

VALUE CO-CREATION ON SOUNDCLOUD: A NETNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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Resumo

Soundcloud is characterized as a platform for the dissemination of emerging music content aimed at early adopter users. Up to date, quantitative studies based on the content of each comment or discursive analysis indicate the existence of superficial and geographically concentrated connections in this platform. However, this approach may misrepresent the richness of meanings that the set of interactions signal to actors in terms of network engagement. From the perspective of micro-foundations of value co-creation and using a netnographic approach, this study aims to analyze actors' engagement in a small community on SoundCloud. Elements referring to the objectives and the integration of resources that the actors contribute to the platform and their meaning emerged from the results. This study contributes to the debate on value co-creation in digital platforms, suggesting that value generation occurs through the aggregate combination of resources, allowing the symbology of value co-creation to be interpreted by actors in the light of its social context.

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ABSTRACT

Soundcloud is characterized as a platform for the dissemination of emerging music content aimed at early adopter users. Up to date, quantitative studies based on the content of each comment or discursive analysis indicate the existence of superficial and geographically concentrated connections in this platform. However, this approach may misrepresent the richness of meanings that the set of interactions signal to actors in terms of network engagement. From the perspective of micro-foundations of value co-creation and using a netnographic approach, this study aims to analyze actors' engagement in a small community on SoundCloud. Elements referring to the objectives and the integration of resources that the actors contribute to the platform and their meaning emerged from the results. This study contributes to the debate on value co-creation in digital platforms, suggesting that value generation occurs through the aggregate combination of resources, allowing the symbology of value co-creation to be interpreted by actors in the light of its social context.

Keywords: Service-Dominant Logic. Digital Platforms. Value co-creation. SoundCloud. Creative Industry

1. INTRODUCTION

The Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) was originally proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004) as an alternative to the logic aimed at exchanging consumer goods for money. According to the SDL, value is based on the exchange of services for services and is created as social and economic actors integrate their resources, acting both as providers of resources and beneficiaries of the value created (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). This extends the perspective of dyadic exchange relationships to service systems, in which value is co-created through the combined efforts of companies, employees, customers, shareholders, government agencies, and other entities, always being determined by the beneficiary (Vargo et al., 2008).

In creative industries, consumers actively participate in the production of content, and the perspective of value co-creation, combined with increasingly broader access to the means of production through information and communication technologies, can contribute to economic and cultural development (Potts et al., 2008). The design of new interactive digital channels facilitates the use of resources provided by consumers, configuring new relational bases and value meanings (Martínez-Cañas et al., 2016).

SDL originated in the field of marketing, but its study and applicability extended to other disciplines. In Information Systems (IS), for example, digital platforms are studied as means to co-create value (Ceccagnoli et al., 2012; Giesbrecht et al., 2017; Ordanini & Pasini, 2008; Yan et al., 2010). In the music industry, Gamble and Gilmore (2013) suggest that consumer control and engagement through value co-creation will take consumer marketing to a new dimension.

Music streaming platforms, such as Deezer, Spotify, Pandora, and SoundCloud, allow consumers to access sound content and share their experiences, enhancing interaction and the development of affective and social bonds (Recuero, 2012). These platforms imply changes in the way music is promoted, digitized, localized, performed, communicated, and integrated using technology (Saragih, 2019). This interactional

potential, however, is not always fully exploited (Hubbles et al., 2017), raising the need for additional studies for a more effective value co-creation.

According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, the use of streaming service platforms is booming globally, from 0.4% of music consumption in 2010 to 62.1% in 2020. In 2020 in Latin America, the market of streaming grew 30.2%, totaling 84.1% of total music revenue in the region. Brazil stands out on the continent, growing 37.1% in this market in 2020 (IFPI, 2021).

Launched in 2008, SoundCloud soon became popular as the circulation and dissemination medium used by independent musical artists. This popularization can be attributed to some characteristics, such as 1) a rigorous copyright analysis system that does not require intermediaries; 2) its usage logic aggregates practices from other social networks and easily integrates with them; 3) the inclusion of tags in the tracks, serving as curatorship by the users themselves; 4) musical tracks are represented by sound waves, in which the user can interact by writing comments along with them (Hubbles et al., 2017). Unlike other platforms' focus on record labels, music distributors, and event producers, on Soundcloud all users can publish content, acting both as independent artists that integrate value creation resources and as beneficiaries of the value created (Saragih, 2019). Soundcloud is, therefore, an interesting and underexplored virtual environment for the study of value co-creation in the music industry.

Previous studies on Soundcloud have revealed important features about the platform while opening interesting research gaps. Allington et al. (2015), for example, suggest that, despite the ubiquity provided by the Internet, the perception of value remains associated with the geographic location of artists, notably in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe in general. Jordanous et al. (2015), besides warning about this geographic concentration on SoundCloud, enhanced the need to look at the content of interactions and the construction of relationships as an indication of how people value the work of artists. Hubbles et al. (2017), suggest that the comments posted on SoundCloud distance themselves from a virtual social environment, as there is not much exchange between users. Comments are superficial, motivated more by self-expression than interaction, and directed primarily at the community in general, rather than at a specific person (artist or user). These studies adopted a quantitative approach and aimed at core cultural epicenters.

This study seeks a different perspective, by embracing a qualitative ethnographic approach to the comments posted on SoundCloud in a peripheral geographic and cultural context: Brazil. The objective is to analyze the value co-creation process based on user interactions in the SoundCloud digital music streaming platform. Based on the results, we seek to strengthen the debate on value co-creation on digital platforms in the music industry.

We used the netnographic method aimed at a small community within SoundCloud. Four categories of actors were studied: an artist (musicians and DJs), fans, producers, and partner artists. All subjects are from the southern region of Brazil. The temporal and relational characteristics of the actors were explored, as well as their engagement properties. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants and non-participant and undisguised direct observation in the selected profile.

The study was structured as follows: the following sections explore the theoretical foundations of Service-Dominant Logic, Service Interaction, Value Co-creation, Digital Platforms, and the Music Industry. Subsequently, the study method design is presented, followed by the analysis of results and conclusion.

2. VALUE CO-CREATION AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Observing the evolution of economics and marketing, Vargo and Lusch (2004) proposed that the most adequate perspective to understand marketing would no longer be the exchange of tangible, static, and discrete goods for money, but the exchange of services for services, involving application of specialized human skills, knowledge, and skills. What they called the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) has come to play a significant role in contemporary marketing thinking.

The debate about SDL developed around fundamental premises that evolved into five axioms (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p.47): 1) Service is the fundamental basis of exchange; 2) Value is co-created by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary; 3) All social and economic actors are resource integrators; 4) Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary; 5) Value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements. These axioms delineate the SDL, attributing a fundamental role to the joint creation of value.

Under this perspective, service systems are composed of entities that interact or engage to create value (Maglio et al., 2009), combining the efforts of companies, employees, customers, shareholders, government agencies, and other actors directly or indirectly involved in the co-creation process (Vargo et al., 2008). These actors are collections or arrangements of resources, including people, technology, information, and organizations. Thus, action, interaction, and engagement between actors are necessary for effective integration of resources and value creation (Storbacka et al., 2016).

Actors' roles evolve dynamically, from the beneficiary to the provider (Ekman et al., 2016). Therefore, it is essential to extend the co-creation perspective beyond a micro-level dyadic between a company and its customers, extending it to all actors in the service ecosystem. Belonging to an ecosystem allows actors to access critical resources, meet knowledge or skill needs, and establish important relationships (Vargo et al., 2008).

Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018, p.200) defined co-creation as “enactment of interactional creation across interactive system-environments (afforded by interactive platforms), entailing agencing engagements and structuring organizations.” The authors propose that the establishment of links between networks of actors and interactive platforms can reveal opportunities for new sources of value and related resources, through interactional creation (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018).

Storbacka et al. (2016) articulated the co-creation of value at the macro, meso, and micro levels, proposing a micro-foundations view. Actor engagement constitutes one of these micro-foundations, allowing the empirical investigation of value co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016). Storbacka (2019, p.6) defines actor engagement as

An actor's (humans or machines) or a group of actors' (collectives or organizations) exchange-based and non-exchange-based resource contributions, that are facilitated by dispositions, formed partly by actor specific characteristics and partly by the institutional and organizational arrangements prevalent in the context in which the resource contributions occur.

For the purposes of this article, considering the empirical environment of interaction on SoundCloud, we adapted his definition and propose it as “resource contributions based on actor exchanges, formed in part by specific characteristics of the actor and in part by the prevailing institutional arrangements in the context of the music streaming platform”.

Brodie et al. (2011) define engagement as a multidimensional concept that can be analyzed under three categories: (1) cognitive engagement, when the actor cognitively

recognizes and provides his resources to the main actor and/or his partner; (2) emotional engagement, when the actor is committed and willing to invest and spend discretionary efforts to engage with the lead actor and/or her offering; and (3) behavioral engagement, when, given a specific frame of reference, the actor changes its behavior, due to the main actor and/or its offer.

The ability of an actor to appropriate, reproduce or potentially innovate connections in the current time and place, in response to a specific past and/or towards a specific future is defined as the actor's willingness to engage (Storbacka et al., 2016). However, the discussion of engagement needs to encompass not only the provisions for doing so but also the properties of that engagement, defined as observable engagement activities (Storbacka, 2019).

It is also important to realize that the actor's engagement is governed by the institutional logic of a specific ecosystem of services. This means that actors don't get involved in a vacuum. Quite the opposite. The concept of shared institutional logic includes governance values, norms, and principles that guide interactions between system actors (Storbacka et al., 2016).

3. CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOR

To explore engagement behavior in the context of Soundcloud, broad categories are demanded to let the specificities of this environment emerge from a netnographic perspective. These perspectives were found in Van Doorn et al. (2010) and Jaakkola and Alexander (2014).

Van Doorn et al. (2010) argue that engagement is behavioral in nature and involves the various motivational factors that lead to behavioral manifestations concerning brands and companies, besides purchase transactions. They identify five dimensions of customer engagement behavior: 1) valence: engagement can be positive or negative, bringing both financial and non-financial consequences for the company; 2) form: refers to the different ways in which engagement can be expressed by customers; 3) scope: refers to the temporal dimension (momentary or continuous engagement) or geographic (local or global involvement); 4) nature of the impact: it can be understood in terms of its immediacy (time required to occur), intensity (level of change affected), amplitude (reach or the number of people affected) and longevity (time the impact remains active); 5) customer objective: the purpose of the interaction, to whom it is directed, to what extent it is planned and how it is aligned with the company's objectives.

Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) expand the behavioral view into multi-stakeholder service systems and identify four types of customer engagement behaviors based on informational properties. The authors identify the motivators and value created from the results of these behaviors. The final classification presented seems to prioritize, however, what Van Doorn et al. (2010) suggests the client's objective since the concept involves “contributions of resources from the client (...) to...” (our underline). Table 1 presents the concepts and examples of each type of engagement behavior identified by the authors. Aspects of engagement in value creation are also explained by Vargo et al. (2017), in which the exchange of resources between actors promotes the co-creation of value in the scope of service systems, with this value being determined concerning contexts and their relationships.

Table 1. Types of Engagement Behavior

Type of Engagement Behavior	Concept: Contributions of customer resources, such as knowledge, skills, work, and time, to...	Examples
Augmenting behavior	...directly augment and add to the focal firm's offering beyond that which is fundamental to the transaction	Customers posting content on social media, customers inventing alternate uses for a product.
Codeveloping behavior	... facilitate the focal firm's development of its offering	Customers giving ideas for new or improved products and services, customer participation in test use of a new product.
Influencing behavior	... affect other actors' perceptions, preferences, or knowledge regarding the focal firm	Customer provided word of mouth or blogging about their experiences with certain products or firms, customers recommending certain products or firms.
Mobilizing behavior	... mobilize other stakeholders' actions toward the focal firm	Private citizens recruit other citizens and businesses to plant flowers and donate money to the station scheme, customers convincing other customers to boycott a product.

Fonte: Jaakkola and Alexander (2014, p.255)

A considerable benefit from the network effects is related to engagement, in which other actors that join the platform strengthen it and in which membership generates benefits related to the number of other actors that joined the platform (Katz & Shapiro, 1994; Thomas et al., 2014). These benefits can take three forms: relational, informational, or motivational benefits. Relational benefits refer to the ability to engage with other actors using the same engagement platform. Informational benefits accrue from the data maintained by the platform and the ability to generate personalized information from that data. Motivational benefits stimulate the actors' engagement activity, for example, through gamification (Blaschke et al., 2019).

4. CO-CREATION ON MUSIC STREAMING PLATFORMS

In the music industry, fans (consumers) can use a virtual platform to promote music by their favorite artists and co-create value. The consumer, through active behavior, co-produces the service and gets closer to the artist, collaborating in the development of his career, while the artist benefits not only from reduced costs but also by improving his reputation by becoming more available and more connected to their audience (Chaney, 2012).

Co-creation, therefore, can be practiced at various stages of the value chain in the music industry, that is, development, promotion, production, or distribution. In the music business, consumers can also be a "creative partner" in the process of creating value across the entire chain. The music community initiates collective movements of music consumers to develop and establish a virtual platform as a means of interacting with artists (Saragih, 2019). Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018) explain the context of digital platforms as an operating environment in which value is created in the collaboration between actors, with an emphasis on the beneficiary.

Virtual platforms have been increasingly used to construct social networks and co-create value in the music industry, minimizing the role of traditional distribution channels. This use extends to both in live and recorded music channels. In this process, the focus of interactions has been mainly the musical experience, followed by the creation of monetary value and, finally, social interaction (Saragih, 2019). In the case of SoundCloud, interactions are mainly aimed at the musical experience and social interaction (Hubbles et al., 2017).

SoundCloud provides the feeling of shared mutual experiences, like listening to music at a concert or seeing a movie in a movie theater. Many users seem to use SoundCloud as background music, regardless of the comments. In addition to counting the number of plays and favorites, or comment boxes arranged in chronological order, comments alert listeners that other people are listening (Hubbles et al., 2017). In these virtual environments, what Edvardsson et al. (2011) classify as value co-creation in a social context, that is, the creation of a value co-creation community in a service system that is driven and moderated by the construction of values in the music scene.

In general, consumer interactions with small music producers on social networks are characterized by the creation of emotional bonding, and by the encouragement of content circulation (spreading). These practices aid in the development of synergistic relationships, in which the energy of consumers is harnessed by producers and record labels to encourage new ideological conceptions of music, particularly for fans to become active participants in making music and musicians meaningful in the marketplace (Choi & Burnes, 2017).

Active consumer participation can give companies access to a community in which diverse participants from different backgrounds share and negotiate various resources, histories, and meanings (Schau et al., 2009). Although a company can produce the initial content, community members can enrich the content and add value to attract other consumers (Choi & Burnes, 2017). SoundCloud facilitates interaction between listeners, for example, by allowing them to write public comments at specific points in the song (timestamps), displayed graphically during playback, also offering the possibility of publishing a response (Hubbles et al., 2017).

Despite the support for social interaction, it seems superficial. Ishizaki et al. (2015) took a linguistics approach to analyze speech acts from over 49,000 user comments on SoundCloud and Last.FM. The analysis indicated that most comments were basically short statements (claim) or reactions (react) to the songs, with relatively few personal interactions. Hubbles et al. (2017) also identified that SoundCloud comments rarely constitute responses to other listeners. As in the study by Rotman et al. (2009) about YouTube, there are practically no lengthy discussions and many comments are left unanswered. Possibly, the design for comments, generating its agglutination in certain tracks, is not appealing enough for a consistent interaction. In this sense, the users' motivation is related to the expression of their opinions to the public and to "leaving their mark to posterity" rather than oriented towards specific interactions with other listeners.

The next section presents the method used to analyze the forms of interaction that take place on digital platforms, specifically, on the SoundCloud music streaming service, to discuss their impacts on artists, fans, and the music industry.

5. METHOD

For the purposes of this article, a qualitative descriptive approach was adopted to provide an in-depth and holistic understanding of the phenomena under study, contextualizing them and recognizing their dynamic character (Fragoso et al., 2011). The

research strategy used was netnography, which adapts ethnographic techniques to study the cultures and communities that inhabit computer-mediated environments (Kozinets, 2002). Three data collection techniques were applied: interviews, observation, and field notes. The following subsections detail these techniques.

Interviews

The interview protocol included: date, place, name of the respondent, brief contextualization of the study to the respondent, and open-ended questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). Due to the inductive-exploratory nature of the study, the interview script inspired by generic categories of consumer engagement on digital platforms proposed by Van Doorn et al. (2010) and Jaakkola and Alexander (2014), shown in Table 2. An in-depth interview was chosen to enable the researcher to “probe” the responses, allowing for a deeper understanding of the actor's behavior and involvement properties and evaluating his/her engagement.

Table 2. Interview script

Categories		Open questions
Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Valence	How do you think your actions and interactions on SoundCloud can have positive - financial and non-financial consequences for artists? How do you usually recommend the artist or track to friends and family?
	Form	Tell us about your interaction history on SoundCloud. How long on average do you interact and since when? How do you contribute your music experience and knowledge? And with financial resources? After making some comments, how was the feedback of the artist?
	Scope	When you make a comment or other form of interaction, what is the focus? When do you get any response to your interaction how do you usually react? And when you don't get answers?
	Nature of impact	In your opinion, what is the impact generated by your interactions on the platform for the artist? What about you?
	Objectives	Explain your goals as you interact. For example, when you interact with other users you do it willingly, out of necessity, out of curiosity, professional interest, or relational interest? How do you plan your interactions? For example, when, where, why, and for whom are your interactions?
Jaakkola and Alexander (2014)	Augmented	Explain how your contributions to artists are: how you use resources such as knowledge, skills, work, and time to improve quality and add value directly to the artist's content and play on your tracks.
	Codeveloping	Explain how you use resources, such as knowledge, skills, and time, to facilitate the development of artists and their publications.
	Influencing	How do you use features such as knowledge, experience, and time to affect other users' perceptions, preferences, or knowledge of the artist?
	Mobilizing	How are your contributions of resources, such as relationships and time to mobilize actions of other stakeholders for the artist?

Source: based on the cited authors.

In addition to this script, complementary questions were asked to understand the engagement and its empirical context. For example, users were asked to report on their experience with other artists, how they felt, the situation in which they used the SoundCloud platform to interact, the results of that interaction, their experiences on other service platforms, their view on the role and characteristics of interactions on digital platforms in general.

The choice of respondents was made considering four aspects identified by Miles and Huberman (1994): 1) environment: the Soundcloud platform; 2) actors: the artist and

his followers; 3) events: platform interactions; and 4) process: a temporal perspective of interactions.

Artist E1 was selected for accessibility and his outstanding performance on Soundcloud. Until the conclusion of this survey, E1 completed twelve years as a user of the platform with the MB profile. His profile shows the verification seal awarded by Soundcloud in recognition of the most popular artists. His first track was published in 2008 and today he has more than 60 tracks published. E1 had more than 300,000 interactions between comments, likes, republications, and reproductions. The track with the highest number of interactions had more than 46,500 reproductions, 80 comments, 1,500 likes, and 200 republications. His profile is linked to nine other platforms, including social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), blog (Tumblr), streaming (Myspace, Lastfm, Youtube) and music marketing (Beatport, Bandcamp).

The “snowball” principle was used to access the other interviewees. For example, E1 indicated E8, which in turn indicated E3. The selection of other actors followed criteria that are justified by the intention of enriching and complementing data from the network of actors in the ecosystem of services on the platform, such as a) users who follow E1 on Soundcloud, b) who have had an experience of interaction on the platform on the last year; c) located in the southern region of Brazil; and, d) who work with a dual function (fan-artist; cultural producer-artist, etc.).

The interviews were recorded on video or audio, with handwritten notes during these interviews, and later transcribed.

Observation

Observational data were first collected on the public profile of E1 (MB project): name of the artistic project, username, profile picture, its location, links from other social networks, and the message the user wrote freely about himself sharing his interests, relevant information to the community, number of followers, and the number of profiles he is following. We chose to code the qualitative data manually (Kozinets et al., 2010), using annotations in Word documents and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

The collection of the archived data began with the comments made by E1 on his profile. A total of 132 comments were collected, starting with the most recent tracks to identify the most relevant key informants for the interview. From this, it was possible to start forwarding messages to these informants. Internal messages were forwarded directly to the SoundCloud inbox, and external messages were sent to the Facebook and Instagram profiles of the informants who linked these accounts to SoundCloud.

All comments made in the twelve years that E1 has been a Soundcloud user were collected. The comments made by the artist and all the comments made by other users in the 60 tracks published by the artist were analyzed, totaling 852 comments. In addition to the tracks, the albums published by the artist, the playlists created by him, and the republications made from other profiles were observed. Finally, the field notes registered in the Notes Journal that describe the researcher's personal experiences in the virtual community were examined, such as the first impressions of the community's interactional practices, followed by the cataloging of the information found.

An Excel spreadsheet was created to store and analyze the records of each observation day with all data collected in each range. In the end, the data were identified and separated into three categories: the first related to user behavior and observable involvement properties, the second related to the level of engagement, and the third on the dimensions of engagement, which were finally compared with the emerging categories in the process of collecting and analyzing data extracted from interviews.

To record the archived data, a standard observation file was created with the following information: observation date, track name, publication date, duration, link, number of comments, comment date, a full copy of the comment, time of banner in which the comment was made, name of the profile of the person who commented, transcript of the comment, date of the comment, if there was a reply to the comment, number of likes, republications, and reproductions.

From this process, categories related to the behavior and properties of engagement based on the comments emerged, as well as the level and the dimensions of engagement, which were compared with those of the data collection and analysis process from interviews.

Field Notes

A journal was created with notes about the researchers' perceptions of immersing themselves in the habits, impressions, and customs of users on the SoundCloud website. The results were analyzed for the actors involved in this process (Frow et al., 2015; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and classified into four categories: artists (musicians and DJs), fans, music producers, and partner artists. Likewise, the results of these interactions for the co-creation of value in the process of production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of music on the digital platform were analyzed.

Despite the division of data between interviews, observation, and field notes, in netnography, this division should be blurred, helping to obtain a more integrated view and a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon at hand. Thus, the study was developed with constant feedbacks between its qualitative research phases, namely data collection, writing of results, and data analysis (Kozinets et al., 2010). In this process, validity and reliability followed the principles of reflexivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2009), in which the researcher shares the community rules and uses this knowledge both to discern the data relevant to the research and to interpret them.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview invitations were sent directly on the SoundCloud platform and other social networks connected to the authors' profiles. Four people accepted the interview contact in this way. The other respondents were accessed through the snowball process. Table 3 presents the profile of the interviewees and the duration of the interviews. Eight interviews were conducted in November 2020 with a total duration of 3 hours and 57 minutes, transcribed into 56 pages of text. Except for the artist himself, the interviews were conducted via videoconference, due to the obligatory social distance resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. WhatsApp was used, with audio recording. The readings were carried out seeking 1) to identify the theoretical categories established ex-ante and 2) to identify ex-post emerging codes and standards.

Table 3. Profile of respondents

	Sex	Profession	Age	Started in SoundCloud	Interview time (mm:ss)
E1	Men	DJ and music producer	45	2008	31:34
E2	Men	Logistics and DJ	26	2013	22:34
E3	Woman	DJ and micro-businesswoman	32	2008	30:58
E4	Men	DJ and producer	33	2011	38:47
E5	Men	Autonomous Public Relations	33	2008	28:30

E6	Men	Lawyer	32	2010	19:40
E7	Men	Audio engineer and music producer	28	2012	45:15

Source: Research data.

On Soundcloud, tracks are presented in two ways: in chronological order, signaling the time they were published, or in order of popularity. Track popularity is measured by the sum of all interactions on each track divided by the time it is available. In each published track, users can view the engagement of others during its execution (number of likes, plays, and comments), post comments, and click on the icon with the heart figure to demonstrate that they liked the track. Thus, it was possible to identify interactions and analyze user engagement.

SoundCloud in the context of music

From the interviews, it was observed that the interactions between multiple actors can have an impact on the music industry. For example, E4 states that “if you get an artist who stands out a lot there in a certain genre, that genre may start to be adopted by the events”. These interactions can leverage those artists who have reached a significant audience to participate in events (Garay & Pérez, 2017) and sign contracts with major labels (Gateau, 2014). For E4, SoundCloud has the potential to direct which will be the best-selling hits: “it is a big factor that can have a determination there within the direction the scene is taking, be it electronic or any other”.

Users of different musical styles use different streaming platforms. In the case of SoundCloud, “mainly in Psytrance [because] in House and Techno, people already use Spotify and YouTube” (E7). Users consider SoundCloud a platform with more alternative content, more “underground” (E7) when compared to other platforms. This concentration in musical genres possibly results from the targeting of searches to the most popular artists, generating the geographic concentration already mentioned in previous studies (Allington et al., 2015; Jordanous et al., 2015).

Despite this apparent musical specialization, some comments suggest a diversity of content. In this sense, E3 says: “I really like this part of researching and there I find a lot of things like that I didn't even imagine” and provided as an example “Nigerian jazz, some artists playing things we don't see elsewhere (...), more contemporary sounds too and from [different] cultures”. This indicates that musical and geographic concentration finds its limit in the active and exploratory search that users make for the content of their interest, which can also represent a challenge for producers (Daugherty et al., 2008), as the music is placed therein by artists in their early careers and is at a more embryonic stage of development, requiring efforts to identify potential successful artists. For artists, this diversity can make it difficult to promote content, since the platform is not well known for listening to music. According to E1, “nowadays we have another tool which is Spotify, it is also a newer way that people are using which is (...) more popular”. Possibly, the platform's offer of different ways of sharing content, including links to other social networks, is aimed at minimizing the low popularity indicated by the artists.

Interaction objectives

The types of actors' goals have emerged as the main dimensions of engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010) in Soundcloud. The answers indicated the existence of several factors that influence engagement, such as exploring and strengthening relationships and boosting emergent content.

Explore new relationships

The platform's ease of connecting allows the exploratory use of the network, accessing actors from different networks through different platforms, expanding the audience reached. The exploration of Soundcloud's internal relations is exemplified by E3: "I go searching for one [artist] and when I see it I find another [artist]. Also, because there's this thing about you being able to share partnerships and artists within this same platform, so when I'm there looking for a sound by the guy and then there's 'linked' to another artist there and so I get to know other things". E6 complements indicating external relations: "we end up using SoundCloud as a network and you go to other networks if you want to expand contact". This connection between the platforms also occurs as a second way of contact: "there were cases like this, where I met the guy on SoundCloud, when he doesn't answer me then I go on Facebook and look for his page and he answers there" (E4).

Users also use the platform to search for new musical styles, as E3 says: "I try to see a little more the different styles (...) trying to find new styles by following people". Thus, the platform facilitates the creation of relationships on the network, as noted by E5: "I think this is one of the coolest things to connect with people from places we never imagined".

These intra- and cross-platform interactions enable new connections between different actors, such as artists, event producers, record labels, sponsors, partner artists, and other professionals interested in shared content (Hoksbergen & Insch, 2016). The breadth of the network brings benefits to actors, as E1 noted: "entrepreneurs and event producers who may want to contract [an artist] for a show can begin to benefit both financially and to create an ever-growing fan repertoire."

Related professional activities also seek to use the platform to meet new artists and content of interest. Photographer E8 mentioned that "there were all the DJs that played at the events I photographed".

Strengthen relationships

In addition to exploratory use, engagement in SoundCloud is aimed at strengthening relationships among users who follow an artist's profile. In this sense, E7 comments that "the sharing on profiles is more to support friends (...) to give relevance to the quality product, then I share it and to increase the number of plays when they launch there".

Interactions with users on the platforms are important for the continuity of the artist's work: "This is important because it's a way of instigating that person to continue doing a good job" (E1). "Sometimes there is someone who is from your production friendship circle to encourage or encourage the guy's work in the relationship part itself" (E4). Although short, these comments constitute praise for the artist, such as the expressions "Killer" and "Killer the Killer" used to refer to the artist who publishes good content and the term "*manja*" (Portuguese slang) to refer to good knowledge artist's music.

Some platform features reinforce the ties created. According to E7: "your fan can download your track, but he has some favors to do like a comment, like and a repost and a share on his profile through other platforms" and in this way, these exchanges help spread the content.

The connection possibilities allow the artist to share content with their contacts beyond SoundCloud. Using private sharing, the user can direct the content directly to another individual, as highlighted by E1: "so we usually send a SoundCloud link for family members or for people to listen".

Boosting emerging content

SoundCloud interactions are relevant both for early-career artists to attract audiences and for experienced artists to generate visibility for new music. Regarding the beginning artists, E1 comments that: “the interactions (...) will lead this person to find a place where he will be heard, where he was not heard before”. E7 complements by stating that “we certainly seek to [interact] as much as possible” and “of course, [interacting] is important for any artist, [because] we always want a better way to promote ourselves”, mainly due to the focus of the platform in certain musical styles. In this logic, the greater the engagement on the platform, the greater the reach of the content and the visibility of the artists will be (Choi & Burnes, 2017).

For more experienced artists, Soundcloud is used to pre-release their music before commercialization. E8 suggests that “we wanted to have an account to keep up to date with new releases, the things that didn't come out on record labels come out on SoundCloud first”. At this stage, artists can use multiple platforms to share this content. According to E7: “I usually do this by sharing the link, right, whether by WhatsApp, Messenger, or Instagram”. This reinforces the platform's targeting both artists and seminal content.

The visibility and popularity generated by interactions on the platform are perceived by artists as factors that generate credibility and relevance, stimulating the development of their careers. E6 comments that visibility: “is positive and gives you credibility for (...) your work”. Likewise, E1 expressed willingness “to use the tool more constantly and share these links more often” and “post more music” as he believes that these engagement activities are important “to remain relevant” in the music scene.

Music producer E6 also says that credibility extends beyond the platform for actors in the music ecosystem: “it won't change much for the audience, you know, but I believe that for the contractor [it makes a difference]”, explaining that “as a contractor [it contributes for] a decision like this between one guy and another”. In this case, the construction of the artists' reputation does not need word-of-mouth communication in a physical environment, extending to the virtual one (Lange & Bürkner, 2013), but is created by interactions in the virtual environment itself. Thus, the focus of interaction on Soundcloud seems to be directed at the content development and distribution phases, despite the possibilities of value co-creation in other phases, such as promotion and production (Saragih, 2019).

In summary, the interaction goals seem not to be initially planned (Rook & Fisher, 1995). The actors seem to be initially motivated only by “checking out what's new” on the platform. In this process, only when faced with the content, the objectives are enacted (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018) in actions aimed at the joint creation of value, in line with the platform's objectives (Van Doorn et al., 2010). E3 illustrates this by stating, concerning the types of objectives mentioned above, that it is “a little of each of these things” and complements by justifying the importance of interactions to boost the artists in its network: “for example, if you are a regional artist [and] a friend of mine, I like to share”. The results slightly differentiate Soundcloud, by its characteristics, from the systematic review conducted by (Saragih, 2019), suggesting that the platform provides interactions with a more intense focus on experiences and relationships, to the detriment of those focused on monetary goals. The actors' objectives seem to drive the creation of value on this platform for mobilizing user groups, balancing interests, matchmaking between customers (fans) and partner segments, making strategic decisions for ecosystem evolution, reducing multiple contents hosting costs, scale, and liquidity (Yablonsky, 2020). Soundcloud is characterized, therefore, as a platform for the dissemination of

emerging music content aimed at early adopter users. The goals of exploring new relationships, strengthening existing relationships, and boosting emerging content do not seem to be evidenced by the individual content of each comment or interaction (Hubbles et al., 2017; Ishizaki et al., 2015; Jordanous et al., 2015; Rotman et al., 2009). The creation of value arising from these objectives seems to be rather enacted in the aggregated meaning of these comments and interactions that constitute the engagement of actors, allowing them to evaluate their performance.

Resource integration

Users can use the various functionalities available on the platform to integrate and share resources (e.g. time, knowledge, skills, money) with users from different places.

Signaling of interest

When interacting with the content of artists, the user leaves the record to other platform users, as E5 explains: “to keep a visual memory of that observation”. E1 demonstrated that he considers it important to maintain high levels of cognitive and emotional engagement on the platform, as interactivity can be directly related to the artist's feeling of satisfaction, also acting as a signal for the quality of the content posted on the platform.

The statements revealed a hidden meaning in the apparent superficiality of the comments, leading to the conclusion that the dimensions of valence and form (Van Doorn et al., 2010) are intertwined in this context. “When you have enough comments, you're happy, 'oh cool'.” (E1). When asked about how she reacts to the interactions she receives, E3 comments: “I feel very happy” and states that she understands interactions as a sign of content quality: “a sign that people are interested in knowing my work and they think [it] cool”. The valence of comments on SoundCloud is generally positive, both for the artists and for their content, including comments such as “*sonzeira*” (slang translated as “very nice sound”), “reference” and “manja”. Positive valence takes the form of short comments aimed at the general public (Hubbles et al., 2017; Ishizaki et al., 2015). The greater the number of positive comments, the greater the interest in the content. These results complement those proposed by Van Doorn et al. (2010), and suggest that user actions can, in fact, be positive based on the valence of their content.

In addition to the number of comments, the number of connections also flags user interest. The more connections an actor has, the more confidence in the quality of his/her work is transmitted to other actors in the ecosystem. Thus, the artist improves his image by becoming more available and more connected to his audience (Chaney, 2012).

On the other hand, the absence of interactions can take on a negative value, in the form of a low number or even the absence of comments. E1 comments that “when there aren't many comments you get sad, right, you think you're not being nice”. Although negative comments weren't noted, E1 suggests they can “bury a guy” referring to the end of an artistic career. To avoid embarrassment, E6 explains that “I keep negative comments to myself”. Thus, negative comments signal the limit of the music's non-adherence to the artist's audience.

Technical contributions

Although fewer in number, contributions in terms of knowledge and skills increase the value of the content of other actors. This way, users can make more technical comments, as exemplified by E5: “look at that music transition is cool”. In these cases, interactions are also used as a kind of mentoring between artists. This support network was identified mainly among users who are also artists, such as E7: “some people also get in touch for mentoring through SoundCloud”. E3 explains: “for example, [when] I

made a new song, before posting it I'll send it to my friends (...) it's more of a technical part, right, people stay there commenting 'I think there's a little bit of this or that'". E3 also receives requests to make contributions "I contribute a lot so many artists send me [their music] and I can give my opinion".

The exchange of resources between actors, such as knowledge and skills, can influence the development of artists and the improvement of their music production techniques. It is observed that new artists seek contributions from more experienced ones. Unlike simple signs of interest, technical contributions take on a distinct communicational format, with positive valence (Van Doorn et al., 2010) and taking a more "embodied" form of discussions and exchange of ideas (Rotman et al., 2009).

Playlists and tags

Playlists and tags are a less direct way to provide knowledge and experience. By creating and sharing these resources, actors affect other users' perceptions, preferences, and knowledge of the artist or published content. According to E4: "I also use playlists to pass along a little of my contributions for each project, you know. In these playlists, I put together something that has to do with my moments, composing [also] with other artists". E1 states that playlists are a way for users who are not artists to express themselves, contributing to their musical preference and knowledge.

Regarding tags, E5 mentions: "we tag the tracks so naturally outsiders will follow you". The incorporation of tags indicates that the actor is applying his knowledge in establishing relationships between the musical content and previously defined styles, facilitating the identification of content. These resources can result in the discovery of a new musical style or new artists, an increase in access, and a greater "fan repertoire" (E1) for artists. Therefore, playlists can offer new perspectives on previously published music by associating it with other similar content. In this sense, they suggest an augmented behavior and co-development of value creation (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014).

Affective contribution

Despite being pointed out as one of the forms of interaction (Choi & Burnes, 2017), the affective contribution appeared with less intensity in the interviews. For fans, interactions can co-create value as they make it possible to create a direct connection, with the possibility of generating a feeling of greater intimacy with the artists. E2, for example, uses music on SoundCloud to express his feelings and convey them to users "as a matter of my feeling that for sure I always try to pass it on to songs so let's say the music will be a part of me that they will see".

Engagement also aims to generate relational and emotional benefits, as E1 stated: "the focus is on congratulating someone for a job well done". He also identified that those interactions add value to the artist's work: "it is a way of valuing the someone's work" (E1).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the segmented musical curation provided by the platform enabled the formation of groups with a more pronounced identity and a sense of belonging. As E8 emphasizes: "now in the pandemic crisis, in [social] isolation, these interactions within the platform make us feel connected and belonging to a tribe, right, of people who interact on the same tracks and with the same artists".

Time

The time dedicated to the platform can be considered an artist's critical resource for creating interactional value. For example, E2, who also works as a logistics professional, comments: "I spend most of my time working and it's difficult for you to keep that focus". Even so, he claims that since he created his account he uses the platform

daily, emphasizing that dedicating time to interact is important for the popularity of the content: "on social networks, you have to have time to dedicate it to popularize it." Because of this, he seeks to optimize his time in interactions: "When I have a time, I try to focus as much as possible on likes and search for new artists and respond to people."

Updating content also demands dedication. Active artists seek to be up to date with their content. According to E3: "we keep taking that older [track] there and updating it".

On the other hand, some artists understand (or want to understand) that when someone doesn't speak up, it can happen because of lack of time: "when I don't get these answers, I think the person must be very busy and doesn't have time to respond to all interactions" (E1). Thus, user comments on tracks can signal their interest, but the absence of these comments is not always interpreted as a lack of interest. The shortage of time can also result in a decrease in interactions, as observed by E7: "sometimes I can't manage to answer all the comments (...) because it's a lot of interaction, it's a lot of comments". In this sense, it is reasonable to consider that time is a critical resource that allows or restricts engagement in these service platforms. Consequently, dedication is necessary for artists to reach their goals and obtain the expected results from this engagement.

From the results obtained, it is observed that the SoundCloud platform provides the integration of homopathic and heteropathic resources (Peters, 2016; Storbacka et al., 2016). Homopathic integration occurs both based on summative or aggregative relationships between resources, as well as sharing the link of a band to contacts in other networks. The heteropathic appears in the emerging relationships between resources, such as through the active search for new songs, styles, and artists, as well as the creation of tags and creation of playlists within the platform.

7. CONCLUSION

This research qualitatively analyzed value co-creation on the Soundcloud platform from a small community of artists and fans in a developing country, complementing previous research findings and contributing to the debate on value co-creation. Soundcloud is aimed at the ideation and experimentation of musical content by established artists and artists at the beginning of their careers. These artistic trajectories benefit not only from reduced costs for insertion in the market but also from the construction of their musical identity and from getting closer to their audience (Chaney, 2012). Through active behavior, fans co-produce the service and get closer to the artists. Thus, Soundcloud involves actors, empowers users, and allows for the curation of musical content (Kijima & Arai, 2016).

From the perspective of micro-foundations (Storbacka, 2019), elements emerged regarding the desired objectives for interaction and the integration of resources that the actors contribute to the platform. The desired goals are characterized by the exploration and strengthening of relationships and the promotion of emerging content. The integration of resources involved the signaling of interest, technical contributions, playlists and tags, affective contribution, and time dedicated to the interaction. These elements are consistent with the platform's proposal, as the resources provided can be directed towards the objectives sought by the actors.

The results of this study theoretically contribute towards suggesting that the generation of value, in the case of Soundcloud and similar platforms, occurs through the aggregate combination or "density" (Storbacka, 2019) of resources for value co-creation. This density of resources allows the central symbology of value co-creation to be

interpreted by actors in light of their social context (Akaka & Vargo, 2015). Thus, it is understood that this study advances knowledge of previous research, in the sense that the content of each comment (Hubbles et al., 2017; Jordanous et al., 2015) or even a discursive analysis (Ishizaki et al., 2015) are limited representations of the wealth of meanings that the set of interactions allows signaling actors in terms of the engagement of other elements of their network. Therefore, a broader perspective on this process was needed to understand what it translates to in terms of value co-creation. Empirically, these results can help record label or music distributor marketing managers take a more integrated look at the artists they are looking to hire.

By taking an ethnographic approach, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other artist communities or fans on Soundcloud or other platforms. It is suggested that future studies adopt a mixed methods perspective, to allow such generalizations.

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