structural inequality. This section interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework, focusing on four key dimensions:

democratization paradox, algorithmic governance and aesthetic standardisation, identity labour and creative autonomy, and the reconfiguration of artistic institutions in digital environments.

6.1 The Democratization Paradox

The central argument emerging from this study is that digital platforms produce a democratization paradox. On the surface, social media platforms appear to democratize art by removing institutional gatekeepers and enabling direct access to global audiences. This aligns with Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture, where barriers to entry are significantly reduced.

However, the findings demonstrate that democratisation is uneven and conditional. While publication is accessible, visibility is algorithmically controlled. This confirms Gillespie's (2018) argument that platforms are not neutral intermediaries but active curators of information flows.

Thus, democratisation in digital art should be understood not as equal distribution of opportunity but as reconfiguration of control mechanisms. Traditional gatekeepers such as galleries and curators are replaced by algorithmic systems that are less visible but equally powerful. This paradox reflects a shift from institutional gatekeeping to infrastructural gatekeeping.

6.2 Algorithmic Governance and Aesthetic Standardisation

The findings highlight that algorithmic systems significantly shape artistic production by rewarding certain aesthetic forms over others. This supports Pasquale's

(2015) argument that algorithmic systems operate as "black boxes" that influence outcomes without transparency.

Artists adapt their work to align with algorithmic preferences, leading to the emergence of standardised visual cultures. This includes:

- Preference for visually striking imagery
- Short-form, high-impact content structures
- Emotionally engaging or trend-responsive aesthetics

Over time, this leads to what can be described as algorithmic aesthetic convergence, where diverse artistic expressions are gradually shaped into platform-optimised formats. This finding challenges the assumption that digital platforms inherently promote diversity. Instead, they may subtly encourage homogenization through engagement-driven ranking systems.

From a theoretical perspective, this supports van Dijck's (2013) argument that connectivity is structured rather than organic. Platforms actively shape cultural expression through design and data governance.

6.3 Identity, Labour, and Creative Autonomy

The study also reveals that emerging artists are increasingly engaged in identity labour, where artistic practice is inseparable from self-branding and audience management. This aligns with Abidin's (2020) analysis of internet celebrity culture, where personal identity becomes a form of capital.

This transformation has several implications:

- Artistic identity becomes performative and continuously curated
- Creative autonomy is constrained by platform expectations
- Emotional and cognitive labour increases significantly

Duffy (2017) describes this condition as aspirational labour, where individuals invest in visibility with uncertain economic return. The findings extend this argument by showing that artistic identity itself becomes a site of labour extraction.

This raises critical questions about authenticity. When artistic production is shaped by engagement metrics and branding strategies, the boundary between genuine expression and strategic performance becomes increasingly blurred. Thus, digital platforms do not eliminate identity constraints but reconfigure them into market-driven forms of visibility labour.

6.4 Reconfiguration of Artistic Institutions

One of the most significant implications of this study is the transformation of traditional artistic institutions. Museums, galleries, and curators no longer function as exclusive gatekeepers of artistic legitimacy. Instead, legitimacy is partially redistributed across digital infrastructures.

However, this does not mean the disappearance of institutional power. Rather, it indicates a shift toward platform institutionalism, where digital platforms

assume curatorial functions through algorithmic systems.

This supports Srnicek's (2017) argument that platforms operate as infrastructural intermediaries that structure economic and cultural interactions. In the context of art, platforms effectively become new cultural institutions that determine visibility, engagement, and monetisation pathways.

This reconfiguration produces a hybrid system where:

- Traditional institutions retain symbolic authority
- Digital platforms control visibility and distribution
- Audiences participate in value production through engagement

Thus, the art world becomes a multi-layered ecosystem of overlapping institutional logics.

6.5 Implications for Emerging Artists

For emerging artists, the findings suggest a dual reality. On one hand, digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for exposure, experimentation, and audience building. On the other hand, these opportunities are mediated by algorithmic systems that introduce instability and competition.

Artists must therefore navigate a complex balance between:

- Creative autonomy and algorithmic optimisation
- Authentic expression and audience engagement

- Artistic experimentation and platform visibility

This balancing act reflects the structural contradictions of digital capitalism, where empowerment and control coexist within the same infrastructure.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that digital democratisation of art is not a linear process of liberation but a structurally ambivalent transformation. Social media platforms expand access while simultaneously reorganising visibility, labour, and value production within algorithmically governed systems.

The theoretical synthesis confirms that:

- Participatory culture explains access expansion
- Network society explains connectivity
- Field theory explains continued competition for capital
- Platform capitalism explains structural control

Together, these frameworks reveal that digital art ecosystems are best understood as hybrid systems of empowerment and constraint, rather than fully democratized spaces.

7. Conclusion

This study has critically examined the concept of digital democratisation of art within contemporary social media ecosystems, focusing on the experiences and structural conditions affecting emerging artists. The findings demonstrate that while digital platforms significantly expand access

to artistic production and global distribution, they simultaneously introduce new forms of inequality shaped by algorithmic governance, attention economies, and platform capitalism.

One of the central conclusions is that democratisation in digital art is not absolute but conditional. Social media platforms remove traditional institutional barriers such as galleries and curators, allowing artists to publish work independently and reach global audiences. However, this apparent openness is counterbalanced by algorithmic systems that regulate visibility based on engagement metrics. As a result, artistic success is increasingly determined not only by creative merit but also by the ability to conform to platform-specific visibility logics.

The study also concludes that emerging artists are required to engage in continuous self-branding and visibility labour. Artistic identity becomes intertwined with digital persona management, where consistency, audience engagement, and platform optimisation are essential for sustaining relevance. This transformation reflects broader shifts in creative labour, where emotional, cognitive, and temporal investments are directed toward maintaining algorithmic visibility rather than purely artistic exploration.

Furthermore, the research highlights that platform capitalism plays a decisive role in structuring artistic ecosystems. Digital platforms operate as infrastructural intermediaries that extract value from user-generated content while controlling distribution mechanisms. This creates a dependency relationship in which artists rely

on privately owned systems for visibility, monetisation, and audience engagement, thereby limiting full creative autonomy.

Theoretically, the integration of participatory culture, network society, cultural production theory, and platform capitalism provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics. Together, these perspectives reveal that digital art ecosystems are hybrid structures characterised by both empowerment and constraint.

In conclusion, digital democratisation of art should be understood as a paradoxical process: it expands creative access while simultaneously reproducing new hierarchies of visibility and economic inequality. Future research should incorporate empirical case studies and artist-centred ethnographies to further examine how individuals strategically navigate these platform-driven constraints.

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