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Platformed indie: Poptimism in Italian digital music culture

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines the transformation of Italian indie culture under platform capitalism, tracing how digital infrastructures have reconfigured the relationship between independence and mainstream commercial logic. Drawing on fieldwork with musicians, industry professionals, and audiences across Italy, it argues that the semantic and aesthetic coordinates of indie have shifted from oppositional autonomy to a stylised modality compatible with platform logics, where visibility and metric optimisation increasingly dictate artistic legitimacy through commercial imperatives and through the internalisation of platform-mediated evaluative frameworks. The Italian case, rooted in a tradition of politicised independence, reveals how local infrastructures and cultural histories mediate these global transformations. Synthesising grounded, abductive analysis with historical reconstruction, the study identifies three intertwined processes – *mainstreamisation*, *semantic drift*, and *platform gravity* – through which visibility metrics and sponsorship logics recalibrate artistic practice, legitimacy, and audience address, recognising that these dynamics interact with diverse cultural trajectories and do not operate as a uniform homogenising force. The emerging configurations still depend on established intermediaries, informal circuits, and human decision-making embedded in longstanding power structures, even as platform mediation intensifies the circulation and repetition of certain stylistic and organisational practices. To theorise these shifts, the article advances ‘poptimism’ as a structural condition. The analysis shows how this gravitational field is absorbed into existing professional sensibilities, where platform mentalities recur within industry judgements shaped by longstanding organisational logics.

Keywords: platformisation; indie culture; Italian music; music industry; mainstreamisation

1. Introduction

Outside Milan’s Circolo Magnolia, rain gathers in small pools across the gravel courtyard. The assembled crowd – clad in the semiotic armour of cultural resistance: worn leather jackets adorned with Crass patches, precisely distressed denim displaying carefully curated My Bloody Valentine and Wire badges – huddles beneath the sparse shelter of the entrance overhang. The air vibrates with expectation for tonight’s post-punk act. Yet as we file into the interior, something extraordinary transpires. The sound system begins to play the latest Sanremo playlist – that most mainstream of Italian musical institutions, traditionally regarded within these circles as the embodiment of commercial banality. What follows defies cultural prediction. A young woman with green hair and a Sonic Youth tattoo visible beneath her fishnet sleeves begins, almost unconsciously, to mouth the lyrics. Near the bar, a cluster of men in black-rimmed glasses and carefully selected band t-shirts – marking

affiliations with Mogwai, Low, and other canonised exemplars of alternative integrity – exchange knowing glances before surrendering to the moment. By the third track, the room has transformed: bodies previously trained in the performed stillness of shoegaze appreciation now move with unguarded enthusiasm. The boundary between subcultural opposition and mainstream participation momentarily dissolved.

This scene – readers may judge its plausibility after considering the evidence presented in this paper – encapsulates the central puzzle at the heart of Italian independent music culture’s transformation. Beyond any blurring of aesthetic boundaries, the relation between oppositional positioning and cultural practice has been redefined. The categories through which musical distinction once operated have undergone a profound shift, yet our theoretical vocabularies have struggled to keep pace with this transformation.

Drawing upon two years of ethnographic enquiry with musicians, industry professionals, and audiences across Italy, this study examines how platform capitalism has restructured the logic of cultural production, showing how the mediation of music through streaming services and digital distribution has engendered new patterns of cultural visibility that reshape not simply what music circulates, but what music gets created. The Italian case proves particularly revealing precisely because of its distinctive history – a context where independence once carried explicit political dimensions, circulating through infrastructures developed specifically to exist beyond both state and market logics.

2. Context

2.1. Historical trajectories of independence in Italian music

The intellectual lineage of Italian independent music predates the formal *indie* category, rooted in post-war critiques of commercial culture that framed song as political expression – anti-fascist, proletarian, and oppositional to Sanremo’s sentimentalism (Jona and Straniero 1995). This impulse evolved into the 1960s *cantautori* tradition, where artists negotiated literary-political ambitions with market demands (Santoro 2002; Jachia 1998; Guichard 1999; Fabri 2016, pp. 94–100), crystallising early notions of artistic integrity. Throughout the 1970s, radicalised youth movements and the Italian New Left gave rise to autonomous infrastructures of cultural production – festivals, pirate radio, and underground publications – where music served more as political intervention than entertainment (Valcarenghi 1973; Caroli 1977; Volpi 2013; Carrera 2014). Later, the Italian punk scene, infused with a DIY ethos, further catalysed a politicised aesthetics of refusal (Bertrando 1980; Masini 2018; Tomatis 2019, pp. 494–533), and *centri sociali* (‘social centres’) expanded as interdisciplinary nodes for radical culture, where independence was understood not as niche marketing, but as cultural resistance (Anselmi 2002, pp. 9–36).

The 1990s marked a phase of infrastructural consolidation (Magaudda 2009, pp. 300–304). New distribution channels, specialist press, and live venues permitted a ‘true indie sensibility’ to emerge: unpolished production, affective restraint in lyrics, and sonic references to Anglo-American alt-rock filtered through Italian linguistic and cultural forms. This decade witnessed the transformation of post-punk iconoclasts CCCP into CSI, a collective whose 1997 *Tabula Rasa Elettrificata* charted despite its independent origins – signalling a breach in the indie/mainstream boundary (Bratus 2024, pp. 197–198). Around CSI, a broader infrastructure coalesced (e.g. I Dischi del Mulo, Consorzio Produttori Indipendenti), committed to preserving artistic autonomy while engaging wider audiences. At the same time, bands like Afterhours, Marlene Kuntz, and Massimo Volume built loyal followings, as festivals such as Arezzo Wave, Sonica, and Tora! Tora! thrived (Vignola 2005; Santia 2024), while remaining outside the mainstream system. Alongside this, radical hip hop collectives (*posse*) disseminated politicised rap through the *centri sociali* circuit, deploying southern

dialects, militant critique, and anti-globalisation discourse (Branzaglia et al. 1992; Dines 1999, pp. 90–92).

The scenario began to change in the 2000s, as independent artists gained access to mainstream exposure while attempting to retain aesthetic autonomy (Calogero 2021), and a paradox emerged in which visibility compromised the autonomy central to indie identity. What this trajectory reveals is that ‘indie’, in Italy, has never been a fixed identity, but a shifting set of strategies for cultural autonomy. Building on prior reconstructions of the Italian independent field as a process of institutionalisation marked by ‘symbolic struggles’ over authenticity and integration (Magaudda 2009), the analysis follows these tensions into the platform era. The permeability between independent and mainstream cultures is not new to the Italian context. What requires closer attention, however, is the historical variability of how such transitions have been structured, perceived, and made intelligible. For instance, during the so-called *anni del riflusso* (‘years of ebb’), when the militant collectivism of the 1970s gave way to a widespread retreat into private, consumer cultures (Morando 2009), the de-politicisation of everyday life was mirrored in music scenes, where the symbolic languages of counterculture were increasingly stripped of their oppositional charge and reintegrated into the circuits of mass media and entertainment, while scenes more radically linked to the DIY ethos moved further and further away from possibilities of widespread media visibility.

Practices once embedded in political projects were reabsorbed into entertainment logics, but that incorporation still retained the contours of an event: a temporal and ideological break, legible as de-politicisation or compromise. Similarly, the emergence of high-profile artists from within the 1990s *posse* movement, itself an attempt to reassert oppositional infrastructures in the wake of the ‘ebb’, was framed within a narrative of co-optation, where the political content of subcultural production was seen to be diluted in exchange for mass visibility. What unified these moments was the persistence of a critical vocabulary capable of naming incorporation, and of locating independence as a position under threat (Mitchell 1995; Santoro and Solaroli 2007).

By contrast, the ongoing transformation complicates such historical patterns. Absorption into dominant cultural circuits has long been a structural possibility for marginal forms. What shifts in the present are the conditions through which it occurs and becomes intelligible. Indeed, the gradual restructuring of cultural production through platform infrastructures involves more than expanded access or accelerated circulation. It entails a redefinition of autonomy itself, no longer positioned in tension with a visible centre, but articulated through patterns of data, visibility, and infrastructural compliance. The intermediaries that once organised structural distance, from physical distribution networks to editorial hierarchies, have been replaced by systems oriented towards frictionless circulation and predictive optimisation. Earlier historical formations, from the ‘ebb’ to the emergence of *posse*-derived mainstream careers, remain crucial for understanding the shifting grammars of legitimacy. At the same time, their explanatory power is limited when applied to a field organised around the internal differentiation of a unified media logic rather than spatial exteriority. Under such conditions, the persistence of independence becomes less a question of oppositional location than of how difference can be enacted without ceasing to be processable.

2.2. Indies and platformisation

The concept of ‘platformisation’ refers to the growing entrenchment of digital platforms across cultural, economic, and social life (van Dijck et al. 2018). It represents a reorganisation of how value is created and extracted – shaped by datafication (Couldry and Mejias 2019),

algorithmic systems, and the monopolistic logic of network effects (Poell et al. 2021). In the music industry, the consolidation of streaming and social media into a unified media ecosystem has redefined production, distribution, and monetisation (Hodgson 2021; Bonini and Magaudda 2023).

Music streaming platforms are now the primary means through which recorded music is accessed and consumed worldwide. In 2024, global recorded-music revenues rose 4.8% to US \$29.6 billion, with streaming accounting for 69% of the total, paid subscriptions generating US\$20.4 billion, and subscriber numbers reaching 752 million (Reuters 2025; IFPI 2025). In Italy, the recorded-music market expanded by 8.5% to €461.2 million, with streaming comprising 67% of total revenues; within this, subscription streaming grew 17.1%, contributing €204.9 million – a share of 44.4% of the total (FIMI 2025; Music Business Worldwide 2025). These figures illustrate the consolidation of streaming as the dominant mode of music production, circulation, and consumption in both global and national contexts.

Services like Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Music operate at the intersection of cultural production, finance, advertising, and algorithmic curation (Vonderau 2019, p. 12; Eriksson et al. 2019, p. 137). While early digital optimism suggested the democratisation of access (McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2017), subsequent analyses revealed persistent inequalities. According to these more critical orientations, recommendation systems would reinforce winner-takes-most dynamics (Im et al. 2020), contributing to market concentration (Aguiar and Waldfogel 2021), reshaping artistic autonomy (Klein et al. 2016), and entrenching structural asymmetries (Marshall 2015). Despite expanded access to monetisation, revenue distribution remains skewed – nearly 77% of streaming income accrues to the top 1% of artists (Coelho and Mendes 2019, p. 458). These disparities are symptomatic of deeper algorithmic biases, which seem to privilege already-visible content and reproduce inequalities linked to gender, race, and resource access (Tofalvy and Koltai 2023; Deldjoo et al. 2024; Melchiorre et al. 2021; Meier and Manzerolle 2019). As described in the literature, artists have adapted their creative practices to platform incentives: treating songs as data-ready objects prepared with coded metadata for discovery (Morris 2020) and approaching recommendation systems as cultural gatekeepers by calibrating structure, release cadence, and promotion to platform affordances, with reported pressures towards optimisation and tendencies to homogenisation (Raffa and Pronzato 2021). Studies also depict an ongoing negotiation between opportunity and constraint, in which creators ‘work towards’ platforms yet resist full-optimisation ideologies, within ecosystems where visibility is co-produced by users, algorithms, and platform owners (Kiberg 2023; Polak and Schaap 2024). Related work traces optimisation across the track’s life cycle, encompassing discovery-ready composition and metadata, calibrated releases and paratexts, feedback-driven recommendation, and data-informed revisions (Raffa and Pronzato 2025).

Studies supported that recommendation engines now serve as primary mechanisms of music discovery (Gillespie 2014, pp. 167–194; Seaver 2022). As content abundance grows, users appear to experience a ‘burden of choice’ (Cohn 2019; Barna 2017), reinforcing the role of algorithmic filtering to sustain engagement (Martel 2018; Pedersen 2020). Studies on listener practices revealed ambivalence: while personalised playlists and resistance strategies showed some agency (Hagen 2015; Velkova and Kaun 2019), users also expressed confusion or scepticism about algorithmic functioning (Siles et al. 2020), and reported a growing sense of fragmentation in musical discovery (Raffa 2024a).

Gatekeeping has also been rearticulated (Bonini and Gandini 2019, pp. 1–11). Both human and algorithmic curators privilege content with high engagement potential, producing feedback loops that align user behaviour with industry priorities (Prey 2020). Even platforms initially framed as alternatives – Bandcamp, SoundCloud, MySpace – seem to replicate dominant logics (Thow 2023; Hesmondhalgh et al. 2019, pp. 1–13). Indeed, while these services appear to support decentralisation, they frequently uphold conventional metrics of

marketability and visibility (Pilati et al. 2024, pp. 338–357), limiting space for genuine alternatives. Moreover, as argued by Krogh (2023), platforms also actively intervene in cultural categorisation itself, with Spotify's MIR-based genre analysis enabling the strategic invention of new genres to accommodate commercial interests, effectively producing classificatory distinctions with no conventional cultural basis.

Independent record labels occupy an ambivalent position. Long framed as alternatives to major labels, they balance ideals of autonomy with market survival (Oakes 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2015). Independence is both an economic structure and a cultural value – expressed through aesthetics, subcultural affiliations, and DIY practices (Hibbett 2005; Fonarow 2006). Yet this ethos has evolved into a more entrepreneurial model, repurposing subcultural skills as career strategies (Spencer 2008; Dale 2009; Bennett 2018, pp. 140–155), often blending autonomy with professionalisation.

Scholars suggest that platformisation may be reshaping traditional dynamics within independent music. Metrics and visibility appear to mediate 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995), potentially forcing artists to reconcile authenticity with algorithmic optimisation (Bennett 2014, pp. 89–103; Guerra and Quintela 2020, pp. 262–264; Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020; Collet and Rémy 2023). Festivals, scenes, and digital niches seem increasingly absorbed into branded and promotional circuits (Cummings 2007; Kruse 2010; Hviid et al. 2018; Khaire 2017, pp. 259–293). Some studies suggest that platform-based talent discovery may be eroding the boundary between indie and mainstream, as algorithmic curation tends to favour commercially viable traits while marginalising less conforming acts (Raffa 2025).

In this system, artists appear more autonomous while remaining structurally embedded in engagement-driven architectures (Negus 2019). This 'paradox of democratisation' (Frenneaux 2023, pp. 125–137) is evident in the imperative of constant visibility, where promotional labour risks undermining the autonomy traditionally associated with independent music (Jones 2021). As the semantic boundaries of indie shift under platform conditions, independence becomes less a marker of resistance and more a stylised modality of market compatibility – raising new questions about the cultural and political role of independent actors in platform-era music production.

While the terms 'indie' and 'independent' are often used interchangeably, this article treats them as analytically distinct. Independent refers broadly to artists, labels, and circuits that operate outside the major label system. Indie, by contrast, is used here in a more specific and historically situated sense to describe a cultural formation linked to particular aesthetic styles, affective dispositions, and infrastructural conditions. In the Italian context, these styles corresponded to the local equivalents of what is commonly labelled indie in Anglo-American contexts – primarily variants of indie-pop, indie-rock, and alternative songwriting that emerged from the late 1980s to the 2000s, often marked by irony, lyrical ambiguity, aesthetic autonomy, casual political commitment, and an ambivalent relationship to mainstream conventions.

The scope of this analysis is limited to this segment of the independent field, whose actors increasingly engage with the logics of visibility, immediacy, and affective accessibility structured by platform infrastructures. This should not be mistaken for a general theory of independence. Many artists in Italy – particularly those working in metal, jazz, or progressive rock – remain independent in an industrial sense, but follow different aesthetic principles, value systems, and modes of circulation. The arguments advanced in this article apply to a particular subset of indie artists whose historical formation, affective style, and strategic positioning differ meaningfully from independent artists as a whole. While the broader independent sector remains diverse and internally differentiated, the claims developed here are situated within a specific lineage of indie sensibility and practice. Making this boundary explicit is essential to preserve the analytical coherence of the discussion that follows.

3. Methodology

This study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), reflecting an epistemological commitment to the socially constructed nature of cultural categories and the interpretive processes through which they are negotiated. This orientation avoids positivist assumptions of fixed realities, instead acknowledging the co-production of meaning between researcher and participants (Clarke 2005; Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

Data collection combined three qualitative methods. First, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a strategically selected sample across the Italian music industry – including four independent label representatives, two major label A&R managers, two artist managers, three music journalists, two event organisers, two music producers, and two established artists. Interviews lasted 45–70 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded systematically. Initial purposive sampling was followed by snowball sampling.

Second, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted between March 2023 and February 2025 at music events across Italy, including festivals such as MiAmi (Milan), Ypsigrock (Castelbuono), and Linecheck (Milan), as well as industry showcases including Milano Music Week. Fieldwork also involved regular attendance at live music venues in Milan, Turin, and Bologna, where informal interactions with artists, managers, and other cultural intermediaries provided valuable opportunities for observation and conversation. These observations captured how indie/mainstream boundaries are performed in physical settings, documenting audience composition, performance aesthetics, artist-audience dynamics, and spatial arrangements. Fieldnotes focussed on the material and temporal dimensions of these scenes (Pink 2015).

Third, a digital ethnography examined online environments where Italian indie music circulates. This involved sustained observation, from September 2022 to February 2025, of multiple Facebook groups dedicated to music discussion and scene coordination, as well as the public social media content of a range of artists (both independent and major-affiliated) and cultural intermediaries, including festival promoters, radio hosts, music journalists, and label representatives. Across this period, several hundred posts and associated comment threads were systematically collected and archived for coding, allowing for the analysis of recurring themes, interactional dynamics, and the circulation of aesthetic and classificatory vocabularies. This multisited strategy (Marcus 1995) acknowledged the fluidity between online and offline domains in contemporary music culture. The textual corpus – originally in Italian – was translated as literally as possible before analysis to retain semantic precision.

Data analysis followed grounded theory's constant comparative method. Initial open coding allowed concepts to emerge inductively, followed by focussed coding to develop explanatory categories. Theoretical integration involved mapping relationships among categories to build an interpretive framework. Analytical memos documented emerging insights and decisions, supporting transparency and rigour (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

The analytical logic of this study is best described as abductive, reflecting an iterative process of moving between data and theory (Reichert 2007; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I did not apply predetermined models, and theoretical resources were employed as sensitising concepts. This approach enabled a productive tension between empirical emergence and theoretical interpretation, without drifting into either naïve empiricism or excessive abstraction.

Rigour was ensured through triangulation, prolonged field engagement, member checking, and reflexive journaling. Ethical safeguards included informed consent and anonymisation of digital data.

Reflexivity was central. My background as a former, casual music critic and musician within the Italian music ecosystem shaped both access and interpretation. This dual positioning enabled familiarity with insider codes and aesthetic hierarchies (Becker 1982; Raffa 2024b), while also requiring vigilance against uncritical reproduction of field logics.

The sense of dissonance I encountered while observing younger artists' pragmatic use of streaming tools or their disinterest in oppositional identity is not only autoethnographic, but generational and embodied. This distance proved analytically productive, as it foregrounded the ways in which I understood how 'platformed indie' reorganises cultural legitimacy in forms that are not always visible from within earlier models. At the same time, it required a suspension of inherited coordinates, resisting the impulse to judge coherence by the standards of a previous infrastructure. My semi-insider status, then, operated as both resource and friction, a position that makes certain dynamics comprehensible, while also demanding constant reflexive calibration. The constructivist grounded theory framework supported this reflexive posture by treating findings as co-produced (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021), while maintaining a strong commitment to empirical grounding and methodological accountability.

4. Findings

Through iterative comparison and theoretical coding, the analysis crystallised into three interrelated core categories. The first, *mainstreamisation*, designates the processes by which practices and aesthetic markers formerly situated in oppositional or marginal contexts become absorbed into mainstream circuits of production, distribution, and recognition. The second, *semantic drift*, accounts for shifts in the meaning, usage, and associative range of the term indie, tracing how its classificatory function is decoupled from earlier institutional and aesthetic referents. The third, *platform gravity*, describes the cumulative tendency for artistic practices to orient themselves towards the affordances, evaluative metrics, and classificatory regimes of digital platforms. These categories were generated through successive open, focussed, and axial coding cycles, in which preliminary codes from interviews, fieldnotes, and digital materials were constantly compared within and across sources, refined and integrated through analytic memoing, and consolidated into higher-order explanatory constructs once theoretical saturation was reached.

This work centres participants' own interpretations of these changes, tracing how they make sense of shifting cultural norms and technological affordances. The analysis foregrounds ambivalent, situated negotiations, moving beyond the resistance/capitulation binary. By attending to both discursive and material dimensions, the analytical framework connects subjective meaning-making with the structural conditions that shape the field – allowing for a relational understanding of how independence is recast under contemporary platform capitalism.

4.1. The 'mainstreamisation' process

In recent years, what was once understood as 'indie' in Italy has undergone a significant transformation. Across the fieldwork, artists, managers, and cultural intermediaries consistently invoked the sense that something fundamental had shifted – a quiet realignment of the coordinates through which independence is recognised, enacted, and valued. The term *mainstreamisation* is used here not to describe a linear drift from margins to centre, but to account for a broader cultural reorganisation – where oppositional practices are not overcome but absorbed, and where visibility often arrives stripped of the antagonisms that once defined its terms.

A recurring reference point in these narratives was the period between 2014 and 2016, described by informants as a moment of rupture. The crossover success of artists formerly rooted in marginal scenes signalled not just increased exposure but a more profound recalibration of the relationship between aesthetic identity and market recognition.

Around 2016, something crazy happened: Calcutta, Thegiornalisti, all these acts we thought of as totally underground suddenly blew up on mainstream radio, got on TV, played to these massive crowds. Guys who used to play to ten kids in a squat in Rome started signing six-figure deals and becoming faces for fashion brands. People were saying, 'Oh, indie is going mainstream,' but if you actually listened, what was happening was these guys kept some of their style but were making music that wasn't 'indie' in any real way anymore. (Music journalist, interview)

This account captures more than a change in scale. It speaks to the erosion of a set of cultural expectations that once grounded the indie identity in forms of refusal – of commercial polish, of broadcast ubiquity, of commodified image.

For those whose careers were shaped by earlier conditions, the reordering was as strategic as it was existential. An independent label founder, whose roster had once flourished within an alternative touring circuit, described the shift as follows:

When we started our label [...], we were focused on promoting local artists who offered an alternative to what you heard on the radio. Not only weren't we invited to Sanremo, but we didn't want to go. That was the enemy. Then between 2014 and 2016, everything changed. Mainstream media and radio stations realised we were the ones filling clubs all over Italy with our artists' tours. Now radio airplay and Sanremo are obligations for us. [...] Experimentation is something we can't afford anymore, especially since the small club circuit has collapsed. Younger generations are only attracted to big events, and small to mid-sized venues are closing. [...] The pandemic played a role, but so did other factors. Indie culture has converted to a more pop philosophy ... finally! (Indie label representative, interview)

Here, the narrative of co-optation is best read as structural necessity. With the collapse of the small-venue ecology and a shifting audience sensibility increasingly attuned to large-scale formats, artists and labels have recalibrated their aspirations.

Participants did not experience the change as an imposition; they described a tacit convergence, involving a reconfiguration of taste cultures, brand sensibilities, and industry strategies around a shared imaginary of the 'accessible indie act'. One performer, interviewed backstage at a midsize festival, offered a candid account of this convergence:

It was just filling a gap in the market [...]. You had this audience of university students and graduates with decent education who wouldn't touch politically charged music but also couldn't stand commercial pop. They wanted something less glossy and with smarter lyrics. The Italian mainstream had nothing like that. (Established artist, interview)

This is the language of adaptation – of a scene that learned to read the market and of an industry that learned to mine subcultural capital without importing its underlying values. In this arrangement, independence became a matter of aesthetic texture and not necessarily of infrastructural autonomy.

There was a generation sick to death of all that protest song preachiness. Then the 2010s indie scene showed up: post-ironic, meme-worthy tunes that actually spoke to real life. No big political manifestos, just the small, mundane stuff we were all living through. (Promotion manager, interview)

Informants often voiced the reversal in the symbolic economy of branding with pragmatic irony:

I could give you a list of artists who twenty years ago wouldn't have associated their image with a brand even under torture, and who now wake up every morning hoping Coca-Cola wants to use their song in a commercial. (Artist manager, interview)

Take this wave of Neapolitan artists talking up a mythical scene that never really existed [...]. [I]t looks super cool, [...] all packaged by big Milan creative agencies riding the buzz from *Gomorrah* or *My Brilliant Friend*. But when I think of the old Neapolitan school, I think of Napoli Centrale and people who were pissed off at the system. Now everything is fully folded into mainstream thinking. (Event organiser, interview)

Hence, interviewees describe corporate affiliation as a threshold of success, a practical marker that makes work legible to sponsors, platforms, and audiences. Analytically, this operates as a device that translates aesthetic fit into durable visibility and investability.

4.2. The semantic transformation of 'indie'

Across the ethnographic fieldwork, a recurring sentiment emerged among artists, critics, and organisers: the term 'indie' is used primarily as a genre label, detached from production context or institutional location. What once indexed structural autonomy and an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the mainstream now circulates primarily as a genre label, detached from its original referents in production context or institutional location. This transformation takes shape at the level of language, yet signals a broader reconfiguration in which aesthetic codes detach from the practices and material conditions that once gave them coherence. The shift was not simply perceived as conceptual slippage, but as a mode of disorientation. Among long-standing participants in Italian independent music cultures, the hollowing out of indie as a meaningful category was often narrated through anecdotes inflected with irony, unease, or ambivalence. Its semantic drift was particularly pronounced within 'platformed' classificatory regimes – Spotify playlists, algorithmic tags, festival marketing – where indie is increasingly mobilised to designate a polished, affectively soft strain of pop.

There are Spotify playlists called Indie Italia and Scuola Indie – but if you're expecting Italian versions of Fugazi or Dinosaur Jr., think again. What you actually get is the most godawful, saccharine nursery-pop imaginable – the least threatening thing possible to the establishment. But ask a kid today what 'indie' means, and that's what they'll point to. (Music critic, Facebook comment)

What this comment articulates is a moment in which language continues to operate by habit, while its capacity to orient meaning has grown unstable. The emotional tone of the comment – marked by both recognition and estrangement – captures a broader experiential pattern: the awareness that the same word now signifies something felt to be qualitatively different. While the insiders interviewed may overstate the platforms' direct influence on processes of cultural classification, there is a widely shared perception that platform systems have introduced new labelling regimes and, in some cases, redefined or imposed new genre categories. This shift was not experienced uniformly. For artists whose work had been shaped by earlier understandings, the current usage often posed practical challenges, particularly in terms of cultural positioning.

For years we called ourselves 'indie', now we're scrambling for new labels before people think we're making that same rubbish everyone's pumping out these days. (Alternative musician, conversation note)

Nowadays, 'indie' basically just means X Factor contestants in denim jackets. (Artist manager, interview)

These reflections do not so much reject emerging styles as register the instability of meaning itself – an effort to reposition artistic identity within a shifting semiotic terrain. While 'indie' remains in circulation, its altered connotations generate hesitation among those who once found the term sufficient to locate their practice. This sense of dislocation also manifested spatially and aesthetically. Participants described a contraction of cultural reference points within the Italian indie landscape – a reorientation away from transnational currents and towards a more insular, self-referential musical field, experienced less as continuity than as enclosure. An established alternative rock band member whose career began in the 1990s, a period when indie still retained clear coordinates of reference, stated:

These days, nobody in Italy listens to alternative international music anymore. Gigs by foreign bands are empty – you can't even book them now. The Italian 'indie' crowd ONLY listens to Italian stuff. Baustelle fans have never heard of Chromatics, Afterhours fans don't know Wilco [...] Thurston Moore plays to 200 people when he's lucky. We're a self-absorbed bubble where fans only care about Italian lyrics and couldn't give a toss about the actual sound – because to them, it doesn't even matter. And let's be honest, the sound – the actual music being played – is what would count abroad. But we've got nothing to say on that front, because here? Nobody cares. They're making records with embarrassingly bad production, slapping the 'indie' label on them, and not even getting laughed at for it. (Musician, Facebook post)

This statement identifies a perceived multi-layered transformation: the decline of cosmopolitan musical literacy, the retreat into national-linguistic enclaves, the waning importance of sonic innovation, and the rise of inward-facing validation loops. Together, these dynamics suggest a scene increasingly divorced from the aesthetic and ideological frameworks that once oriented it towards transnational currents or experimental practice. Independence, in this narrative, no longer signifies dissent or marginality, but a comfortably insular variant of mainstream Italian pop culture. Importantly, what emerges is not just a critique of artistic choices but of the cultural logics that render those choices legible. When stylistic markers survive their institutional conditions – when the sound of independence persists in the absence of its supporting infrastructure – the result is a simulation of autonomy, stripped of its former antagonism. Data showed the perception that aesthetic gestures once associated with resistance can now circulate freely within commercial environments, detached from the political or material commitments they once implied.

These experiences do not suggest that 'indie' has lost all meaning – on the contrary, it remains a prominent term within the cultural discourse of contemporary Italian music. What has shifted, however, is the structure of its associations. It now operates less as a structural position within the music industry and more as a cluster of recognisable stylistic cues – tonal, visual, and lyrical – whose presence can be sustained independently of the institutional conditions in which they first emerged. The persistence of such markers does not contradict the adaptive tendencies described above. Adaptation under platform conditions often proceeds through the selective retention and recontextualisation of familiar cues, whose semiotic anchoring shifts from signalling a position outside the mainstream to functioning as aesthetic signifiers compatible with streaming and social media logics. Continuity at the level of style can thus coexist with profound transformations in the economic, technological, and institutional frameworks within which these styles are produced and consumed. The perceptual work once performed by the term has not disappeared,

but it has taken on new contours, which some participants experience as a loss, others as an adaptation, and still others as simply the natural progression of linguistic change.

The broader implication is that such semantic transformations shape the conditions under which artistic practices are interpreted, evaluated, and situated. The term ‘indie’ does not simply describe music: it organises the frameworks of recognition through which practices are made legible. As this framework shifts, so too do the interpretive horizons available to those working within the field.

4.3. Platform gravity

As mentioned above, participants often traced the redefinition of ‘indie’ – its semantic drift, aesthetic convergence, and shifting social valence – to a broader transformation that was understood as native to the internet. Indeed, from the outset, the process was experienced as a reorganisation of visibility, taste, and legitimacy that emerged within and through digital environments.

The shift from indie to something more commercial and carefree basically comes down to the internet. These days, TikTok is the biggest driver of this trend, especially now that what we consider ‘indie’ has completely blended with rap and urban scenes. But back when it all started around 2015, Facebook was the place where it happened. The perfect example is the *Diesagiowave* group. It had like 20,000 members and was just a nonstop flood of memes and viral catchphrases, and that’s where artists blew up before they’d suddenly pop up on Radio DeeJay [commercial radio] or at MiAmi [festival in Milan] a few months later. The group was full of Gen Z kids but also a ton of music industry insiders. That’s even where the term ‘itpop’ came from, which is now the official label for this new wave of Italian indie pop. (Music journalist, interview)

This account offers crucial insight into how digital transformation operated before the full emergence of streaming dominance. Platforms like Facebook, and later TikTok, were described as both incubators and accelerants – spaces where humour, irony, visual language, references to popular culture, and sonic identity converged in ways that facilitated quick uptake and widespread circulation. In this context, *indie* became increasingly associated with shareability, lightness of tone, and cultural referentiality – a movement less grounded in institutional withdrawal than in platform-based virality. Most significantly, these views describe the porous boundary between these seemingly grassroots digital communities and industry structures, with industry insiders already embedded within these spaces, ready to amplify and formalise emergent trends. For many participants, platforms initially represented a democratising force – a means of circumventing traditional gatekeepers and reaching audiences directly. This narrative of expanded opportunity remained present in some accounts, particularly among younger artists who had never experienced the pre-platform landscape. However, as the research progressed, a more ambivalent picture emerged: the apparent openness of digital distribution began to reveal underlying constraints, shaped by the subtle operations of algorithmic sorting, curated playlists, and performance metrics that structure visibility and influence artistic viability.

Everything shifted around 2018–2019 when social platforms started limiting organic reach, and Spotify became the ultimate power player. The old system – where indie artists could bubble up naturally – got replaced by algorithms, Spotify’s editorial playlists, and this whole machine that flattened everything into sameness. And honestly, by then, ‘indie’ wasn’t even niche anymore. You had these artists popping off on

radio or at Sanremo, so the audience grew way beyond niche. (Artist manager, conversation note)

In this narrative, the emphasis shifts from autonomy itself to the changing conditions of exposure within platform-driven music economies. The language of ‘flattening’ recurred across interviews as an experiential metaphor for the perceived contraction of stylistic breadth under the dual pressures of algorithmic optimisation and editorial mediation.

This study does not aim to undertake a formal musicological analysis, grounding itself instead in the lived and narrated experience of practitioners, and in the ways they ascribe significance to sonic transformations within their creative environments. In informants’ accounts, the recourse to libraries appeared not as a discrete decision but as part of an ambient economy of sounds that renders certain timbres and textures immediately available while others recede from use; the contraction of instrumental introductions was described as a felt pressure towards immediacy, an injunction to arrive quickly at the vocal entry; harmonic and structural simplifications were framed as a tacit recalibration of complexity in favour of fluency and recognisability; the placement of choruses earlier in the track, their prolongation, and their calibration to the rhythms of TikTok circulation were narrated less as deliberate concessions than as the naturalisation of new temporalities of listening; reductions in timbral variety and the narrowing of dynamic range were recounted alongside the recurrence of specific structural and equalisation practices, forming a background of production habits so ingrained as to elude conscious reflection. Such accounts, while not constituting technical diagnoses, are consistent with tendencies documented in prior scholarship on the sonic consequences of digital distribution systems, and point to the deep integration of platform logics into the ordinary dispositions of contemporary music-making (Raffa 2024b, pp. 163–213).

Over time, aesthetic shifts were rarely described in strategic terms. Instead, they emerged through processes of habituation, informed by repeated cues about what circulates and what recedes. This transformation was not uniformly cast in negative terms. For many, especially those lacking access to traditional industry infrastructures, platforms such as Spotify, Instagram, and TikTok remained indispensable – offering visibility, reach, and forms of audience connection otherwise out of reach. Yet even within such pragmatic assessments, there was widespread recognition of the implicit constraints embedded in platform logics. The process appeared ambient in character – diffuse and unspoken, yet nonetheless powerful in shaping creative orientation across the field.

Spotify has completely changed how we produce and write songs. Everything’s on a tight schedule now, there’s always pressure to land on playlists. You don’t get room to experiment; everything’s kind of standardised because that’s what the platforms push. But you don’t have a choice if you want to stay in the game. [...] Even the indie scene is totally trapped in this system now. (Artist manager, conversation note)

This account reveals how platform logics are experienced as reshaping creative practice through perceived imperatives and diffuse cues. The reported sense of indie practitioners being ‘trapped’ demonstrates how even ostensibly autonomous spheres now feel compelled to internalise commercial metrics. These accounts describe a phenomenology of constrained agency where adaptation feels less like choice than survival within an ecosystem actors perceive as offering no alternative pathways.

Platforms give indie artists more tools to be heard, but cutting through is tougher than ever. Labels have whole teams gaming algorithms and playlists, while independents

have to DIY it all. So most just copy what's already working [...], [the] system basically runs on autopilot. (Artist, Facebook post)

For financial reasons, we can't afford to ignore an artist's social media and streaming numbers when we sign someone new. That's where the real validation happens. (Independent label representative, interview)

These perceptions signal a transformation in the very criteria by which legitimacy is ascribed (Raffa 2025). Where visibility once emerged through subcultural capital, live performance networks, or critical mediation, it now hinged increasingly on metrics of digital traction. Aesthetic value became entangled with platform-oriented circulation and performativity. Taken together, these accounts outline a narrative of cultural reconfiguration. While the field of musical visibility remains active, its dynamics have shifted in response to changing infrastructural conditions. The space for independent music continues to exist, though increasingly modulated by the 'platform gravity' that governs access, circulation, and classification through subtle affordances and constraints. The semantic and aesthetic contours of 'indie' are now delineated through varying degrees of compatibility with platform logics (track duration, mood calibration, vocal clarity, hook placement, and real-time performance metrics).

Crucially, these shifts were sensed less as top-down impositions than as emergent conditions within which artists, labels, and listeners positioned themselves reflexively. The accumulation of seemingly minor decisions – what to release, how to frame it, which risks to avoid – was often felt to produce a gravitational pull, a shared centre of gravity that shaped perception without fixing its coordinates. The ethnographic material points to platform effects as relational and emergent, formed through recursive interactions. Over time, these interactions generated tendencies towards aesthetic consolidation, absent any formal mandate. Within this environment, indie ceased to function as a site of tension or refusal, reappearing instead as one among many affectively legible forms, optimised for circulation within a digital ecology attuned to ease, immediacy, and habitual engagement.

5. Poptimism in Italian digital music culture

Through an abductive analytical process that moved iteratively between empirical observations and theoretical formulations, 'poptimism' emerged as a particularly incisive framework for interpreting the transformations documented in Italian digital music culture. This conceptualisation deliberately departs from the term's established use in music-criticism discourse (Morley 2006; Broyles 2010; Austerlitz 2014) and adopts a different formulation (Raffa 2024b): a structural condition in which platformised cultural production constrains emergent artistic heterodoxy and privileges the reproduction of standardised cultural forms – those most amenable to platform legibility, audience predictability, and metricised success. The term poptimism emerged in Anglo-American music criticism as a challenge to the 'rockist' hierarchies that historically shaped journalistic and academic value judgments. It proposed an alternative framework that took seriously the formal, affective, and cultural complexity of mainstream popular music. In repurposing this term, I am not denying that history, but extending its conceptual reach. Hence, poptimism does not refer to a critical stance or evaluative position, but to a set of aesthetic and strategic orientations that have become increasingly normative within platform-mediated fields of musical production. What distinguishes this usage is not a focus on genre, but on infrastructure: poptimism as a field condition in which success tends to be measured through visibility, accessibility, and a specific form of affective legibility. It names a cultural logic that reshapes

how distinction is performed, and under what conditions experimentation or marginality can be sustained.

Older accounts of ‘going mainstream’ presupposed identifiable boundaries between centre and periphery and were often narrated by critics and subcultural audiences as compromise, dilution, or strategic repositioning. The current configuration is diffuse. Contemporary music fields comprise ‘rival mainstreams’ (Weisbard 2014): parallel centres of visibility and value organised through shared infrastructures of recommendation, measurement, and sponsorship. Within this terrain, informants did not describe their practices as betrayals of autonomy; they articulated autonomy as calibration to these systems, signalling that the underlying values have already shifted. I use ‘poptimism’ to name this condition. It operates as a gravitational field consolidated by platform dynamics, in which success orients around affective legibility, genre fluidity, and metric visibility; it is neither a consciously adopted ideology nor a fixed destination. In this context, the suitability of poptimism lies in the way its historical, etymological, and ideological layers condense the processes observed in the field. Historically, it is entangled with critical debates that sought to recalibrate hierarchies of value by extending full legitimacy to mainstream pop forms; its etymology fuses the sphere of the ‘popular’ with an evaluative stance of affirmation; and ideologically it signals a disposition in which accessibility, melodic immediacy, and mass appeal are treated as virtues. In the Italian platform context, these traits no longer appear as the outcome of an explicit polemic, but as the taken-for-granted coordinates within which production and reception take place. Retaining the term allows these sedimented associations to remain audible, marking the passage from a consciously argued critical position to an infrastructural condition in which optimism towards the logics of mainstream pop forms is presupposed and naturalised.

Understood thus, poptimism functions as a system of symbolic regulation, manifesting as commercially driven cultural paradigm that might actively suppress innovation through its institutionalisation of platform logics and by its self-reinforcing structure where economic imperatives and symbolic dominance converge. Participants in this study did not articulate what I call ‘poptimism’ as an ideology in abstract terms, but their lived experiences consistently pointed towards an environment in which divergence, experimentation, and marginality appeared ever harder to sustain. Independent artists, once defined by their position outside institutional systems, now find themselves adapting to an environment where visibility is contingent upon compatibility with dominant distribution logics. Cultural intermediaries, meanwhile, routinely described their work as guided not by artistic judgement or curatorial innovation, but by performance data such as streaming counts, social engagement, and algorithmic traction. This shift involves changes in both taste and infrastructure, and at its core reflects a rearticulation of cultural legitimacy, in which alignment with dominant systems appears as a condition of participation.

Ten or fifteen years ago, if someone from the alternative scene watched *Sanremo* or *The X Factor*, they’d have to do it in secret. Now, unexpectedly, everyone follows mainstream chart music [...], there’s no shame in anything anymore [...] [P]latforms amplified all this. (Label representative, interview)

The Italian context demonstrates this structural condition with paradigmatic clarity. Crucially, elements previously associated with stigma have come to function as cultural capital (Barna 2020, p. 90). The embrace of mainstream culture now indicates alignment with a dominant cultural logic inflected by the diminishing force of former oppositions. This phenomenon reveals less a strategic adaptation than a sedimented shift – an institutionalisation of a horizon where distinction rests on fluently inhabiting mainstream codes. This transformation represents neither conscious ideological abandonment nor creative decline

(see Wilson 2007; Broyles 2010; Wilson in Weisbard 2012; Prior in Bennett et al. 2020, pp. 172–177; Sorensen 2020), but the culmination of historical tendencies. The transformation of ‘indie’ from a structured oppositional stance to a stylistic variant within mainstream consumption exemplifies the recursive logic of algorithmic systems, in which the salience of prior engagement continually reinforces dominant taxonomies. This semantic drift signals a deeper redeployment of the relationship between restricted and large-scale production, as valuation principles rooted in circulation, visibility, and quantifiability pervade formerly autonomous fields. Under platform capitalism, such realignment is driven by the datafication of taste and the imperative of public legibility: in an environment where cultural actors are compelled to voice positions across social media, remaining outside algorithmically structured spaces becomes increasingly untenable, rendering divergence perceptible only through the very metrics that neutralise it.

Three dimensions characterise this cultural logic as observed in the field. First, the flattening of cultural hierarchies towards market optimisation rather than greater equality. As emerged from the analysed data, cultural artifacts seem to undergo categorisation according to platform-specific taxonomies oriented towards functional consumption contexts, which tend to supersede aesthetic or subcultural distinctions. Second, platform imperatives become internalised as creative principles. Artists affirm they adapt through conscious strategy and through the incorporation of algorithmic preferences into their creative dispositions, constituting artistic subjectivities shaped by engagement with platform environments and their specific reward structures. Third, a systemic privileging of conformity over innovation appears to emerge. Cultural content value increasingly derives from engagement metrics, amplifying existing patterns and diminishing the influence of critical evaluation or subcultural validation. When success is calibrated through platform-specific metrics, forms of aesthetic divergence risk becoming neither economically sustainable nor culturally recognisable.

This cultural logic extends the broader reorganisation of popular music under promotional logics, where music increasingly functions as one element within promotional ecosystems dominated by brands (Meier 2017). The ethnographic material suggests musical expression becomes increasingly intertwined with its capacity to generate platform engagement, indicating shifts in how musical value undergoes creation and maintenance. Platform metrics appear to evolve from success measurement tools to elements in artistic legitimacy construction. Traditional notions of ‘selling out’ seem increasingly challenged within this environment. Historical charges have played significant roles in popular music’s development as legitimate artistic expression (Klein et al. 2017). With promotional strategies and commercial business practices now closely intertwined with core activities previously associated with music making, such concepts’ relevance undergoes questioning by industry participants, musicians, and audiences alike.

My idea of *poptimism* seeks to offer a lens through which the semantic absorption of ‘indie’ into mainstream canons can be understood as emblematic of broader restructurings under platform capitalism, where oppositional categories are not negated but subsumed. The Italian case makes visible how local cultural fields are reconfigured by global platform logics: creation itself becomes anticipatory, shaped by the predictive rhythms of engagement data. In this setting, governance operates outside top-down directives and unfolds through ambient, recursive systems of valorisation, producing aesthetic convergence by conditioning the parameters of what are thinkable, shareable, and ultimately audible.

However, while much of the discussion has focussed on artists and intermediaries who actively engage with platform dynamics, this orientation is not universal. Several interlocutors, particularly those affiliated with older independent labels or record stores, niche editorial projects, or hyperlocal live circuits, expressed ambivalence towards platform cultures. Their practices were shaped by slower temporalities, reduced exposure, or

aesthetic strategies that maintained a degree of opacity. In some cases, this opacity was not framed as resistance, but as a way of sustaining alignment with an alternative form of mainstream culture: a transnational ecology of taste that circulates through design, fashion, and curated cool, often connected to international circuits but distinct from ‘platform poptimism’.

Much of the offline fieldwork was conducted in Milan, a city whose status as a fashion capital and hub of the creative industries intensifies these dynamics. In this context, platform scepticism may coexist with aesthetic refinement and symbolic capital, reflecting modes of autonomy calibrated through selective affiliations and ambient forms of distinction, independent of any explicit stance toward the mainstream. These patterns complicate a binary understanding of agency under platform conditions. They suggest a field in which cultural actors respond to visibility through situated strategies shaped by institutional memory, generational orientation, and the socio-symbolic landscapes of urban creative economies.

6. Conclusions

This study has offered a grounded interpretation of how platform capitalism is reshaping the field of independent music in Italy. Through the abductive analysis of interviews, observations, and digital materials, poptimism is proposed as a prevailing field condition in which cultural visibility and artistic legitimacy are often mediated by, and increasingly sensitive to, alignment with the operational logics of digital infrastructures. Experienced as ambient and habituated instead of imposed, this condition tends over time to recalibrate, without determining, the coordinates through which actors perceive value, possibility, and cultural consequence.

This inquiry finds its conceptual departure in Hesmondhalgh’s (1999) theorisation of indie as a semi-institutional field, shaped by forms of mediated distance – from major-label control, from commercial aesthetics, from mainstream modes of circulation. But what is encountered in the present research is not the persistence of that field, nor its disappearance, but something more ambiguous: a shifting experiential terrain in which the ethical and aesthetic coordinates of indie survive as tonalities instead of taking the form of stable structures. The artists and intermediaries I spoke with do not mobilise indie as a banner or system of belief, but gesture towards it – sometimes obliquely, sometimes ironically – as a horizon that has become difficult to inhabit, yet equally difficult to renounce. If previous studies mapped ‘indie’ as a cultural formation held together by institutions and oppositional claims, this analysis shows a dispersed set of attachments and intuitions that still orient practice, but without stable footing. It is from within this unstable ground – neither post-indie nor fully platform-aligned – that the recalibration of value, distinctiveness, and autonomy takes place.

Several limitations merit note. First, the single-country ethnographic focus affords depth but limits generalisability. Second, platform architectures evolve rapidly; specific affordances may change even as underlying structural dynamics persist. Third, the study foregrounds producers and intermediaries, leaving audience perspectives comparatively underexplored. Within these bounds, the article contributes to understanding contemporary cultural production by documenting the semantic transformation of ‘indie’ in Italy and showing how mainstream conventions are assimilated into independent practice both through overt commercial imperatives and through the internalisation of platform-mediated evaluative frameworks in which engagement metrics increasingly supersede traditional forms of subcultural validation.

The Italian case adds specificity. Historically, indie and independent culture in Italy have been tied to aesthetic distance, political traditions, infrastructural separation – especially in live circuits and distribution – and regional specificity. Meanwhile, the relatively late

platformisation of the industry, the role of language in limiting international visibility, and the tight Milan-Rome-Bologna-Turin nexus of media, fashion, and live performance shape a context in which platform popoptimism circulates through particular logics of distinction.

This article centres on artists, label operators, and other intermediaries. The wider fieldwork also observed audiences and fan communities in live settings and on social media, but this dimension is only lightly represented here due to a deliberate focus on supply-side recalibrations – infrastructural, aesthetic, and professional. Audiences are integral to these processes: how listeners interpret, appropriate, or contest the semiotic drift of ‘indie’ remains a key site of meaning-making. A fuller treatment of fan dynamics – particularly the tension between niche taste cultures and algorithmically flattened discovery – forms part of the broader research agenda.

In conclusion, this research does not cast platformisation as a unilateral force of homogenisation. Stylistic evolutions can still arise from grassroots dynamics. However, platform mediation might accelerate and consolidate these processes: amplifying what is legible, stabilising emergent patterns through repetition, and reframing fringe innovation as normative content. The present study does not claim to advance a universal model, but seeks to underscore the significance of examining how cultural producers and intermediaries perceive, negotiate, and inhabit these transformations as agents operating within systems where value increasingly undergoes construction through metrics, visibility, fragmentation, and infrastructural alignment. Under such conditions, the persistence of independence cannot be assessed through its fidelity to historical forms, but through its capacity to acquire meaning within altered coordinates, no longer secured by structural exteriority, but reconfigured through practices that remain intelligible, however precariously, within the very systems they once sought to evade.

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