

Understanding the Roles and Values of *Zimeiti* in Taiwanese Independent Music Networks

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Abstract

With the pandemic forcing the music sector to increase their reliance on online approaches, inspecting the potential of digital media is crucial to reshape the indie sector's development. This qualitative research conducted in-depth interviews with three *zimeiti* leaders to understand their roles and values in Taiwanese indie music networks. By examining contextual evidence, this research identifies several crucial roles of such media beyond their informational intermediate natures, including promoters, value deliverers, incubators, gatekeepers, and culture shapers. Such pro-indie media are expected to enhance diversity in music scenes but can be subjective and biased due to the small ownership patterns, requiring audience participation to add balance. This research considers such *zimeiti* as cohesive hubs in Taiwanese indie music networks, in which they provide industrial, social, and cultural value to the indie sectors and accelerate the development of Taiwanese indie music with their media specialties.

Keywords

Zimeiti, Taiwanese indie music, music networks, digital

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Introduction

Online–offline integration is crucial to the development of the music industry in the post-pandemic period, wherein various activities from production, performance, and promotions are inevitably accomplished through online approaches. In such a transitional period, music practitioners are facing precarious financial and emotional aspects (Messick 2020). Under such circumstances, Taiwanese indie musicians, especially those operate in a small scale, are encouraged to seek opportunities from different platforms, as they are incapable of obtaining resources and exposure from the mainstream media. Working with the *zimeiti*¹ (自媒體) has become favorable approaches for such musicians to accelerate their careers.

Understanding such *zimeiti* and their positions in indie music networks is indispensable in terms of combing out the establishments of Taiwanese indie musicians. However, the roles and values of such *zimeiti* in Taiwanese indie networks have not been examined, in which contextual and sociological evidence is crucial to understanding the dynamics and development of indie music (Shuker 2013).

Recognizing the importance of such digital means in the post-pandemic era, this research examines the contextual evidence to inspect the various roles of the *zimeiti* in Taiwanese indie music networks, as well as the values they deliver to both the audience and the indie musicians in different aspects. With such evidence, this study is expected to provide insights into Taiwanese indie musicians' career development.

Understanding *Zimeiti* from the Emergences of Citizen Media

In terms of *zimeiti*, this article follows the definitions proposed by Fang (2021). By reviewing and analyzing the *zimeiti* participants in China, he argues that the *zimeiti* are those outlets that provide user-generated contents to the audience exclusive through social media platforms, as well as how they are consumed. Such *zimeiti* and the related actors, including online influencers, none-official accounts, and other independent social media accounts regarding certain issues, have become the new trends of the content providers online which coexist with the institutional (traditional) media. Although the traditional media are still dominant due to the control of capital resources, the *zimeiti* are commended by the audience because they cover all subjects and themes among the shared contents.

The concepts and the backgrounds of *zimeiti* can be illuminated by the emergences of the citizen media. Citizen media, also known as self-media or we media, are modernized small media that collect and convey information regarding specific topics to the audience. Specifically, they tend to provide user-generated content. Such media can be managed by

1 While translating the term "自媒體", the reviewer and author have gone through serious discussions regarding the naming of the social media business under analysis. Simply translating this term into English was not applicable. In the previous revisions, the author borrowed the terms "we-media" and "citizen-media" to address the subject, but there were still mismatched meanings where both terms imply the concepts of journalism, in which they are not equivalent or suitable for understanding the contexts of the popular music in Taiwan. Consequently, as the reviewer kindly suggested, the author adopted the direct transliteration of *zimeiti* to indicate the "自媒體" and the related ideas discussed in this article.

individuals or groups, and can comprise influencers, professionals, and regular audience. In today's digital world, where media have rapidly developed and people have every means to access the Internet, citizen media are not only important in the informational and communicative aspects, but they are also equally crucial in the social and cultural aspects of everyday life (Xie et al. 2020).

Audience participation and user-generated content are the key features of both the *zimeiti* and the citizen media. The tendency to discuss things online is obvious among people (Bowman and Willis 2003). People have been employing the Internet to share their thoughts and interests since the maturity of Internet technologies, implementing the social and informational features of the Internet, including communication, interaction, and dissemination. By participating in such an intermediary process of information, people act not just as information receivers, but also as potential content providers.

Such tendencies can morph into serious informational collections, analyses, and disseminations, all conducted by people who care for the same issues or interests. From the old-world online platforms such as Myspace to trendy social media such as Instagram and Snapchat, people are getting used to floating back and forth along the spectrum of media senders and receivers.

Both audiences and artists are social media embracers who often conduct music activities through digital approaches and streaming services. With innovative digital tools, applications, and platforms, there is a growing trend in citizen media regarding the different topics and distinctive issues of music, from global popstars to local indie musicians (Xie et al. 2020). Since the means of music production and consumption are structurally digitalized, appreciating such digital citizen media is becoming influential and normalized in indie music networks (Hracs 2012; Thokozani 2022).

Media impacts the development of the cultural and creative sectors in the digital era. Owing to their self-owned business structure, citizen media are more flexible and efficient than the mainstream media in terms of responding to varying information. Based on such characteristics, the citizen media can instantly deliver specific information to their own niches among musicians and audiences.

From industrial and social perspectives, these media demonstrate the merits of independence. They are not controlled or owned by mega companies, and can cast their influence according to their own ideas. As Bowman and Willis (2003) argued, such digital means and users are the force to break down the homogenization underlaid in the accessible informational world built by traditional mega media.

Instead of using the term "we media" or "citizen media" as the topic, this article adopts *zimeiti* to accentuate the cases. Although the concepts behind these terms share several features in common, there are still mismatches between *zimeiti* and citizen media regarding the contexts and backgrounds. While the citizen media represent the new type of media that break down the homogenization of the informational world and even create social values from the civil participations' perspectives, the *zimeiti* nowadays do not necessarily carry the meanings of journalism but serve as the creative content providers on the social media platforms (Fang 2021). Thus, the term *zimeiti* is contextually applicable in this article.

The Diversity of Taiwanese Music Industry

The Taiwanese music industry comprises diverse models and cultural expressions across a wide spectrum. It comprises sectors that include the commercial and the arts, the traditional and the modern, and the elite and the people. Such complex elements not only bring countless hit songs to the markets but also generate alternative and indie music scenes (Lee 2015).

Popular music has been a representative of Taiwanese cultural and creative industries that cast international influence and achieve cultural exports. Such influences of Taiwanese popular music are shaped by their historical context. Due to its complex political background and crucial geographical position, the Taiwanese music industry has been influenced by different cultures, consequently generating diverse appearances.

Taiwanese music has come a long way since the Japanese colonial period. It has been strictly regulated by domestic political conditions and governmental policies imposed by foreign regimes such as Japan, China, and America. Such regimes have had a profound impact on Taiwanese society and have planted favorable ideas regarding popular music in local music scenes (Ho 2007; Fen 2012; Lin 2017; Scaglione 2020).

Although Taiwan has been recognized as the most competitive player in the Mandopop business, it has been relatively late to initiate structural reforms to catch up with global transformations in the digital era. This is because the leading mega companies in the business are somehow still immersed in the past days when Taiwanese music was dominating the Mandopop markets and, thus, failed to quickly respond to the inevitable transformations (Lee 2015).

Mainstream artists, stars, and entertainers enjoy the core positions with the music companies who are well-polished enough to launch various projects, activities, and productions with commercial value to kick off their stardom. However, some individuals have also reached the audience on their own. These two categories, along with online distributors and offline venues, are involved in the restructuring processes of the industry².

Taiwanese music has witnessed the potential of indie sectors for decades. Due to the blurry definitions of indie music, it is reasonable for some participants to struggle between artistic and commercial values as well as between the niche and mass markets. The global music industry has already been integrating these sectors and developing new global audiences to react to constant, varied, and unpredictable transformations led by innovative digitalization. As the development of niche markets and new audiences is becoming a new battlefield in global music environments, the Taiwanese music industry should acknowledge the potential of indie music and find opportunities in both the Mandopop and global music markets.

² 2020 Investigation Report of Taiwanese Cultural Contents Industries, TAICCA, <https://taicca.tw/article/26bcd207> (Accessed May 05, 2022).

From Marginal Players to Potential Competitors: Positioning Taiwanese Indie Music in the Music Markets

Indie music can be understood through various definitions, including industrial, cultural, musical, and ideological perspectives. It can be recognized as a grass-rooted force that stands against the commercialization of music, it can be categorized as a musical genre that serves only niche group of people with certain music tastes, and it can also be defined as the music sector that exists without any ties to the major labels and their subsidiaries. It can also be recognized as small-scaled creative works which are made under limited resources while manifesting entrepreneurship, which are benefited from the digital environment.

The independent musicians today can make music in their own bedrooms and subsequently establish their careers; they can generate business opportunities while building up micro, spontaneous, and collaborative business models which are different from the major labels (Walzer 2017). Therefore, societies can differ in their recognition of indie independence, depending on the context and the features of the domestic industries (Hesmondhalgh 1997; Jian 2013, 2018).

Although the well-developed digital environment has created friendly conditions to accelerate their independence from the music industries and those major labels, these independent musicians are highly relying on the digital means and social platforms invested by the major music corporations and operated with commercial purposes.

Therefore, the definitions of independent music should be constantly reexamined as the demonstrations of such independence are related to the industrial, social, and cultural contexts. However, digitalization has already become the preconditions of all industries across various scales and categories, wherein such digitalization not only serves for the indie sectors but also the major. In terms of the music industry, the major labels also gain positive consequences throughout such digitalization. They have professional and specialized departments to utilize, invest, and even acquire such digital means so that they can obtain greater commercial rewards. The global independent music is undoubtedly fostered by such digital environments (capitalism). Nevertheless, the independent musicians also condemn the commercial activities or capitalism as the stigma of their DIY nature, making it problematic to partition such independent music from the picture created by the major.

Taiwanese indie music is recognized as underground music by society. However, indie musicians place more emphasis on achieving self-actualization and adopting entrepreneurship to build sustainable careers. Jian (2013) emphasizes the DIY spirits manifested in Taiwanese indie musicians' daily practices. She argues that there is a strong grass-rooted resilience among Taiwanese indie musicians which encourages them to adapt coexisting patterns with dominant mega music companies in terms of musicality, productions, and performances.

Lee (2015) argues that, although the Taiwanese indie music represents a unique social network among the creative and aesthetic fields, the boundaries between the mainstreams and the indie are getting blurry. He believes that the indie music demonstrates the merits

of being autonomous and free, in which it can thus embrace different musical genres and bravely generate new contents.

In Taiwan, the boundaries between the indie and the major are blurry because many people, including fans and artists, define indie music from its content and other conceptual criteria rather than industrial evidence. As Jian (2013) argued, defining indie music from the musical contents or the label scales are pointless, because its relationships to the major are complex that these two sectors are not entirely counterparts. Yet, such approaches can cause problems in positioning Taiwanese indie music in the markets and industries. This research understands Taiwanese indie music from an industrial perspective and defines it as a music sector without sustainable resources or ties to mega companies.

Over the past decade, a new wave of Taiwanese indie music has emerged. Such indie musicians are now competitive in various musical awards, and some have even successfully knocked on the doors of the international markets³. With such formal recognition, Taiwanese indie music has legitimately surpassed subcultural positions and gained phenomenal places in both industrial and cultural aspects. In 2022, Flesh Juicer⁴, an indie metal band from Taichung, was awarded by the 33th Golden Melody Award⁵ with the title "Best Band," and their name has subsequently invaded the media in no time.

Due to the localized advantage of clusters and cross-regional networks, Taiwan is viewed as the most interdisciplinary and creative platform of the Mandopop business, as it occupies suitable positions in the networks and engages with other markets. Consequently, Taiwanese music is enhanced by the integration of a clustering environment and networks, which provide diversified approaches to incubate young indie musicians and related creative artists⁶. Currently, Taiwanese indie music is a strong competitor in the music market. With its unrestricted musical content and alternative aesthetics, Taiwanese indie music has the potential to break through the conventional frames of Mandopop rooted in the music industry (Jian 2019, 213-228).

Influential Policies Regarding Taiwanese Indie Music

To foster the Taiwanese music industry and its diversity, the public sector, both central and local, has implemented various policies and projects, and several such policies are exclusive to the indie sectors. To directly support indie music with financial aid, the Taiwan Ministry of Culture has provided subsidies to indie music regarding production and distribution since 2007. To enhance diversity and originality in music scenes, the Golden Indie Melody Award⁷

3 'Three Approaches to Foster Taiwanese Pop Music', <https://www.twreporter.org/a/taiwan-indie-bands-grants-policy-review> (Accessed Jul. 1, 2022).

4 Flesh Juicer is an indie metal band with a huge fanbase, <https://www.facebook.com/fleshjuicer> (Accessed July 02, 2022)

5 Golden Melody Award is the biggest musical award in the Mandopop world held by the Taiwanese governments, <https://gma.tavis.tw/gm33/index.htm> (Accessed Jul. 02, 2022).

6 "Inside Taiwan's Indie Music Scene: Is It Truly 'Independent'?". The New Lens. Retrieved from <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/105334> (Accessed Oct. 02, 2021).

7 The Golden Indie Music Awards are music awards for original music with music composition at its core, encouraging musicians in Taiwan to show their diverse creativity, <https://gima.tavis.tw/about.php> (Accessed Sep. 02, 2021).

has been held since 2010, which attracts indie musicians from across Asia to compete and connect with each other.

Today, the Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development (BAMID) provides multiple subsidies to facilitate the development of the Taiwanese music industry, giving artists various opportunities to pursue music. Such subsidies are expected to accelerate different aspects of the music industry, including the cultivation of talented artists, incubations of agents and managers, production assistance, assistance of inter-platform programs with new media, and marketing promotions⁸.

While the production and distribution phases are well conditioned, professional intermediaries, such as managers, agents, and labels that provide specialized services, remain insufficient (Jian 2019, 213-228). The public sector, thus, is noticeably focusing on nurturing professional intermediaries to improve the competitiveness of the Taiwanese music industry. Such policies imply that the Taiwanese public sector is redirecting the music industry to respond to the current musical environment shaped by digital technologies.

However, public sector subsidies also involve hidden risks. Large portions of Taiwanese indie artists seek and even rely on governmental subsidies to actualize their musical creativity, and the establishment of their careers is thus delayed or rushed by the outcomes of annual applications. Although there are indie musicians who manage to maintain their independence from such monetary support, developing indie music on such financial aid is an inefficient process.

Although making music can be easy in such a digital era, the invisible barriers to breaking into the markets are slowly rising. The music industry has become more complex because of the integration of cross-field technologies. Such technologies are employed to provide new experiences to the audience, where visual, audio, and interactive elements are imperative. Thus, different scales of monetary cost and managerial specialties are required, an arduous task for the indie sectors without support from mega companies. Under such circumstances, following the guidance of the public sector and seeking applicable resources are favorable ways for indie musicians to pursue sustainable careers.

Nevertheless, the developments of Taiwanese indie music are still adapting a bottom-up approach. Although the public sectors from central to local governments provide subsidies to the indie sectors, only small proportions of them can successfully gain such monetary supports, whereas most of the Taiwanese indie musicians are building up their careers with precarity. On the top of that, applying for such subsidies is highly competitive; the indie musicians must put extra efforts beyond musicmaking to prepare for the paper works and eye-catching portfolio which are burdening their daily routine. To these indie musicians, applying for such subsidies can be a self-exploiting journey towards uncertain consequences.

8 Governmental subsidies regarding to the music industry, https://www.bamid.gov.tw/submenu_204.html (Accessed Aug. 02, 2020).

Indie Music as a Lifestyle: Taiwanese Indie Music and Its Audience

In this post-pandemic era, Taiwanese indie music is ready to go viral again, and nearly 100 music festivals of different scales are scheduled in the second half of 2022⁹. Such offline events are mainly supported by young fans. Indie music is popular among Taiwanese youth. Such young generations go after indie music not just to appreciate its creative musical content and aesthetics, but also to live out and demonstrate its social and cultural values. More precisely, indie music has become a symbol as well as a lifestyle in which the audience proactively participates in live performances to shape their identities and broaden their networks together.

With the booming of social platforms, media nowadays sever for different audiences and fans, accelerating the segmentation of the music markets. Due to streaming services, reaching out to global indie artists and diverse musical genres has become commonplace for the local audience. As people are proactively looking for new musical information, it is crucial for artists to adopt new interactive communicative approaches to engage with the audience. While mainstream participants exploit traditional mass media to talk to the audience following their conventional patterns of success, indie music has acquired advantages from the *zimeiti* in terms of its immediate response to digital consumerism in the new generation¹⁰.

Online streaming services and algorithmic mechanisms have contributed to the development of indie music. Indie artists have a chance at becoming sensations if the social media algorithms are aptly used. In the mature digital era, exploring new audiences from different niche markets is a suitable way for indie musicians to build their reputations, in which they should apply alternative approaches to reach out to new fans instead of blindly competing for the same group of audience¹¹.

However, this article does not suggest that those mainstream artists and the major companies are ignoring the *zimeiti* in the digital era. Instead, they recognize the potential influences of such *zimeiti* as well as the platforms, wherein they begin to invest in such platforms to gain the controls in the long run, leading the media independence to a complex and ambiguous situation.

The Challenges of Taiwanese Indie Music in the Post-Pandemic Era

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the global entertainment industry. Music industries were dramatically influenced by the pandemic, especially for sectors that rely on live performances and related activities. Live performances, concerts, and other offline activities around the world were canceled owing to governmental restrictions, in which venues and stadiums were shut down to prevent people from gathering. Although

9 2022 Music Festivals' Schedules in Taiwan, <https://partystar.media/fest>.

10 Industrial Research Report by TAICCA, <https://taicca.tw/article/7332ed67>.

11 "Decoding digital marketing" (數位行銷大解密). Retrieved from <https://zh.taiwanbeats.tw/archives/t8937> (Accessed Jun. 02, 2022).

online streaming has been well developed in recent decades, live performances are still irreplaceable because of the uniqueness of a live musical experience.

Conventionally, the participants of music industry build up exclusive social networks through spatial engagements, such as venues, record stores, and live concerts. Such engagements between the participants are crucial to the developments of the music business, because they enhance the clustering effects of such creative works (Lin 2011).

Today, such engagements go beyond the offline spatial limitations, wherein the participants are forming broader networks on online including social media and streaming platforms. Whether online or offline, the participants of the music business long for a base where they can interact together and meet someone who shares the same musical tastes.

The relevance of the *zimeiti* in the development of indie music can be inspected with the fact that such media provide a place that welcome all participants to engage together. Since the indie musicians have a collaborative nature, such engagements are important to them because they can broaden the social networks and reach out to different people for more resources, especially in the digital era. These *zimeiti* on the social platforms, as mentioned in the sections above, are not entirely journalistic; they also cover the aspects of entertainment and advertisement business, which are also deeply related to music business.

Social platforms greatly influence how people share and receive information, and the people are consequently active participants in the content-generating of the social media in the digital era. The *zimeiti* referred in this article are those social media that produce creative contents and information on social media platforms instead of pure journalism. Such *zimeiti*, just like indie music, are coexisting with those major, demonstrating the merits of being autonomous. However, as people and the media rely heavily on such platforms, it becomes harder for them to obtain and appreciate journalistic independence (Poell and Dijck 2014).

Although such self-owned media produces news, they are not entirely journalistic per se; they play crucial roles in cultural, advertisements and entertainment business. Nevertheless, they are still expected to maintain autonomous and objective while producing the informative contents, in which the absence of external control, the resilience against others' influence, and autonomy are appreciated. Also, when the indie musicians overly rely on such media to establish their careers in terms of promotions and exposures, their independence should be questioned (Kari and Hallvard 2016).

Entrepreneurships in Indie Music Scene

The digitalized environments are encouraging the indie musicians to become entrepreneurs. Bittencourt and Domingues (2019) argue that the indie musicians today are entrepreneurial musicians. They further address the DIT, Do-It-Together, spirits in such indie music due to the collaborative natures among different participants in the indie music scene. The independent musicians are considered entrepreneurs because they are devoted in creating something new in both cultural and economic fields.

These entrepreneurial musicians must be creative so that they can constantly react and adapt to the reconfigurations of the music industry. Since such indie musicians are forced to become entrepreneurs in the digital era, they should obtain entrepreneurial attitudes, in which they need to broaden the networks and gain new knowledges regarding the music business to face with the obstacles brought by the innovative environment. On the top of that, they must learn to take risks and seek for opportunities (Bittencourt and Domingues 2019).

The entrepreneurship can be taken into actions under casual manners among the small-scaled and individual musicians motivated by the passion toward music rather than seeking the commercial rewards. That is, the establishments of their careers and business are not only pathed by commercial concerns but also emotional drivers which surpass (or ignore) the commercial logics. Such approaches can be risky and unsustainable, and these self-employed musicians are thus becoming precarious workers (Lin 2011).

However, it is arbitrary to understand such entrepreneurship only from the positive aspects while ignoring its potential negative consequences. Self-exploitations are common among these entrepreneurial indie musicians that they must act more than just artists to build up careers. As Hracs (2012) argued, the indie musicians are forced to become multitaskers in the digital era, wherein they must learn entrepreneurial skills to survive in the digital era. Undoubtedly, the indie musicians can create new opportunities of collaborations through entrepreneurial practices, but they still face with precarious conditions without sustainable resources and monetary rewards.

Even though the indie musicians can go DIY, the entrepreneurship among the indie musicians triggered by the digital cultures has enhanced the complexity of the networks, in which all participants are potentially interconnected due to collaboration opportunities. In the digital era, it is important for the indie musicians to apply proper strategies in terms of career establishments so that they would not be washed out easily among numerous actors.

Methods

This study conducted in-depth interviews to obtain qualitative data. Through literature reviews, current features of Taiwanese indie music are identified in this research, including the booming of *zimeiti* in indie networks, the self-exploiting nature of indie music, new forms of engagement with the audience in the digital era, the market potential of indie music, and the immoderate reliance on public support.

This study collected insights and evidence regarding the current conditions of Taiwanese indie music from the perspective of the *zimeiti*. By understanding the roles and values of such media in indie networks from industrial, social, and cultural perspectives, this research correspondingly discussed the conditions of Taiwanese indie music. The synergies and imposed regulations were also investigated.

A qualitative approach is suitable for this study because it allows the researcher to discover contextual evidence regarding cultural and social phenomena. Semi-structured

in-depth interviews were conducted with three *zimeiti* entrepreneurs (leaders), *B-rated Entertainment*¹², *Party Star Media*¹³ (一起追星去), and *Weekly Indie Band*¹⁴ (每週一首獨立樂團), who manage Taiwanese indie music contents and the related business. These three media brands are established on different types of platforms, including YouTube channels, Facebook, Instagram, and self-owned websites.

The interviewees were selected based on two criteria. The first is their reputation. The selected media must have established their reputations in the Taiwanese indie music networks when approached by this research; they are all well-known and recognized by both Taiwanese indie musicians and fans due to their pro-indie contents. The second reason is their accessibility. Several suitable *zimeiti* were targeted by this research during the interviewee selection process. However, many of these media were incapable of conducting interviews due to personal or business concerns, while the aforementioned three showed great interest in the research topic and immediately agreed to participate in interviews.

The owners of these three selected *zimeiti* are all practitioners in the music business. Brother B is an artist manager and agent that focuses on hip-hop music, John works as a fulltime music press, and Mu is a professional sound engineer who works at different venues. Such backgrounds allow these interviewees to respond immediately with practical experiences throughout the interviews, and they are able to reflect the real-life scenarios of the music business. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and other information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of the interview sessions

Source: Designed by the author.

Media	Interviewee	Date	Location	Duration
B-rated Entertainment	Brother B, Label owner	Dec. 08. 2020	B-rated Studio, Taichung	2 hrs
一起追星去 Party Star Media	John, Label owner	Jan. 21. 2021	Match Café, Taichung	2 hrs
每週一首獨立樂團 Weekly indie band	Mu, Editor in chief	Feb. 02. 2021	King Maui Café, Taipei	2.5 hrs

Although the interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, the collected evidence was still applicable, owing to its empirical and contextual values. By conducting these interviews, this research generated several findings and arguments, which are elaborated upon in the following sections.

12 B-rated Entertainment is an empirical media in Taiwanese hip hop music scenes, <https://b-rated.co/>.

13 Party Star Media (一起追星去) is a professional media company that shares information on Taiwanese indie music, <https://www.youtube.com/c/PartyStarShow/about>.

14 Weekly Indie Band (每週一首獨立樂團) shares indie music productions on both Facebook and Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/weeklyindieband/>.

From Music Enthusiasts to Media Entrepreneurs

A common factor among the selected names was their entrepreneurialism. The founders and editors of such influential *zimeiti* are mostly self-driven enthusiasts and practitioners of music. When establishing their media platforms, such groups of people are not motivated by monetary purposes and do not view their media as a lucrative business, but are rather triggered by their music experience and pursuits in Taiwanese music. As their experiences and pursuits are diverse, the creative content and target audiences of such *zimeiti* are varied.

I was originally an event planner...I subsequently worked as a booking agent in my senior year, and then began to serve as an intermediary as well as visual producer for indie hip-hop artists...I gradually kicked off my own label in such practices, aiming to be a professional...just like everyone else...(Brother B, December 08, 2020).

...The operational team comprises music business practitioners who work at venues...due to our occupation, we have many chances to work with indie bands, wherein some of them produce great music yet sell few tickets, and this is the reason why we started this company, because we want to share good music with the audience through a professional perspective...(Mu, February 02, 2021).

Their endeavors reflect the risk-taking spirit in musical enthusiasts and practitioners in the indie sector. Taiwanese indie music networks are becoming vibrant with such participants, where new blood and creative ideas are constantly presented. Such entrepreneurship also enhances the competitiveness of indie sectors, implying an increasing number of people who aim to become professionals rather than retain amateurs.

From an industrial perspective, entrepreneurship regarding the media and other musical professions could be a solution to increasing self-exploitation among indie musicians. As Hracs (2012) argues, the indie musicians are forced to apply digital means to manage the nonmusical aspect of their careers because such digital approaches have become the preconditions of the global creative industries wherein the indie musicians are involuntary multitaskers. The *zimeiti* can serve as intermediaries in networks, providing services for the indie music regarding promotions, advertisements, and marketing. The emergence of such media has moderated the self-exploitation of indie music.

Small and Flexible: The Distinctive Features of the *Zimeiti*

These *zimeiti* tend to be on a small scale in terms of business structures, and are thus more flexible than traditional major media with complex authorities that intervene in the content-generating process. With such flexibility, these *zimeiti* can instantly focus on the latest information and respond to the ongoing trends in the industry according to the consumption habits of their audience.

The flexibility of *zimeiti* also leads to good interaction between users. As such media have a low entry barrier for access, all types of audiences from fans to practitioners can easily access such media from various digital devices. Media users can interact and mingle

with others, and they can also share their music productions and thoughts simply by leaving comments and dropping links. Such *zimeiti* can sometimes trigger sensations, launch collaborations, and discover hit songs through such interactions among audiences.

... Media like us are small but flexible, and this is our advantage because we can adapt quickly to how people use the Internet ...It is rather easy for all users to access different media today, and they can also share their thoughts and music production by dropping links. Some of them could even become the next hit within a blink, you will never know...People give and take through these media, it's an alternative interacting process...(Brother B, December 08, 2020).

Being distinctive and professional on certain niche topics is important for *zimeiti*. Most of the audience's attention has been captured by several well-recognized music businesses that acquire great resources. As the masses receive information mainly through such popular media, their musical tastes and knowledge becomes limited to only certain popular genres and artists. This leads to homogenization highlighting the importance of the *zimeiti*, as Bowman and Willis (2003) argue, which maintain diversity in musical environments.

However, the uneven allocation of media resources also appears in the indie sectors, in which a few well-established indie artists and bands occupy most of the exposure and the media's cover pages from time to time. Therefore, alternative¹⁵ *zimeiti* that specialize in the distinctive realms of music are important, as they can discover marginal indie musicians and drag them to a perceivable position by providing alternative exposures. Thus, such media encourage diverse music consumption.

...audience nowadays receive information mostly via the mainstream media, and they thus obtain only the knowledge of hit songs...professional and distinctive media regarding different music genres are thus important, for they bring alternative approaches for the audience to access diverse music...(John, January 21, 2021)

Reaching out to International Audience: Zimeiti as Promoters

Previous research has recognized the market potential of Taiwanese indie music owing to its unrestricted creative content. This research discusses the synergy between *zimeiti* and indie music regarding such potential. Media share information and content through different platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Such platforms carry the features of high penetration and accessibility, which are conducive to engagement with both local and international audiences. With such accessibility, these media serve as cross-regional promoters that provide different (more) approaches of exposure for indie musicians, in which they present Taiwanese indie music to a broader fanbase both locally and internationally.

I recognize our media as an intermediary as well as a promoter that bridges the gap between indie music and the audience...we mainly provide an alternative approach of exposure for the indie musicians, especially for those young starters...I

15 The term "alternative" in this article is adopted to describe the none-mainstream status of the media. It does imply the connotations defined under popular music studies.

hope that we can lead such indie musicians into a bigger market...(Mu, February 02, 2021)

I serve as a promoter. Our YouTube channel has accumulated over 30 million views...it is surprising to know that foreign audiences share a major proportion of our total clicks, which is a good phenomenon to be honestly...I can share Taiwan indie music with the whole world through my channel simply by adding English titles...(John, January 21, 2021)

Indie musicians can acquire not only a larger fan base but also broader networks through these *zimeiti*. The *zimeiti* are creating intermediate platforms that attract professional musicians from both the indie and major sectors, as well as those with the same interests, to interact together and even collaborate. Such music collaborations can be initiated locally and internationally; as Brother B noted, international access is one of the key features of flexible *zimeiti* and promoters.

...international access is also our key feature as a 'zimeiti' and a promoter...with my previous experience and the subsequent resources of being a booking agent, we can actually provide a bigger network for the indie musicians, wherein we can invite indie talents from both local and international to do a collab. (Brother B, December 08, 2020)

As a promoter, Brother B has been helping the indie hip-hop musicians to claim international fans and even go abroad with his experience of being a booking agent. He will recommend those indie rappers (MCs) to the international hip-hop musicians, seeking opportunities for the Taiwanese indie musicians to serve as the opening guests when the international musicians perform in Taiwan. By making music videos, he also helped the famous hip-hop music group, 911¹⁶ (玖壹壹), to accumulate outstanding views on the YouTube channel and subsequently break into a bigger market.

Beyond the Shared Contents: *Zimeiti* as Value Delivers

Zimeiti acquire the ability to share content with boundaryless penetrations, in which they present, approve, and even endorse certain musical tastes and social values to different (niche) groups of the audience. In this discourse, such *zimeiti* are not only intermediaries between music producers and consumers, but they are also distinctive cultural icons that can strengthen the cohesion among people who share the same interests and values in indie music networks.

...we share contents with our audience as a hub in the networks, and it's also important what kind of values we are addressing... Such values can include certain beliefs and interests...I know that some kind of social cohesion is gradually established by such media and the audience in the process...(Brother B, December 08, 2020)

...We want to establish a platform for those "small" indie musicians who have

16 911 (玖壹壹) is a famous hip-hop music group that was nominated for the best vocal group by the 27th Golden Melody Award. <https://www.facebook.com/JiuYiYi/> (Accessed Nov. 20, 2022).

only few fans, and we want to share their music productions to the audience through our media...I hope that such unestablished indie musicians can connect to others through platform, and expand their networks...(Mu, February 02, 2021)

Serving as value delivers, these *zimeiti* are not just engaging with the audience by sharing content, but they also create an inter-bonding process among the users, which includes average fans, music practitioners, content explorers, and other media in the music networks. Such a bonding process is beneficial in accentuating the characteristics of such media, as they obtain appreciation from people who seek the same values. Such values are derived from music, but they go beyond it as well. They can be political, in favor of protecting certain rights or against certain regimes, depending on the themes of the music. Such bonding processes also imply the matchmaking nature and advantages of such media, in which they can trigger various types of collaborations among the participants.

Media as Incubators: The Ability of Matchmaking in the Music Networks

In addition to the aforementioned roles of intermediators, value deliverers, and promoters, these influential *zimeiti* regarding indie music also act as incubators per se, in which they subtly build up alternative means of matchmaking among the indie music networks. By recognizing their matchmaking abilities, such media can provide more opportunities for indie musicians in terms of career development and cross-boundary collaboration.

...beside the content-sharing nature, we are also trying to act as incubators, you know we can spot some opportunities for the indie musicians from the complex information, and sometimes it can really help them in terms of matchmaking...like I have sent several young rappers to the TV program, and they thus become famous and got a lot of fans...'zimeiti' are indispensable in the development of indie music, especially in the local indie music scenes...(Brother B, December 08, 2020)

In terms of incubations, Brother B believes that the matchmaking abilities are important. He has initiated numerous collaborations between indie musicians; he introduces beatmakers to the rappers and finds new voices for the music producers. He even pushed several indie rappers to join the competitions held by TV programs, wherein such rappers consequently obtained many exposures and new fans.

Such media demonstrate the merits of their incubating nature underlaid in their routine practices and content-generating processes, in which they can complement the indie musicians with their mediatic specialties. As professional media who produce live performance films of the indie musicians, Party Star and the editor-in-chief, John, have successfully helped the indie band “Chair” to be nominated for the best-live-performance from the 10th Golden Indie Melody Award.

In terms of incubation, such media are fostering Taiwanese indie musicians by introducing them not just to the audience but also to major businesses and even governmental awards. It is important to recognize that the costs of such alternative incubation are relatively low and even free. As John mentioned, most of the indie musicians are monetarily poor, and he wanted to help such indie musicians with his

media specialties.

...incubation is also a thing we do...two of my film works were nominated with best live performance award by the Golden Indie Melody Award...Therefore, I think I am somehow also an incubator, in which I provide the indie musicians alternative approaches to access bigger crowds and even awards...most of them are poor, and I want to help them...(John, January 21, 2021)

Zimeiti as Gatekeepers and Educators

Beyond the roles of content providers, value deliverers, intermediators, and promoters, *zimeiti* also perceive themselves as educators and gatekeepers. They will carefully examine and gatekeep the music content they present to the audience based on their value propositions, in which they believe themselves to be obliged to educate the audience to better appreciate diverse indie music.

Raising the appreciation of indie music among audiences is a long journey. Mu argued that preaching such cultural and creative productions is quite similar to preaching on social issues, wherein it is difficult for all audiences to embrace such topics due to unfamiliarity. However, as such media are addressing the merits of indie music through their routine practices and content, they are gradually building up an organic environment of music consumption through digital approaches.

...Our responsibilities are not only to share contents but also to educate people... we should deliver more diverse music genres and cultural values to our audience... I believe that the consumptions of music reflects how people perceive this world, so we media have to send certain social reflection and awareness to them...we are also gatekeepers and educators, and we can help people to appreciate different cultures and build up an organic music environment...(Brother B, December 08, 2020)

...we expect ourselves to act as educators who change people's perceptions regarding indie music, and then teach them to appreciate its beauty ...I think preaching such cultural and creative productions is like preaching social issues... it takes time to let people recognize the things they are not familiar with, and I believe that we will get there eventually...(Mu, February 02, 2021)

The *zimeiti* consider themselves gatekeepers and educators who present valuable indie music to the audience. These acts and efforts undoubtedly contributed to the development of indie music. However, such a gatekeeping process can be unduly subjective because the contents regarding indie music are generated only according to media operators' tastes, rather than going through complex layers of inspection. Consequently, participation from the audience is important to such self-owned media; voices from different perspectives and stances can neutralize the subjectivities underlaid in the presented contents.

Supporting Taiwanese Indie Music from Bottom-up Approaches

Instead of fostering indie music from a top-down approach like the public sector, the *zimeiti* adopt a bottom-up approach. The public sector has established laws and standards

with professional perspectives to serve the best interests in the music industry. However, individuals who try to apply for such aids are expected (required) to fulfill certain criteria, which include submitting detailed proposals and business plans in the first place. It is fair to state that the application of such subsidies imposes extra burdens on the indie sectors, and it is difficult for the indie musicians without such qualifications to obtain aid from the public sector.

In contrast, the *zimeiti* support indie music through a bottom-up approach. Although they do not directly succor the indie musicians in terms of financial aspects, they provide great assistance in terms of digital promotions and exposures. The backgrounds of the *zimeiti* reveal that many of the founders come from a rather indie position in the industrial context, and such grass-rooted positions consequently helped them understand the needs and circumstances of indie music. Therefore, these media can provide opportunities for indie musicians from a bottom-up perspective in both industrial and cultural aspects, which contributes to the development of local indie talents.

I think the key point is that most of these media are self-motivated and grass-rooted music lovers...we start from a rather indie position in the industry, so we know the struggles of being an indie... (Brother B, December 08, 2020)

...As we are working in venues, we understand the circumstances of being indie and even share the same beliefs sometimes...so in terms of managing a media, we want to help the indie musicians to gain more exposure and opportunities...(Mu, February 02, 2021)

The heads of such *zimeiti* carry out their professionalism and interest in generating creative content on their platforms, wherein they simultaneously broaden their networks during the content-generating process. They need to reach different stakeholders to collect the latest information regarding Taiwanese indie music. With the accumulation of their reputations and practices in musical medialects, they further connect to other influencers in different sectors beyond the indie networks, such as festival organizers and iconic pop stars. By doing so, such *zimeiti* serve as cross-sector bridges that have the potential to encourage integration between indie music and other sectors.

...My previous experiences allowed me to participate the China tours of some Taiwanese artists during my internship in Shanghai, such as MC Hot Dog(熱狗) and MJ116(頑童). As I rolled with them, I took some casual pictures of their rehearsals and breaktimes, which enlightened my interest in visual production and further built up my connection with other artists. That was the most critical moment of my media career...(Brother B, December 08, 2020)

...As my visual works and social media seem accountable today, some of the music festival will hire me to provide my skills and knowledge as their official live media representative, and I even got the chance to work with Singaporean media as a selecting committee to value their annual album award...(John, January 21, 2021)

The value propositions of such *zimeiti* are inevitably manipulated by the personal context of owners and managers. As they are personally positioned in Taiwanese

indie music networks with a pro-indie stance, their media and related social platforms consequently speak up for Taiwanese indie music and care about its future development. However, such value propositions can cause a bias. As public media, they are responsible for presenting neutral information regarding all music sectors, whether indie or mega. A pro-indie stance can sometimes obscure their neutrality.

Media as Culture Shapers

The *zimeiti* consider themselves educators and gatekeepers in the indie music networks. However, apart from such roles identified upon their engagement with the audience, such media also shape the culture that influences the creative process of musicians. In terms of music production, indie musicians acquire knowledge to improve their production skills through the *zimeiti* and obtain opportunities to collaborate with other creative people. More importantly, they perceive ongoing trends in musical genres in both local and global scenes through the *zimeiti*.

As suggested by the media, some indie musicians will make music that echoes current trends. However, this pursuit is not limited to pursuing more exposure or reputation, they seek to stay connected in the music networks as well. Such a tendency to go after the popular trends reflects their fear of being excluded from the music communities in the production aspect. The emotional precariousities of musicians in the post-pandemic era are serious issues that must be addressed.

...of course, the indie productions are influenced by the media...different musical genres go viral in different time periods; many musicians will start to make music of the popular genres just to catch up with the trends, and wish for reputations and exposures, but such trends are manipulated by the media and algorithms... The media are not just educating the audience; we are also influencing the creative process of the musicians...(Brother B, December 08, 2020)

The culture of Taiwanese indie music is built by multiple stakeholders, including indie musicians, audiences, public sectors, and intermediaries. Together, these stakeholders moderate the content and shape the features of Taiwanese indie music. As informational intermediaries, the *zimeiti* play multiple roles in the counterbalancing process among stakeholders in the development of the indie sectors. These roles subsequently provide different values to Taiwanese indie music networks.

In innovative digital environments, the flexible *zimeiti* break through the rigid frames of traditional mass media and provide alternative contents for the niche audiences. With such advantages, such media are expected to enhance the diversity of Taiwanese music scenes. However, a conflict hides behind the expectation that the musical tastes of their users, including fans and musicians, can be manipulated if they only act as passive content receivers. Obtaining information from different media and platforms is important for users to remain autonomous and conscious, which are indispensable conditions in terms of organic, diverse Taiwanese indie music networks.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the *zimeiti* regarding their roles and values in Taiwanese indie music networks with contextual evidence. Such roles and include promoters, value deliverers, incubators, educators, gatekeepers, and culture shapers. By playing such roles in indie music networks, the *zimeiti* can moderate the self-exploitative tendency among the indie musicians. They provide alternative means for indie music to access potential audiences, alleviating its multitasking nature so that musicians can refocus on their musical pursuits.

Such roles are influential to both audiences and indie musicians, in which they not only accelerate the career development of the indie musicians, but they also introduce various music genres to the audience and consequently establish a diverse musical environment. Musical productions and consumption are constantly shaped by such media, wherein cultural values are demonstrated in such influences.

With the intermediate positions in the music business, *zimeiti* accelerate the integration between the indie and mainstream (mega) sectors as matchmakers in the music networks, in which artistic and commercial collaborations regarding music production are encouraged. The *zimeiti* are bringing indie music to bigger markets, and their industrial values are embodied in such processes.

Although *zimeiti* only acquire niche scales of the audience, they are able to provide broader access for the indie musicians in terms of exposure, networks, and collaborations. More importantly, these media subtly raise the sense of social cohesion among their users by building up interconnections among various audience members who share the same symbols and provide them with a sense of belonging. Therefore, the indie sector is more cohesive and competitive. This demonstrates the social value of the *zimeiti*.

The user-generating features of such media are important. Since *zimeiti* are mostly self-owned and simple-structured, the contents and the related values they deliver to the audience can sometimes be biased and subjective. Therefore, the participation of their audience is crucial because it helps such media retain their neutrality while reporting on the state of the industry. In other words, *zimeiti* and the audience coexist in terms of achieving diverse and organic musical environments.

With mature digital infrastructure, *zimeiti* are pervasive nowadays and are subtly redirecting how people acquire and share musical information and content, especially in the indie sectors. Such media are becoming more influential than ever before, because they accommodate all users who have an interest in music from regular fans to pop stars. As the development and online-offline integration of the music industry deeply rely on such digital intermediaries, these *zimeiti* are crucial stakeholders in Taiwanese indie music networks.

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