



Reimagining Music Education-Industry Pathways: Cultural Capital Conversion Through Merit-Based Systems

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Abstract

The global creative economy faces a persistent disconnect between educational credentials and professional opportunities, particularly acute in developing countries where formal qualifications often fail to translate into sustainable careers. This study empirically investigated how technology-mediated merit-based systems facilitate cultural capital conversion among professional musicians in Nairobi, Kenya. Through in-depth interviews with five professional musicians representing traditional, digital-first, and hybrid pathways, using interpretive phenomenological analysis, we examined lived experiences of navigating education-industry transitions. The study revealed four interconnected cultural capital conversion pathways: direct embodied capital demonstration through digital portfolios, accelerated social capital formation via WhatsApp networks, reputational capital accumulation through platform metrics, and algorithmic capital conversion requiring platform-specific literacy. Key findings demonstrated that successful musicians develop hybrid competency portfolios integrating traditional skills with digital platform knowledge rather than relying on single pathways. All participants maintained multiple income streams due to economic necessity, with digital platforms serving as discovery mechanisms that ultimately connected to offline professional relationships. The research validated theoretical frameworks while revealing important contextual nuances, including platform dependency vulnerabilities and infrastructure challenges. Implications include curriculum reform integrating business skills and platform literacy, policy investments in digital infrastructure, and recognition that merit-based systems complement rather than replace traditional educational pathways in developing-country contexts.

Introduction

The global creative economy grapples with a critical issue: while music education produces numerous graduates with formal credentials, these qualifications often fail to secure sustainable professional opportunities, particularly in developing countries like Kenya (Bennett, 2018). Recent data from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) reveals that while 75% of arts and design alumni in the workforce have arts- or design-related job duties, there remains a significant skills gap: 65% of working alumni reported business, financial, or entrepreneurial skills as 'important' or 'very important' in their employment, yet only 33% reported acquiring these competencies during their postsecondary education (Novak-Leonard, 2024). Furthermore, 77% of arts graduates have freelanced or been self-employed, yet SNAAP survey data consistently indicate that arts school graduates are dissatisfied with their preparation in entrepreneurship, business, and



finance while in school (Frenette & Dowd, 2020). This credential-employment gap highlights a failure in the conversion of cultural capital, whereby institutionalised capital (degrees) misaligns with industry preferences for demonstrated skills and portfolio-based evaluation.

In Nairobi, geographic and economic barriers exacerbate this disconnect, limiting access to traditional industry networks and excluding capable individuals without formal qualifications. This study investigates how technology-mediated merit-based systems transform the conversion of cultural capital by prioritising competency demonstration over credentials, potentially creating equitable pathways from education to professional practice. The shift towards skills-based hiring has accelerated globally, with 81% of employers now utilising skills-based hiring practices, up from 73% in 2023 and 56% in 2022 (TestGorilla, 2024). Marketing and creative industries demonstrate particularly high adoption rates at 95% (TestGorilla, 2024). While digital platforms offer opportunities to democratise access, empirical research on their impact in African contexts remains limited, with most studies focusing on Western settings with established infrastructures (De Beukelaer, 2015). By grounding the analysis in the lived experiences of Nairobi musicians, this research addresses gaps in understanding context-specific conversion mechanisms. It examines how digital platforms mitigate credential inflation, skills-credential mismatches, and systemic exclusion to foster inclusive professional opportunities in developing-country creative industries.

Therefore, this study aimed to empirically test how musicians in Nairobi convert cultural capital through merit-based systems, examining the lived experiences of navigating multiple pathways to professional recognition. The research objectives included:

1. Empirical Validation: Test theoretical frameworks of cultural capital conversion against musicians' actual experiences in navigating education-industry transitions
2. Pathway Analysis: Identify enabling and inhibiting factors across traditional, digital-first, and hybrid professional development approaches
3. Contextual Understanding: Examine how local infrastructure, cultural, and economic conditions shape cultural capital conversion processes
4. Educational Reform Implications: Suggest evidence-based reforms for music education curricula and career development support.

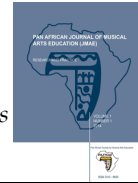
The study hypothesised that successful musicians developed hybrid competency portfolios combining traditional skills with digital platform literacy, that WhatsApp networks served as crucial professional infrastructure in Nairobi's context, and that platform-based recognition created new forms of dependency and vulnerability alongside expanded opportunities.

Literature Review

This literature review examines cultural capital conversion, merit-based recognition systems, and their implications for transforming creative industries, with particular attention to music education in African contexts. The review systematically identifies gaps in the integration of digital platforms and alternative credentialing in developing countries, thereby informing a novel theoretical framework.

Cultural Capital Theory Foundations

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital has reshaped our understanding of how educational systems perpetuate social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986). He identified three forms of capital—economic, cultural, and social—that interact within fields to shape individual opportunities. Cultural capital exists in embodied (skills and knowledge), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalised (credentials) forms. Central to this framework is field-specific capital conversion,



whereby institutionalised capital, such as degrees, is converted into economic capital through employers' recognition of credentials as legitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This process relies on a shared "collective belief" in institutional legitimacy. The concept of habitus explains how individuals internalise field-specific dispositions, guiding their navigation of professional spaces. In music education, this includes technical skills, industry knowledge, and networks, which traditional systems transmit alongside implicit cultural codes that favour those with privileged backgrounds while marginalising others (Bourdieu, 1986).

Contemporary Extensions and Digital Contexts

Recent scholarship extends Bourdieu's framework to digital environments, highlighting how technology reshapes dynamics of cultural capital. Robinson (2009) introduces "digital capital" as a distinct form, encompassing technical skills, digital literacy, and platform-specific knowledge critical for professional success. Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) argue that digital capital converts into educational and professional advantages, with empirical studies showing strong correlations between digital competencies and career outcomes. Digital platforms create parallel pathways for capital accumulation, potentially democratising access but also introducing exclusions based on digital access and literacy (Gandini, 2016). Online platforms, such as social media and portfolio sites, enable the direct demonstration of embodied cultural capital, bypassing traditional credentials, though challenges such as algorithmic bias and platform dependence persist (Duffy & Pooley, 2017).

Merit-Based Systems and Alternative Credentialing

The shift from credential-based to skills-based hiring transforms talent evaluation. Rivera (2015) notes that traditional hiring prioritises educational pedigree, favouring graduates of elite institutions and perpetuating inequality by conflating prestige with capability. Cappelli (2015) identifies a "skills gap" paradox, in which employers report talent shortages yet maintain inflated credential requirements that exclude capable candidates. Recent industry data indicate that skills-based hiring has been adopted by 81% of companies globally, up from 73% in 2023 and 56% in 2022, with the marketing and creative industries demonstrating particularly high adoption rates at 95% (TestGorilla, 2024). Alternative credentialing systems, such as digital badges and micro-credentials, address these limitations by recognising specific skills, enabling continuous learning aligned with industry needs (Caswell & Caswell, 2019). Hickey et al. (2014) highlight design principles such as transparent criteria and stackable credentials, noting improved employment outcomes for badge earners in creative fields.

Creative Industries Context

Music industry research reveals a persistent disconnect between traditional education and professional realities across diverse geographical contexts. In Western contexts, Bennett (2018) reports that only 30% of music graduates in Australia work primarily in music five years post-graduation, suggesting that this pattern reflects industry shifts rather than educational failure. Similarly, the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) found that while 75% of arts and design alumni in the United States workforce have arts- or design-related job duties, significant skills gaps persist: 65% reported business and entrepreneurial skills as crucial for their employment, yet only 33% acquired these competencies during their postsecondary education (Novak-Leonard, 2024). Modern music careers increasingly require "portfolio careers" that combine diverse skills such as digital marketing, data analytics, and entrepreneurship, which conservatory curricula rarely address (Coulson, 2012).

In African contexts, the education-industry disconnect manifests differently yet presents comparable challenges. Research on the Kenyan music industry reveals that digital literacy has become essential



for navigating streaming services and platform-based distribution. Yet, formal music education programmes inadequately prepare musicians for these realities (Eisenberg, 2018). In Nigeria, despite the film and music industries collectively representing the country's second-largest employer after agriculture (creating over 4.2 million jobs), musicians face persistent challenges with copyright infrastructure, royalty collection, and professionalisation of career pathways (De Beukelaer & Eisenberg, 2018). A survey by Highvibes Distribution found that 95% of music creators in Africa have been unpublished since 2018, highlighting significant gaps in intellectual property management and industry formalisation (Songtrust, 2020). The rapid adoption of digital platforms – with African digital music streaming revenues projected to reach US\$500 million by 2025, up from US\$100 million in 2017 (World Bank, 2021) – creates both opportunities and challenges, as musicians must develop platform-specific knowledge that formal education rarely provides.

African Creative Economy Development

Africa's creative economy demonstrates significant growth potential while facing distinct developmental challenges. Currently valued at approximately US\$58.4 billion, the African creative economy represents 2.9% of the global creative industries, which exceed US\$2 trillion (CrossBoundary, 2024). According to UNCTAD (2022), Africa's share of global creative goods exports increased by 4% between 2010 and 2020, while the sector generates approximately 2 million jobs, representing 5% of global employment in the cultural and creative industries. Nigeria's creative industries – mainly driven by music and film – are now the country's second-largest employer after agriculture, responsible for 4.2 million jobs, while Kenya passed a Creative Industries Bill in 2023 to stimulate growth through infrastructure, marketing, and financing (Music In Africa, 2025).

However, traditional educational systems lag behind industry demands, with outdated curricula and weak industry linkages. De Beukelaer (2015), in his comprehensive study of cultural industries in Burkina Faso and Ghana, argues that African creative sectors cannot simply adopt Western models of cultural industry development. Instead, he contends that “far greater empirical attention is needed to the practices in the cultural sector across the continent, because 'Africa' cannot simply pick and adopt a model, it needs to conceptualise and theorise its own models and approaches to the cultural industries for this discourse to become a useful tool” (De Beukelaer, 2015, p. 21). This perspective challenges the assumption that digital technologies alone can resolve structural inequalities in the development of the creative industry.

Policy initiatives increasingly recognise the importance of supporting creative industries through targeted investment. The African Development Bank's Investment in Digital and Creative Enterprises (iDICE) programme, launched in Nigeria in 2023 with US\$618 million in funding, aims to attract direct investment in more than 200 technology and creative start-ups and to create 6 million jobs for young Nigerians (African Development Bank, 2023). Kenya's Creative Economy Masterplan 2022–2027 similarly prioritises the development of digital skills and alternative credentialing pathways. These initiatives signal growing recognition that merit-based systems and investments in digital infrastructure are essential to the sustainable development of the creative economy.

Synthesis and Theoretical Gaps

This systematic review of the literature on cultural capital theory, merit-based recognition systems, and the transformation of creative industries reveals several critical gaps that the present study addresses.

First, while scholars have extended Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to digital environments (Robinson, 2009; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2020; Gandini, 2016), there remains limited empirical research



on how digital platform affordances specifically facilitate the conversion of cultural capital in developing-country contexts. Existing studies predominantly draw on Western contexts with established digital infrastructures, leaving unclear how musicians in contexts characterised by infrastructure constraints, distinct platform ecosystems (such as WhatsApp-dominated professional networking), and distinct cultural practices navigate capital conversion processes.

Second, research on skills based hiring and alternative credentialing (Rivera, 2015; Cappelli, 2015; TestGorilla, 2024) has focused primarily on corporate and technology-sector employment, with insufficient analysis of how merit-based recognition systems operate within informal and semi-formal creative economy structures that characterise much of Africa's music industry. The extent to which platform-based recognition creates new opportunities versus new forms of dependency and vulnerability remains underexplored.

Third, while African creative economy scholarship has grown substantially (De Beukelaer, 2015; De Beukelaer & Eisenberg, 2018; UNCTAD, 2022), empirical studies examining musicians' lived experiences of navigating education-industry transitions through digital platforms remain scarce. Existing research tends toward macro-level policy analysis or industry-wide surveys, leaving gaps in understanding the micro-level processes through which individual musicians convert cultural capital in technology-mediated environments.

Fourth, the literature reveals a significant gap in models for integrating alternative recognition systems into African educational structures. While policy frameworks such as Kenya's Creative Economy Masterplan acknowledge the importance of digital skills, there is limited research on how formal music education institutions can incorporate platform literacy, business competencies, and portfolio-based assessment alongside traditional musical training.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing an integrated framework combining cultural capital theory with merit-based system design, grounded in an empirical examination of Nairobi musicians' lived experiences across traditional, digital-first, and hybrid professional pathways.

Method

This section outlines the methodological procedure employed in carrying out this study.

Research Design

Purposive sampling recruited five professional musicians in Nairobi with varied educational and career trajectories. Inclusion criteria required at least three years of professional music experience, generating income, and a willingness to discuss educational background and career development. The sample represented three pathway types: traditional (formal university training, n=2), digital-first (self-taught, platform-based careers, n=2), and hybrid (combining formal education with digital strategies, n=1). This sample size aligns with IPA's idiographic commitment, which prioritises depth of analysis over breadth. Smith et al. (2009, p. 51) note that there is "no right answer" to sample size but emphasise that data quality and depth of analysis are paramount considerations.

Participants

Purposive sampling recruited five professional musicians in Nairobi with varied educational and career trajectories. Inclusion criteria required at least three years of professional music experience, generating income, and a willingness to discuss educational background and career development. The sample represented three pathway types: traditional (formal university training, n=2), digital-first (self-taught, platform-based careers, n=2), and hybrid (combining formal education with digital strategies, n=1). This sample size aligns with IPA's idiographic commitment, which prioritises depth



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Table 1. Participant Profiles

ID	Instrument	Experience	Pathway Type	Educational Background
P1	Guitar	6 years	Traditional	University music degree
P2	Keyboards/Production	4 years	Digital-First	Self-taught
P3	Drums	5 years	Hybrid	Partial university education
P4	Saxophone	8 years	Traditional	University undergraduate
P5	Guitar/Content-Creation	3 years	Digital-First	Currently studying non-music field

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2025 and lasted 65–85 minutes each. Interviews explored participants' educational experiences, career progression, use of digital platforms, professional networking, and the process of translating skills into professional opportunities. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed IPA's iterative process as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Each transcript was read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial exploratory comments were made, noting descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations. Emergent themes were then developed from these annotations, with connections among themes sought. This process was repeated for each case individually before examining patterns across participants. Themes were organised to represent shared experiences while preserving individual variation. NVivo 12 software supported data organisation throughout the analytic process.

Ethical Considerations

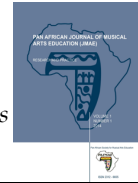
Participants provided informed written consent covering the study's objectives, procedures, audio recording, and use of anonymised quotations. Pseudonyms protected participant identity. Participants could withdraw without penalty at any time. Data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers.

Methodological Limitations

The small sample, while appropriate for IPA's idiographic focus, limits transferability to broader populations. The study's focus on Nairobi may not reflect other Kenyan or African contexts. The cross-sectional design captures experiences at one point in time rather than tracking career development longitudinally. Self-selection may have excluded musicians with predominantly negative experiences.

Results

The analysis of musicians' experiences revealed four interconnected pathways through which cultural capital conversion occurs in Nairobi's creative economy. Rather than operating as discrete channels, these pathways—direct embodied capital demonstration, social capital formation, reputational capital accumulation, and algorithmic capital conversion—function simultaneously and interdependently. Participants' narratives illuminated how local contextual factors, particularly infrastructure constraints and cultural expectations, shape these conversion processes in ways that both align with and diverge from existing theoretical frameworks.



Navigating Skill-Demonstration in a Hybrid Landscape

A central tension emerged across all participants' experiences: the coexistence of traditional and digital modes of demonstrating musical competence. This duality reflects broader transformations in how professional credibility is established and verified within Nairobi's music industry.

Digital-first musicians described social media platforms as their primary means of showcasing skills to potential clients and collaborators. P2, a self-taught keyboardist and producer, explained how Instagram effectively replaced conventional audition processes: "My Instagram was basically my audition. He could hear exactly what I sounded like, see my setup, and watch me play different styles." Similarly, P5 articulated a multi-platform approach: "Social media is everything for me. TikTok for discovery... Instagram for showcasing my work more professionally." These accounts suggest that digital platforms enable musicians to demonstrate embodied cultural capital directly, bypassing institutional credentials that traditionally served as proxies for competence.

However, traditional pathway musicians reported that live demonstrations remain essential, particularly for formal and corporate engagements. P1 recounted: "They still wanted to meet me and hear me play. I remember going to their office... with my guitar and a small amp, played a few pieces." P4 echoed this experience: "For performance work, especially corporate and formal events, clients want to know... they want to hear me play, obviously." These contrasting accounts reveal a generational and contextual divide—older clients and formal institutions continue to privilege in-person verification. In comparison, younger clients and informal markets increasingly accept digital portfolios as sufficient evidence of competence.

The hybrid pathway, exemplified by P3, demonstrated how musicians strategically integrate both approaches. As P3 observed: "The platform work usually connects to offline relationships. Someone sees me online, we meet in person, then the real business happens face-to-face." This finding suggests that digital platforms function primarily as discovery mechanisms that initiate professional relationships, rather than as standalone foundations for sustained careers. The implication is significant: successful capital conversion in Nairobi's context appears to require competence in navigating both digital and traditional modes of demonstration.

WhatsApp as Professional Infrastructure

Perhaps the most striking finding—one not anticipated in the original theoretical framework—was the universal reliance on WhatsApp groups as a crucial professional networking infrastructure. All five participants, regardless of their pathway type, identified WhatsApp as central to accessing opportunities and maintaining professional connections.

P1, despite following a traditional educational pathway, described extensive engagement with digital networking: "I'm in several WhatsApp groups for musicians where people share opportunities." P2 elaborated on how these networks function practically: "WhatsApp groups are huge too—there are groups for session musicians where people post 'looking for a keyboardist for this weekend.' This platform-agnostic networking represents a distinctly local adaptation, reflecting WhatsApp's widespread adoption in Kenya and its affordances for group-based, real-time communication.

The nature of network formation, however, differed meaningfully between pathway types. Traditional musicians emphasised institutional foundations—P1 noted: "University connections were the foundation. My classmates, lecturers... we all support each other." Digital-first musicians, conversely, described building competency-based connections through online communities: "There are producer communities on Facebook and Discord where people share knowledge freely" (P2).



This distinction highlights how educational background shapes not only the content of professional networks but also the logic through which connections are formed and maintained.

Maintaining these networks, participants revealed, demands considerable ongoing effort. P3 articulated this challenge: “You have to be constantly creating content, staying visible, and engaging with people. It's like being a musician and a marketer at the same time.” This observation points to a significant tension: digital networking expands access to opportunities. Still, it simultaneously creates new labour demands that may disadvantage musicians who lack the time, resources, or inclination for continuous online engagement.

Dual Currency of Reputation

Participants' accounts revealed that professional reputation in Nairobi's music industry operates through two parallel systems: digital metrics and formal credentials. Crucially, these systems retain value in different contexts, requiring musicians to accumulate and strategically deploy both forms of reputational capital.

Digital musicians demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of platform metrics as a form of professional currency. P5 explained: “When someone sees I have 50K followers on TikTok and thousands of views on my videos, they perceive me as more professional and in-demand.” Here, quantified engagement serves as a legible signal of market validation, functioning analogously to institutional credentials in traditional contexts. Yet formal credentials retained significant value in specific market segments. P4 was unequivocal about educational roles: “For educational positions, my degree is essential—schools require qualified music teachers with proper certification.” P3 offered a more nuanced perspective: “When I mention I studied at [university], some clients seem reassured, but it's not like they ask for transcripts.” These accounts suggest that credentials function as trust signals whose relevance varies by context—essential for educational employment, reassuring but not determinative for performance work, and largely irrelevant in digitally-mediated markets.

This context-dependent valuation creates strategic complexity for musicians building careers across multiple market segments. The implication is that effective cultural capital conversion requires not merely accumulating credentials or metrics but developing competence in assessing which form of reputational capital carries weight in specific professional contexts.

A further complication emerged in participants' reflections on the relationship between quality and visibility. P2 observed: “You can post something you think is amazing and it gets 50 views, then post something random and it blows up.” This unpredictability highlights a significant limitation of algorithmic mediation: platform visibility does not reliably correspond to musical quality, potentially advantaging musicians skilled in content optimisation over those focused primarily on craft development.

Platform Literacy and Its Discontents

The emergence of what might be termed “algorithmic capital”—platform-specific knowledge enabling effective navigation of digital ecosystems—represented a significant finding with implications for understanding contemporary cultural capital conversion. Digital-first musicians demonstrated sophisticated platform literacy, strategically differentiating their approach across services. P5 articulated this clearly: “TikTok is for viral content—short, catchy videos... Instagram is more professional... YouTube is for longer content... Facebook, I use mainly for networking.” This differentiated understanding enables targeted content strategies that maximise visibility within each platform's distinct algorithmic logic.



Traditional musicians, conversely, reported difficulty developing this literacy. P4 acknowledged: “I recently started Instagram, though I'm still learning how to use it effectively... My generation of classically-trained musicians tends to rely more on traditional networking.” This admission suggests that formal music education, while conferring valuable technical skills and credentials, may inadequately prepare musicians for the platform-mediated dimensions of contemporary careers.

However, platform dependency introduced new vulnerabilities that complicated any straightforward narrative of digital democratisation. P5 described the exhausting demands of algorithmic visibility: “The algorithms are unpredictable... Creating content consistently is exhausting... if you disappear for a week, the algorithm punishes you.” This account reveals how platforms, while enabling new pathways to professional recognition, simultaneously impose disciplinary pressures that may prove unsustainable, particularly for musicians who lack the resources to maintain constant content production.

The findings thus suggest that digital platforms function as new gatekeepers rather than simply eliminating traditional barriers. P2 captured this transformation succinctly: “Nobody asks to see your degree when you're playing at a wedding... But if you're not visible online, you don't exist.” Formal credentials may have diminished in importance for specific market segments, but algorithmic visibility has emerged as an alternative threshold that shapes access to opportunities in its own distinct ways.

Economic Realities and Structural Constraints

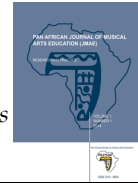
A consistent pattern across all participants, regardless of pathway type, was the need to maintain multiple income streams. Table 2 summarises this diversification:

Table 2: Participant Income Streams

Participant	Primary Income	Secondary Income	Tertiary Income
P1	Live gigs (hotels, corporate)	Teaching	Studio sessions
P2	Live performances	Music production	Platform content
P3	Live gigs	Teaching	Session work
P4	Teaching (schools)	Performance	Orchestral work
P5	Live gigs	Online teaching	Content monetisation

This universal pattern indicates that no single income stream—whether derived from traditional or digital pathways—provides sufficient sustainable career support in Nairobi's music industry. The finding challenges the notion that digital platforms provide straightforward economic alternatives to conventional career structures; rather, they appear to constitute additional income sources that musicians layer on top of established revenue channels.

Infrastructure constraints emerged as significant barriers affecting both traditional and digital musicians. Equipment costs represented a substantial challenge—P3 noted: “Very few musicians here can survive on just performance income... Equipment costs are huge—good drums, cymbals, and hardware are expensive.” Digital content-creation introduced parallel equipment demands: “Equipment is another thing—you need good video quality, audio quality, proper lighting. People judge your skills based on how professional your content looks” (P2). The high cost of internet data further constrained digital engagement: “Data is expensive, and I need to post high-quality videos



regularly” (P2). Transportation posed particular challenges for musicians with bulky instruments: “Moving a drum kit around the city for gigs without your own vehicle is challenging” (P3).

These material constraints intersected with socio-cultural tensions surrounding music as a legitimate profession. P5 described familial pressure: “My parents wanted me to study something 'practical,' so IT was the compromise.” Yet some musicians reframed their unconventional pathways positively – P2 reflected: “Sometimes I even think being self-taught helps – it shows I'm dedicated and creative enough to learn on my own.” These accounts illuminate how musicians negotiate not only economic challenges but also cultural expectations that may delegitimise their professional choices.

Finally, participants identified significant gaps between formal music education and industry requirements. P1 was particularly critical: “They don't teach you how to run a music business... They also focus a lot on Western classical music and jazz, which isn't what most audiences want to hear.” This curriculum misalignment – emphasising genres with limited local commercial viability while neglecting business competencies essential for sustainable careers – represents a structural barrier that formal education currently fails to address.

Pathway Effectiveness Across Contexts

The analysis revealed that pathway effectiveness varied considerably across professional contexts. Table 3 summarises these patterns:

Table 3: Pathway Effectiveness by Context

Context	Traditional Pathway	Digital Pathway	Hybrid Approach
Formal Education Roles	High effectiveness	Low effectiveness	Moderate effectiveness
Performance Gigs	Moderate effectiveness	High effectiveness	High effectiveness
Client Acquisition	Relationship-dependent	Platform-dependent	Balanced approach
Income Stability	Moderate stability	Variable stability	Higher stability

These patterns suggest that hybrid approaches – combining formal credentials with digital platform competencies – may confer advantages in market access and income stability. However, this interpretation requires qualification: hybrid approaches also require substantial investment in diverse skill development and may not be equally accessible to all musicians, given the resource constraints identified above.

Notably, contradictions to the theoretical framework emerged alongside validating evidence. Digital success created new vulnerabilities alongside expanded opportunities. Even digital-first musicians encountered contexts where formal credentials remained decisive – P2 recounted: “I lost a potential teaching gig at a music school once because they wanted a degree.” Such experiences suggest that merit-based digital recognition has not displaced credential requirements but rather coexists with them, creating a more complex landscape that musicians must navigate strategically.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to cultural capital theory by revealing how technology-mediated systems reshape capital conversion processes in developing-country contexts. While Bourdieu's (1986) original framework conceptualised cultural capital conversion as occurring through institutionally-mediated channels – where credentials translate into economic opportunities via employer recognition – the present findings reveal a more complex, multi-directional process in Nairobi's music industry. The four pathways identified – direct embodied capital demonstration, social capital formation, reputational capital accumulation, and algorithmic capital conversion –



operate simultaneously rather than sequentially, suggesting that contemporary musicians must develop competencies across multiple conversion mechanisms to sustain viable careers.

This simultaneity extends recent theoretical work on digital capital (Robinson, 2009; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2020) by demonstrating that digital competencies do not simply add to existing capital forms but fundamentally alter how all forms of capital are accumulated and converted. The finding that digital-first musicians could bypass traditional credentialing processes for performance work—using Instagram portfolios as de facto auditions—while still requiring formal credentials for educational positions, illustrates what might be termed "field segmentation" in capital valuation. Different professional contexts within the same industry operate according to distinct logics of legitimation, requiring musicians to strategically deploy distinct forms of capital depending on the specific opportunity at hand.

The concept of "algorithmic capital" that emerged from this analysis warrants particular attention. Unlike traditional institutional capital, which typically depreciates gradually and predictably, algorithmic capital proved highly volatile—subject to sudden elimination through platform policy changes or algorithmic shifts beyond musicians' control. P5's observation that "if you disappear for a week, the algorithm punishes you" captures this volatility, highlighting how platform-mediated recognition requires continuous labour to maintain. This finding resonates with Duffy and Pooley's (2017) analysis of platform dependency, whilst extending it to non-Western creative economy contexts, where infrastructure constraints compound these vulnerabilities.

Contextualising Digital Platforms in African Creative Economies

A central contribution of this study is to demonstrate how global digital platforms undergo significant local appropriation within specific cultural and infrastructural contexts. The finding that WhatsApp serves as a crucial professional networking infrastructure—a pattern consistent across all participants regardless of pathway type—exemplifies this appropriation. This finding aligns with De Beukelaer and Eisenberg's (2018) observation that mobile telecommunications firms play distinctive roles in African music sectors, often substantially different from those in Western platform ecosystems.

The centrality of WhatsApp reflects both Kenya's telecommunications landscape—where the platform enjoys near-universal adoption—and its specific affordances for group-based, real-time communication that align with collective professional practices. Importantly, this platform served networking functions across all pathway types, suggesting that the traditional/digital distinction may be less meaningful for specific capital conversion mechanisms than for others. Even musicians following traditional educational pathways relied on WhatsApp for opportunity discovery, indicating that digital mediation of professional networking has effectively become universal regardless of other career orientation choices.

This finding contributes to ongoing debates about whether digital platforms democratise access to creative industries or reproduce existing inequalities in new forms. The present evidence suggests that neither position fully captures the observed complexity. Digital platforms expanded access to skill-demonstration opportunities for musicians lacking formal credentials or institutional connections—P2's observation that "nobody asks to see your degree when you're playing at a wedding" illustrates this. Yet simultaneously, platform success often depended on resources—equipment for quality content production, data costs for consistent posting, time for continuous engagement—that remained unequally distributed.



The finding that digital success is typically linked to offline relationships further complicates democratisation narratives; platforms functioned primarily as discovery mechanisms that initiated relationships, which were subsequently developed through in-person interaction, suggesting that they amplify rather than replace existing social capital.

These findings resonate with emerging research on African music industries. Eisenberg's (2018) analysis of platformisation in Kenya's recording industry similarly identified the persistence of offline relationship networks alongside digital distribution channels. The present study extends this work by examining how individual musicians navigate these hybrid professional landscapes, revealing the strategic competencies required for effective navigation.

Addressing the Education-Industry Disconnect

Participants' accounts consistently identified misalignment between formal music education and industry requirements, corroborating concerns raised in international scholarship (Bennett, 2018; Coulson, 2012) while revealing context-specific dimensions. P1's criticism that curricula "focus a lot on Western classical music and jazz, which isn't what most audiences want to hear" highlights how genre emphasis in formal training may poorly match local market demands—a concern particularly salient in African contexts where educational institutions often retain curricula inherited from colonial-era models (De Beukelaer, 2015).

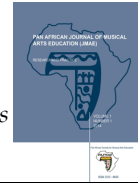
The skills gap participants identified extended beyond genre repertoire to encompass business competencies and digital platform literacy. This finding aligns with SNAAP data, indicating that 65% of working arts alumni consider business and entrepreneurial skills necessary for their employment, while only 33% report acquiring these competencies during their education (Novak-Leonard, 2024). The present findings suggest that this gap may be particularly acute in contexts such as Kenya, where the prevalence of informal-sector employment and the necessity of income diversification make business skills essential for career sustainability.

However, interpreting this disconnect between education and industry requires nuance. Participants following traditional pathways retained advantages in specific market segments—P4's observation that formal credentials remained "essential" for educational positions illustrates continuing returns to institutional capital in particular contexts. The implication is not that formal music education has become irrelevant, but instead that it provides necessary but insufficient preparation for contemporary careers. Hybrid competency portfolios—combining traditional musical training with business skills and platform literacy—appeared to offer the most robust foundation for navigating Nairobi's segmented professional landscape.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions

Several limitations qualify the present findings and suggest boundary conditions for their application. The sample of five musicians, while appropriate for IPA's idiographic focus on depth of analysis, limits transferability to broader populations. Participants were recruited from Nairobi, Kenya's capital and primary music industry hub; musicians in smaller cities or rural areas may face different opportunities and constraints. The cross-sectional design captured experiences at a single point in time, potentially missing how career trajectories and capital conversion processes evolve over more extended periods.

Self-selection into the study may have favoured musicians with relatively successful experiences; those who abandoned music careers due to insurmountable barriers would not appear in a sample of active professional musicians. This limitation is particularly relevant to interpreting findings on opportunities on digital platforms—the musicians interviewed had successfully navigated platform-



mediated career-building. Still, an unknown population may have attempted and failed to achieve comparable success.

The rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms presents an additional limitation. Specific findings about platform affordances and strategies may become outdated as platforms modify their algorithms, policies, and features. The broader theoretical insights about algorithmic capital volatility and the persistence of offline relationships may prove more durable than specific observations about particular platforms.

Implications

For Music Education Institutions

The findings suggest that music education institutions in Kenya and similar contexts should consider curriculum reforms that address identified gaps without abandoning traditional strengths. Specifically, integrating business and entrepreneurial competencies—financial management, marketing, and intellectual property—could better prepare graduates for the income diversification that characterises contemporary music careers. Incorporating digital platform literacy as a core competency rather than an optional supplement would acknowledge the increasingly essential role of online presence in career development across all pathway types.

Genre diversification within curricula merits consideration, given participants' observations about the limited commercial viability of Western classical and jazz repertoire in local markets. This does not imply abandoning these genres entirely but rather ensuring students develop competencies in commercially relevant styles alongside traditional training. Practical mechanisms such as portfolio-based assessment and industry placements could help bridge academic and professional recognition systems.

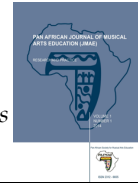
For Musicians

The findings suggest that aspiring musicians in contexts similar to Nairobi would benefit from developing hybrid competency portfolios rather than relying exclusively on either traditional or digital pathways. Early engagement with digital platforms—building online presence and developing platform-specific skills—appears advantageous even for musicians pursuing formal education. However, the finding that platform success typically correlates with offline relationships suggests that in-person networking and relationship development remain essential; digital presence alone may be insufficient.

Given the observed universal pattern of income diversification, musicians would benefit from planning for multiple revenue streams from the outset rather than relying on a single source of income for career sustainability. Investment in high-quality content-creation equipment, while representing a high upfront cost, may yield returns through enhanced professional presentation in platform-mediated markets.

For Policymakers

The persistence of infrastructure barriers across both traditional and digital pathways suggests that technology alone cannot address structural inequalities in access to the creative economy. Policy interventions addressing internet costs, equipment access, and digital literacy could reduce barriers to platform-mediated career pathways. Support for creative entrepreneurship—through mentorship programmes, access to capital, and business development services—could help musicians navigate the income diversification and business competencies required of their careers.



The finding that different professional contexts value other forms of capital suggests that credential recognition frameworks should accommodate this complexity. Rather than positioning digital credentials as replacements for formal qualifications, policies might support systems that recognise multiple forms of competency validation appropriate to different industry segments.

Future Research Directions

Several research directions emerge from the present findings. Longitudinal studies tracking musicians' career trajectories over extended periods would illuminate how capital conversion processes evolve and whether hybrid competency portfolios confer sustained advantages. Quantitative studies with larger samples could test the generalisability of patterns identified here and enable comparison across demographic groups, genres, and geographic contexts.

Comparative research across African countries could examine how different cultural, economic, and technological conditions shape capital conversion processes, potentially identifying common patterns and context-specific variations. Studies specifically examining musicians who have abandoned professional careers could illuminate the barriers that the present sample of active musicians has successfully navigated, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of factors related to career sustainability.

Research examining the differential impacts of platform algorithms across demographic groups could reveal whether platform-mediated recognition reproduces, challenges, or transforms existing inequalities in access to the music industry. Curriculum intervention studies testing integrated approaches to traditional and digital competency development could provide evidence for educational reform initiatives.

Conclusion

This study examined how professional musicians in Nairobi convert cultural capital through technology-mediated merit-based systems, revealing complex processes that both validate and extend existing theoretical frameworks. Four interconnected pathways—direct embodied capital demonstration, social capital formation, reputational capital accumulation, and algorithmic capital conversion—operate simultaneously, requiring musicians to develop hybrid competency portfolios that blend traditional skills with digital platform literacy.

The findings challenge simplistic narratives about digital democratisation of creative industries. While platforms expanded access to skill-demonstration opportunities and enabled musicians to bypass specific credential requirements, they simultaneously introduced new vulnerabilities through algorithmic volatility and platform dependence. Digital success is typically linked to offline relationships, suggesting that platforms function as amplifiers of existing capital rather than as independent sources of professional recognition. WhatsApp emerged as a crucial professional networking infrastructure across all pathway types, illustrating how global platforms undergo local appropriation within specific cultural and infrastructural contexts.

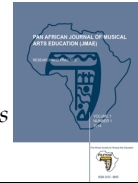
Income diversification has become universal under economic pressures, indicating that no single pathway—traditional or digital—provides sufficient, sustainable career support. Formal credentials retain value in specific contexts, particularly educational employment, while digital reputation dominates performance markets. Infrastructure barriers, including high internet costs and limited access to equipment, persisted across pathways, underscoring that technological solutions alone cannot address structural inequalities without supporting policy interventions.



The study contributes to cultural capital theory by identifying "algorithmic capital" as a novel, volatile form that requires ongoing, platform-specific skills, and by demonstrating field segmentation in capital valuation across professional contexts. More broadly, the findings emphasise the importance of examining global platforms within local contexts to understand the complex, multi-directional processes by which cultural capital is converted in contemporary creative economies.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Opening Questions

1. Can you tell me about your musical background and how you got started?
2. Describe your current professional activities in music.

Educational Pathway

3. What formal and informal musical education have you pursued?
4. How well did your educational experiences prepare you for professional practice?
5. What gaps did you identify between your education and industry requirements?

Professional Development

6. How did you transition from learning music to earning income from music?
7. What were the most significant challenges in establishing your professional career?
8. Describe your current income streams and how they developed over time.

Digital Platform Use

9. Which digital platforms do you use for professional purposes?
10. How do these platforms contribute to your professional recognition and opportunities?
11. What skills have you had to develop specifically for online professional presentation?

Networking and Relationships

12. How do you build and maintain professional relationships in the music industry?
13. What role do online versus offline networks play in your career?
14. Can you describe how you typically find new professional opportunities?

Cultural Capital Conversion

15. How do you demonstrate your musical competency to potential clients or collaborators?
16. What factors influence how others perceive your professional credibility?
17. How do you balance traditional qualifications with alternative forms of recognition?

Contextual Factors

18. What unique challenges or opportunities exist for musicians in Nairobi?
19. How do local cultural and economic conditions shape your professional strategies?
20. What advice would you give to aspiring musicians navigating similar pathways?



Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Research Study: Cultural Capital Conversion in Music Careers

You are invited to participate in a research study examining how musicians in Nairobi develop their careers through different educational and professional pathways. Brian Bichanga is conducting this study as part of academic research at Kabarak University.

What the study involves:

- One interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes
- Questions about your musical education, career development, and use of digital platforms
- Audio recording of the interview for analysis purposes

Your rights as a participant:

- Participation is entirely voluntary
- You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty
- Your identity will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms
- You may request that certain information not be included in the research
- Audio recordings will be stored securely and destroyed after transcription

Benefits and risks:

- No direct benefits to participants
- Minimal risk of discomfort from discussing career experiences
- Opportunity to contribute to research that may benefit future musicians

Contact information: If you have questions about this study, please contact [contact details]

Consent: I have read and understood the information about this study I consent to participate in an audio-recorded interview I consent to the use of anonymised quotes in research publications I understand I may withdraw from the study at any time

Participant signature: _____ Date: _____ Researcher signature: _____

Date: _____



Appendix C: Coding Framework

Primary Codes:

1. Embodied Capital Demonstration

- Digital portfolios
- Live auditions
- Skill verification methods
- Quality vs. accessibility trade-offs

2. Social Capital Formation

- WhatsApp networking
- University connections
- Online communities
- Professional mentorship

3. Reputational Capital

- Digital metrics
- Credential signaling
- Professional testimonials
- Brand development

4. Algorithmic Capital

- Platform-specific knowledge
- Content optimization
- Algorithm adaptation
- Dependency vulnerabilities

5. Income Diversification

- Multiple revenue streams
- Financial stability strategies
- Market adaptation
- Economic constraints

6. Infrastructure Challenges

- Internet access/costs
- Equipment requirements
- Transportation barriers
- Technology literacy

7. Educational Gaps

- Curriculum misalignment
- Business skills deficits
- Genre limitations
- Industry disconnection



Reimagining Music Education-Industry Pathways: Cultural Capital Conversion Through Merit-Based Systems

Appendix D: Cross-Case Analysis Matrix

Theme	P1 (Traditional)	P2 (Digital-First)	P3 (Hybrid)	P4 (Traditional)	P5 (Digital-First)
Primary Skill Demo	Live auditions	Instagram/social	Both digital/live	Live performance	TikTok/Instagram
Networking Method	University alumni	Online communities	WhatsApp + live	Formal institutions	Social platforms
Income Strategy	Gigs + teaching	Performance + production	Diverse portfolio	Teaching-focused	Gigs + content
Platform Literacy	Learning Instagram	Advanced multi-platform	Moderate skills	Limited digital	Expert level
Credential Value	High for teaching	Low importance	Context-dependent	Essential for jobs	Irrelevant for gigs