VI.BE and the Role of Support Platforms in Fostering Small Artists' Success in the Digitalised Music Industry in Flanders

Layla Sonck

0605007

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Promotor: Adelaida AFILIPOAIE

Jury: Simon DELAERE

Social Sciences & Solvay Business School

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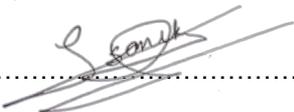
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Abstract

In the past decade, the music industry in Europe has undergone a notable transformation, especially since the rise of digital streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, SoundCloud, and YouTube Music. Although the digitalisation of the music industry brought along some promising opportunities for artists, paradoxically, it seems like 'standing out' is harder than ever before. This master thesis dives into the digitalisation of the Flemish music industry, focusing on how collaboration with support platforms can aid small and upcoming artists in navigating the complexities of the digitalised music industry and how it can enhance their visibility. VI.BE, the support centre for the Flemish music industry, serves as a central case study in this. This research adopts an inductive research approach, collecting and using qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 18 Flemish artists and four VI.BE representatives. The findings reveal that even though digital platforms have democratised many aspects of the music industry, they also bring new challenges for small artists, while traditional challenges still persist. By offering playing opportunities, providing advice and knowledge, and networking opportunities, VI.BE is able to remediate many of these challenges for upcoming artists. The study reveals the importance of hybrid strategies in small artists' paths to success, which combine digital strategies with live performances, to maximise audience engagement. Finally, this thesis offers practical recommendations for music industry stakeholders through the in-depth analysis of existing collaborations and interviews with key stakeholders.

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To everyone mentioned above, as well as those who have supported me along the way, I am profoundly grateful. Your support has made it possible for me to embark on this journey and finish it with a master's thesis that I am beyond proud to present, and of which I hope it will contribute to a vibrant music landscape – in Flanders and other countries.

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Table 1

Overview of interview participants

#	Solo/band	Genre	Category	Monthly listeners on Spotify
1.	Solo	Indie-pop	Independent	> 50,000
2.	Band	Post-punk	Emerging Star	> 20,000
3.	Band	Indie-rock	Emerging Star	> 6,000
4.	Band	Noise	Emerging Star	> 3,000
5.	Band	Psychedelic, post-punk	Independent	> 1,000
6.	Solo	Electronic pop	Independent	> 1,000
7.	Band	Noise, post-punk	Independent	> 1,000
8.	Band	Psychedelic, rock	Emerging Star	> 1,000
9.	Band	Punk	Question Mark	> 300
10.	Solo	Hip-hop	Question Mark	> 100
11.	Solo	Indie-pop	Hobbyist	> 100
12.	Solo	Indie-pop	Question Mark	> 100
13.	Band	Rock, post-punk	Question Mark	> 100
14.	Band	Alternative punk	Question Mark	< 100
15.	Band	Soul, jazz, funk	Question Mark	< 100
16.	Solo	Blues, indie	Hobbyist	N/a
17.	Solo	House, disco, electro	Question Mark	N/a
18.	Solo	Pop, rock	Question Mark	N/a

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1.   Problematisation

In a time of digitisation and platformisation, the music industry has transformed into a very complex landscape. Traditional business models have been disrupted, and stakeholders within the music industry have experienced drastic changes in music creation, production, and distribution (Bostoen & Vanherpe, 2021, p. 35; Waldfogel, 2017, p. 198).

In his book *The Music Industry: Music in the Cloud*, Wikström (2009) describes the profound transformation the music industry has undergone since the emergence of 'the cloud' during the turn of the century. Wikström (2009, pp. 5-8) distinguishes three main tensions that are underlying to the digitalised music industry. The first characterising element is a high level of connectivity between individuals, who can easily distribute information onto the cloud, which consequently results in a lower level of control for music firms themselves (Wikström, 2009, pp. 5-6). A second distinctive of the digitalised music industry according to Wikström (2009, pp. 6-7), is a new emphasis on services, rather than on the product itself. And finally, a third tension Wikström (2009, pp. 7-8) distinguishes is a rise of 'non-professionals' online, who can easily create and distribute their own content on different platforms.

These three characteristics of the digitalised music industry, as described by Wikström (2009, pp. 5-8), have caused a shift in music industries all over the world. But, besides the fact that music industries – including the Flemish music industry – continually had to adapt to the ever-evolving landscape, there is also the matter of competition. Even though Wikström (2009, pp. 7-8) talks about a rise of 'non-professionals' who can easily distribute their content, it is very hard for these artists to get noticed online (Strähle & Köhneke, 2017, p. 218). The music industry has always been characterised by "winner-takes-all tendencies" (Bostoen & Vanherpe, 2021, p. 35), but due to digitisation, it is harder than ever before for smaller artists to show up on the radar, as there are many artists vying for the audience's attention (Bostoen & Vanherpe, 2021, p. 35).

O'Dair and Fry (2019, p. 65) describe a shift in the music industry from an emphasis on 'companies owning music' to 'users having access to music', as services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music have made it possible for users to easily discover and listen to music. However, paradoxically, it is incredibly hard for new and upcoming artists to gain attention on these platforms (Bostoen & Vanherpe, 2021, p. 35). Even though this could be linked to 'the black box', O'Dair and Fry (2019, p. 75) emphasise the importance of looking beyond platform algorithms, as there are many other factors that can influence how music reaches audiences.

1.1.1. Support systems in the Flemish music industry

Just like the rest of the world, the Flemish music industry is finding itself in an ever-evolving music landscape, confronting the challenges that are brought about by digitalisation. Although, as stated by Leyshon et al. (2005, pp. 180-181), these challenges in the music industry cannot be traced back to one singular cause (such as digitalisation), but have been built up over time by a wide range of causes. And so, a wide range of causes asks for a wide range of solutions. In 1998, musician Luc Nowé already recognised the need for change in the Flemish music industry – especially music policy – and founded 'Poppunt Vlaanderen', later reformed to 'VI.BE' (VI.BE, n.d.-d). Today, VI.BE is known as a prominent organisation within the Flemish music industry, continuously supporting artists and industry professionals through active collaboration.

Article 70 of the Flemish Arts Decree (Vlaamse Overheid, 2021) outlines the core tasks of VI.BE:

- Knowledge centre and research: VI.BE takes care of collecting information and conducting research on the Flemish music industry. By doing this, VI.BE can encourage dialogue among music industry stakeholders and shine light on occurring issues.

- Talent development, professionalisation, and empowerment: the second core task of VI.BE is to support artists and organisations in the Flemish music sector, by providing the right tools and expertise.

As VI.BE was founded in the late 1990s, before the major impact of digitalisation on the music industry, it is interesting to investigate how this organisation has evolved over the years and how it supports small artists in a digitised environment today. Already in 2008, VI.BE – back then 'Poppunt' – launched an online networking platform where Flemish musicians could interact with each other, and share and promote their music (VI.BE, n.d.-d). By 2012, over 20,000 Flemish artists were registered on the platform, which was then transformed from an online networking platform to a platform that had the aim to "generate as many playing and media opportunities as possible for everyone" (VI.BE, n.d.-d). And so, VI.BE transformed into an intermediary platform that connects artists from all over Flanders with important stakeholders in the music industry.

1.2.   Purpose of research

The purpose of this thesis is to research and analyse the digitalised Flemish music industry's landscape and how small artists have adapted to the changes caused by digitisation. Additionally, this thesis explores artist visibility through platform collaboration and seeks to find out the importance of support systems, such as VI.BE for small artists in a small market.

By researching this topic and gathering valuable insights, this thesis will then aim to provide valuable recommendations for artists, managers, and important stakeholders within the music industry.

1.3.   Research questions

How do small and upcoming artists in Flanders navigate the digitalised music industry, and what is the role of support systems like VI.BE in their success?

1. What strategies do small and upcoming artists in Flanders employ to adapt to the digitalisation of the music industry?
2. What role do organisations such as VI.BE play in supporting and empowering small and upcoming artists in Flanders in this evolving digital landscape?

1.4.   Methodology

This thesis adopts an inductive research approach, based on the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To get an understanding of the impact of digitisation on the Flemish music industry and how this has an effect on artist visibility, this study will make use of qualitative data collection, containing the following components:

- Artist perspective: in-depth interviews with 18 small and upcoming artists in Flanders to learn about the main obstacles they are facing due to digitalisation of the music industry, and discover their motives to collaborate with support platforms such as VI.BE.

- Organisational perspective: in-depth interviews with VI.BE and four of its representatives to provide a thorough analysis of VI.BE's role within the Flemish music industry and the impact they have on small and upcoming artists' success.

1.5.   Thesis structure

This master's thesis is organised into five chapters, providing a complete analysis of the role of support systems such as VI.BE in the digitalised music industry in Flanders.

- Chapter 1 (Introduction) introduces the research topic, problem statement, purpose of research, research questions, and methodology for this research.

- Chapter 2 (Literature review) provides a thorough overview of existing literature on relevant topics for this research, such as the digitalisation of the music industry and its impact on traditional business models, strategies employed by small and upcoming artists to gain visibility, the role of support systems in the music industry, the specific context of the Flemish music landscape, and a short overview of VI.BE as an organisation and its current initiatives.

- Chapter 3 (Methodological research design) details the research design and methodology for this thesis. In this chapter, the research questions, data collection methods, and the data

analysis methods are discussed. Besides that, the theoretical framework used for the data analysis is further explained.

- Chapter 4 (Results and analysis) presents the findings from the research. The chapter begins by identifying the main obstacles faced by small and upcoming artists in Flanders, followed by an analysis of the current strategies these artists employ to make themselves visible, both traditionally and digitally. The second part of the chapter starts by further examining the historical evolution and expanding roles of VI.BE, and closes with an in-depth analysis of artists' perceptions of VI.BE's role and effectiveness as a support system. After discussing the results, Chapter 4 closes with a thorough analysis, by conducting a cross-theme analysis of the collected data and by comparing the results with the existing literature. Besides that, this chapter addresses some practical suggestions for VI.BE and other music industry stakeholders. Finally, Chapter 4 addresses the limitations of this study and offers recommendations for future research.

- Chapter 5 (Conclusion) summarises the key findings of this research, by discussing the implications of the digitalisation of the music industry in Flanders for small artists, and how VI.BE plays a role for these artists.

Chapter 2. Literature review

The first part of the literature review will dive into the digitalisation of the music industry, and the impact it has had on the overall landscape. In the following parts, the literature review will zoom in on strategies employed by small and upcoming artists to become visible in the digitalised music industry, the role of support systems in the music industry, the Flemish music landscape and policymaking, and finally an overview of VI.BE as an organisation and the current strategies it is adopting to support artists in Flanders.

2.1.   Introduction to the digitalised music industry

The music industry has undergone a profound transformation since the digitalisation of the sector (Strähle & Köhneke, 2017, p. 203). Understanding this shift allows us to understand how organisations such as VI.BE are trying to support small and upcoming artists in this digital era.

2.1.1. Disruption of existing business models in the music industry

According to Moreau (2013, p. 27), the shift from physical formats to digital formats in the 1990s disrupted the existing business models in the music industry. Since digital music is non-rival and non-excludable – as one person's consumption does not prohibit anyone else from consuming (Samuelson, 1954, p. 387) – the way value within the industry was created had to be re-evaluated (Moreau, 2013, p. 27). Now that the music itself was dematerialised, the industry had to shift its focus from selling content to selling related goods, and thus, subscription-based business models appeared to be the most effective strategy in this new digital landscape (Moreau, 2013, p. 27; Hviid et al., 2018, p. 251). According to Lozić (2019, p. 188), the introduction of streaming and subscription-based models has caused revenue growth in the industry. Besides that, the possibility of reaching the long tail (Anderson, 2006, Chapter 1) online, allowed artists to extend their reach (Bittencourt & Domingues, 2019, p. 188). Thanks to music streaming platforms such as Spotify, musicians can more easily distribute their music and reach their audiences online (Sen, 2010, p. 1).

However, the digitalisation of the music industry is not solely a positive narrative. Even though digitisation seems to bring new opportunities for artists, we cannot ignore other aspects, such as economic, political, and cultural impact (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 102). For example, because of this shift towards digitalisation, music is no longer just seen as art, but as data (Negus, 2018, p. 5). Digital conglomerates are now deriving as much information as possible on listener preferences, online conversations related to music, and the music itself, allowing them to commodify music to their benefit (Negus, 2018, pp. 17-18). Finally, Hesmondhalgh (2019, pp. 117-118) warns of oversimplifying views, such as thinking that platforms that allow user-generated content are democratising the production of culture, without considering the underlying interests of these companies.

Nonetheless, according to Hesmondhalgh (2019, p. 117), there are some positive examples, where non-profit organisations do serve the public interest (e.g., Wikipedia). Therefore, Hesmondhalgh (2019) calls for "new democratic media systems" (p. 118), to ensure fairness in this digital age. As VI.BE is a non-profit organisation presenting itself as a support system for artists in Flanders, it would be valuable to further examine how it can help artists navigate the digitalised music industry.

2.1.2. Changes in music consumption

Besides disrupting the existing business models in the music industry, digitisation also had a big impact on music consumption. According to Hviid et al. (2018, p. 274), there is a shift in consumer interest towards services due to digitisation, as consumers now have an unlimited repertoire of online music to choose from. The introduction of streaming platforms was revolutionary for music consumption, with services such as Spotify guiding consumers in navigating the long tail (Hviid et al., 2018, p. 274; Anderson, 2006, Chapter 1). Following this logic, it should be relatively easier for artists in less mainstream genres to get their music to the listener than it was before the digitisation of music.

However, getting music to the right audiences might still be a challenge for artists, as algorithms are opaque entities (Bucher, 2018, p. 41). Listeners are increasingly influenced by algorithms to discover and listen to new music, so it is essential for artists to understand these systems in order to reach their audience (O'Dair & Fry, 2019, p. 67).

2.2. Strategies employed by small and upcoming artists in the digitalised music industry

Even though there are various ways in which small and upcoming artists can try to establish themselves in the industry, not much is known about how Flemish artists try to gain recognition. To try to get an understanding of what strategies beginning musicians employ to navigate the digitalised music industry, this part of the literature review will be based on existing research in other countries.

2.2.1. Use of social media platforms

According to Leenders et al. (2015, p. 1813), a common practice for upcoming independent artists is using social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. In their research, the authors make the distinction between 'Emerging Stars', 'Regional Stars', 'Question Marks', 'Independents', and 'Hobbyists' (Leenders et al., 2015, pp. 1808-1809). Their research shows that the categories that benefit most from a social media strategy are 'Emerging Stars' (artists who are supported by a record label) and 'Independents' (artists who are not supported by a record label). Especially for this last category, adopting a social media strategy may be beneficial (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1813), as they can now bypass having to collaborate with traditional intermediaries such as record labels, and can directly reach their target audience online, through new intermediaries such as online platforms (Hviid et al., 2018, pp. 272-273).

2.2.2. Reassessment of intermediaries

Leenders et al. (2015, p. 1813) contend that there is no strong indication of disintermediation, as record labels still play a substantial role for 'Emerging Stars'. Labels can still have a large appeal for artists, as they can help with traditional ways of music promotion (McCubbin, 2012,

p. 343). However, many artists do opt for new, digital age intermediaries, such as online platforms, allowing them to distribute their music independently (Hviid et al., 2018, p. 260).

Yet, for many of these artists who are taking the entrepreneurial route – especially artists within the 'Question Mark' and 'Hobbyist' categories – there is little to no success on these platforms, even if they might want to break through (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1813). For these artists, it might be crucial to also focus on offline relationships, as these networks might provide them with the right resources to advance their careers (Cartwright & Smith, 2014, pp. 444-445).

These findings raise the question whether support systems such as VI.BE could play a role as an intermediary for these latter categories, who are not benefiting from social platforms or traditional intermediaries such as record labels. In collaboration with VI.BE, these artists might benefit from a 'music incubator' that can help train and mentor them (Bittencourt & Domingues, 2019, p. 179).

2.2.3. Entrepreneurship and support networks

Thomson (2013, p. 523) argues that thanks to technology, artists are now able to access an open market without limits. However, there is a flip side: this new digital landscape also comes with a lot of competition, as there is access to an unlimited number of choices online (Thomson, 2013, p. 523). Consequently, today's artists do not only have to have musical talent but also must be strategic decision-makers and entrepreneurs (Thomson, 2013, pp. 523-524).

The possibility to bypass intermediaries such as record labels by marketing your music directly to consumers online makes artists more entrepreneurial than ever (Hviid et al., 2018, p. 260). However, navigating this complicated online music landscape can be a challenge, as "no one is born an entrepreneur" (Bittencourt & Domingues, 2019, p. 189). Organisations such as VI.BE exist to, among other things, aim to help artists with this by offering advice and knowledge. According to VI.BE's website, more than 20,000 artists are currently registered on their online platform (VI.BE, n.d.-e, VI.BE, n.d.-j), which could be an expression of artists becoming more entrepreneurial, by using these online platforms and support systems to their advantage.

2.3.   The role of support systems in the music industry

2.3.1. Definition

In the last couple of decades, the huge shifts that have taken place in the music industry have required stakeholders to rethink and reconfigure their business models (Bittencourt & Domingues, 2019, p. 173; Moreau, 2013, p. 27). Bittencourt and Domingues (2019) define support systems in the music industry, or what is also sometimes referred to as 'music incubators':

> Music incubators [are] spaces which are aimed at helping agents of the music industry to enter and stay updated in the ever changing music market. This is done through consultancy, mentoring, business rounds and training actions, among other activities. . . . the music incubators help the artist's development through their market initiation. (p. 174)

2.3.2. The role of support systems in amplifying the social capital of musicians

Bittencourt and Domingues (2019, p. 178) link these support systems or music incubators to the 'social capital theory' of Bourdieu (1989), in which the social capital of a person relies on the number of useful connections they have, as well as the combined capital of the group. Engaging with these incubators allows artists to build up their social capital, distinguishing themselves from the usual ways the industry works (Bittencourt & Domingues, 2019, p. 178).

2.3.3. Government support of music support systems

Support systems such as VI.BE are often largely supported by the government. There are several reasons why the government would want to invest in the arts. Barresi (1981, pp. 248-250) distinguishes an era of 'cultural necessity', where the government started showing an increased interest in supporting and funding the arts. Finally, arts were no longer just a luxury or entertainment, but fundamental to society, strengthening the national identity and overall welfare of society (Barresi, 1981, p. 255). Even though Barresi's text dates from 1981, it is still

highly relevant today, as he also anticipated a 'future necessity', where there would be a continued growth in interest in the arts, as well as continued support for arts education and collaboration between artists and educators (Barresi, 1981, pp. 254-255). Today, this is manifested in the policies in support of the arts that are now established in many countries, such as the Flemish government's support for VI.BE's activities (Vlaamse Regering, n.d.).

2.4. The Flemish landscape and policymaking

To get a better understanding of the Flemish music landscape, it is important to sketch the current geographic and political situation, as well as the history and creation of the Belgian unitary state. Mazzola (2019, pp. 336-339) gives a complete overview of this history, to illustrate how Belgium's cultural and linguistic landscape has shaped the music industry over time. The following paragraphs will provide a summary of the historic overview by Mazzola (2019, pp. 336-339), complemented by insights from other authors.

2.4.1. History

Mazzola (2019, pp. 337-338) describes how Belgium's discord between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking sides was already clear since its formation in 1830. Initially, French was the dominant and only recognised language, which already caused a clear distinction from the North in Flanders, where Dutch-Flemish dialects were more common. This division called for the rise of the 'Flemish Movement', which pushed for the recognition of the Dutch language, as well as Flemish cultural freedom. Within this movement, there were some key figures such as Guido Gezelle, who used their art to create a 'Flemish repertoire' and showcase their culture.

Mazzola (2019, p. 337-338) goes on to describe how during the interwar period, the language disputes in Belgium were finally solved when there was a decision regarding the territorial languages: Flemish in the North, and French in the South. This transition to a federal state has significantly impacted policymaking in Belgium, including policies regarding culture (and music). Flanders and Wallonia each have their distinct cultural policies and share jurisdiction in Brussels.

2.4.2. The Flemish music policy organisation

The Flemish music landscape and policy organisation is very complicated because of these federal divisions (Sloboda et al., 2020, p. 119; Mazzola, 2019, p. 338), and consequently, the disparities between the Walloon and Flemish cultures have only increased (Pateman & Elliott, 2006, p. 89). According to Mazzola (2019, p. 338), the federalisation of Belgium not only had an impact on policy but also shaped the audience's music preferences in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, with (1) Flanders preferencing both Flemish and international music; (2) Wallonia being open to ethnocultural diversity but with a big dominance of the French language; and (3) Brussels blending Flemish and Walloon influences, leading to a big cultural and linguistic diversity in that region. This is also illustrated by Spotify statistics, with the most streamed Belgian artists often coming from the capital city (Zonderman, 2023).

Belgium's way of policymaking reflects the linguistic diversity that is present in the country, resulting in a total of six governments: the overarching federal government; the Flemish government; the Walloon Region government; the Brussels-Capital Region government; the French Community government, and German-speaking Community government (Husson et al., 2017, pp. 51-53). The geographic boundaries define the Regions, whereas the Communities are mainly determined by the language and culture of their residents, but Regions and Communities mainly intersect with one another (Husson et al., 2017, p. 51). The findings of Mazzola (2019, p. 338), that Brussels knows a big cultural diversity, is also not surprising: the Brussels-Capital Region exists within the Flemish territory, yet is predominantly French-speaking (Husson et al., 2017, p. 51).

On the federal level, policymaking regarding music is more general, and mainly concern overarching national policies, such as public funding for culture (Leenknegt, 2023, p. 17). On a community level, however, the Flemish, French, and German communities each have their policies (Leenknegt, 2023, p. 2). Finally, in Brussels, things get even more complicated, with shared legislation between the Flemish and French communities to accommodate both the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking inhabitants in the capital city (Mazzola, 2019, p. 338).

2.5. VI.BE: understanding the organisation

2.5.1. Short overview and history

On its website, VI.BE characterises itself in the following manner: "VI.BE is the support centre for artists and the music sector — from beginner to pro, from local to international" (VI.BE, n.d.-h). This short self-characterisation clearly shows the role VI.BE is trying to take on as a 'music incubator' (Bittencourt & Domingues, 2019, p. 174) – the organisation wants to foster artists' success by giving them the necessary guidance and by doing so, VI.BE aims to nurture the Flemish music industry.

VI.BE's website provides an expansive overview of the organisation's history (VI.BE, n.d.-d), which will be used to sketch a short history in the following paragraphs. VI.BE, formerly known as 'Poppunt Vlaanderen' ('Pop Point Flanders'), emerged in 1998 when there was little to no support for pop music in Flanders. Founder Luc Nowé – who is still the managing director of VI.BE up until this day – wanted to support young musicians in Flanders. However, at this point, 'Poppunt Vlaanderen' was not officially recognised in the Flemish Music Decree. In 1998, the organisation tried to apply for subsidies, when the first Music Decree was established, but received a negative assessment. It took up until 2001 for 'Poppunt Vlaanderen' to receive its first structural subsidy when pop and rock were finally recognised in the Amateur Arts Decree.

In 2001, 'Poppunt Vlaanderen' and 'Popadvies' merged to 'Poppunt.be' (Mutsaers & Keunen, 2017, p. 3; VI.BE, n.d.-d). On its website, VI.BE (n.d.-d) goes on to describe how a few years later, in 2008, the music landscape in Flanders had changed drastically due to digitisation, and thus Poppunt.be dropped its first online tool for musicians and key players from the sector: VI.BE was born. By 2011, tens of thousands of musicians were registered on the VI.BE platform, with many of them receiving playing opportunities offered by different organisations and initiatives.

2.5.2. Obligations and initiatives

VI.BE must comply with the guidelines set out in the Flemish Arts Decree ('Kunstendecreet') of April 23, 2021, as well as the Amateur Arts Decree ('Amateurkunstendecreet') of March 19, 2021. The Management Agreement for 2023-2027 in implementation of the Arts Decree of April 23, 2021 (Vlaamse Regering, n.d.), set out three main pillars for the operation of VI.BE as an organisation: the first pillar focuses on expertise management and sharing, with VI.BE acting as a platform to share relevant knowledge and skills with artists, big and small; second, VI.BE should facilitate opportunities and growth for artists, e.g., by giving artists the chance to showcase their talents, develop their skills, and enhance their visibility; and lastly, the Management Agreement discloses that VI.BE should aim to help artists build their networks so that knowledge and experience can be shared.

Throughout the years, VI.BE has launched several initiatives to support small and upcoming artists, acting as a support system. Here is an overview of the current scope of activities of VI.BE:

- Knowledge: VI.BE acts as a hub for providing valuable information for artists. In the Management Agreement 2023-2027 in implementation of the Arts Decree of April 23, 2021 (Vlaamse Regering, n.d.), the specific tasks for VI.BE concerning research and knowledge are set out:

  (1) Sharing expertise and offering primary advice to artists and the sector; (2) encouraging artist development; (3) empowering artists and sector professionals through training and education; (4) observing, tracking, and mapping trends and advancements; (5) initiating, stimulating, and coordinating research; (6) using data to provide stronger support for the sector. (p. 4)

  There are a few examples of how VI.BE tries to fulfil this research and knowledge duty. Most importantly, VI.BE provides one-on-one advice for artists who need guidance navigating the Flemish music industry (VI.BE, n.d.-b).

There are also other ways in which VI.BE provides advice and knowledge to artists, for example on their website (VI.BE, n.d.-a), or through their 'Poppuntgids' ('Pop point guide'), a book that serves as a comprehensive guide for musicians and DJs (Pauly & H'madoun, 2017).

Finally, VI.BE also tries to further support research surrounding music and the Flemish music industry, by conducting their own research (VI.BE, n.d.-g), or by supporting research in education, for example with its annual Pop Thesis Prize (Mutsaers & Keunen, 2017, p. 3).

- <u>Platform</u>: VI.BE's website provides a platform for artists where they can create profiles, and discover and sign up for new opportunities. According to VI.BE (n.d.-j), over 20,000 artists have created a profile on the platform, as well as over 1,000 organisations and media outlets that can offer artists the opportunity to play at upcoming events. The platform has offered some now well-known artists' first playing opportunities, such as Bazart, Brutus, Compact Disc Dummies, Tamino, and Charlotte De Witte (VI.BE, n.d.-j).

- <u>Projects</u>: VI.BE is engaged in a few different projects to help support the music scene in Flanders and Belgium.

    o 'Sound Track' is a music competition, initiated by VI.BE in collaboration with diverse music institutions in Flanders – such as Ancienne Belgique, Het Depot, Trix, and others – and artists from all genres can participate (VI.BE, n.d.-i). Among 'Humo's Rock Rally' and 'De Nieuwe Lichting', 'Sound Track' is one of the more prominent music competitions in Flanders. On its website, VI.BE (n.d.-i) discloses that the 18 laureates receive year-long support with personal guidance, workshops, and performances in prominent concert halls. By winning this competition, these artists are offered significant opportunities to grow their careers. In 2023, 1,133 artists submitted an entry (VI.BE, n.d.-i).

- 'Lokale Helden' (*'Local Heroes'*) is a music celebration held biennially in April, aiming to highlight local musical talent (Lokale Helden, n.d.). It encourages diverse organizers, ranging from youth centres to cultural houses and cafes, to showcase musical talent from their local scene.

- 'Stoemp!' celebrates music in Brussels by hosting free concerts in lesser-known venues and pubs, bringing music closer to the audience (Stoemp!, n.d.). During this event, new artists get the chance to get exposure to new audiences and established artists can perform in a more intimate setting.

- The 'MIA's' (Music Industry Awards), the yearly award ceremony recognising outstanding achievements in the Belgian music industry, are organised by the public broadcaster, VRT, in collaboration with VI.BE (VI.BE, n.d.-f).

- 'Week van de Belgische muziek' (*'Week of Belgian Music'*) is a week-long event that celebrates and promotes Belgian music (Week van de Belgische Muziek, n.d.). VI.BE actively participates in this week, aiming to enhance the appreciation and recognition of Belgian talent.

Chapter 3. Methodological research design

3.1.   Research questions

Throughout the last decade, music industries all over the world have undergone a notable transformation, due to digitisation. It appears that although this has brought along some promising opportunities for artists (McLean et al., 2010, p. 1375), there is another side to the coin, as the digital realm also comes with many challenges, such as standing out in an oversaturated market (Bostoen & Vanherpe, 2021, p. 35).

This master's thesis explores business model innovation in the Flemish music industry, focusing on how collaboration with support platforms, such as VI.BE, can aid small and upcoming artists in navigating the complexities of the digitalised music landscape. The central research questions are:

How do small and upcoming artists in Flanders navigate the digitalised music industry, and what is the role of support systems like VI.BE in their success?

1. What strategies do small and upcoming artists in Flanders employ to adapt to the digitalisation of the music industry?

2. What role do organisations such as VI.BE play in supporting and empowering small and upcoming artists in Flanders in this evolving digital landscape?

To get a better understanding of the role of support systems for small artists in a small-scale setting, this thesis will use VI.BE as a specific case study. This will give a better overview of VI.BE as an organisation, their history, current support programs, collaborative projects with artists, and their overall significance in fostering artist visibility in Flanders.

3.2. Data collection methods

To get an understanding of the presence of a platform such as VI.BE in a small-scale music landscape and how this impacts artist visibility, this study makes use of qualitative data collection, more specifically in-depth interviews, with the specific case study of VI.BE as a support system.

3.3. Scope of data collection

3.3.1. In-depth interviews: artist perspective

In-depth interviews with small and upcoming Flemish artists will give a better understanding of their personal experiences within the music industry. By asking open-ended questions, these in-depth interviews with small artists will give an overview of their strategies for navigating the digitalised music landscape in Flanders, as well as their perspectives on the significance of support systems such as VI.BE in enhancing their visibility.

A total of 18 small and upcoming artists, who have utilised VI.BE's resources in the past, will be asked about their experiences with the organisation and how they perceive the role of such support system in the digitalised music industry in Flanders. Besides that, they will be asked some more general questions about how they navigate the digitalised music industry in Flanders as a small artist.

To ensure the quality of responses, the selection of artists encompasses a diverse range of profiles, with differences in genres, sizes, popularity, monthly listeners and more. This diversity in profiles is essential to capture the big range of different perspectives and experiences within the digitalised music industries. By gathering these different insights, a more holistic understanding of the current challenges and opportunities that are encountered by artists in Flanders can be gained. Moreover, it allows to understand how different elements and factors may influence how an artist navigates the digitalised music industry, as well as their presence on the VI.BE platform.

First, this diversity in profiles of the participants includes a near equal number of bands and solo artists. It is essential to include both, since solo artists and bands might navigate the music industry in different ways. Besides a combination of both bands and solo artists, the participants stem from diverse musical genres, varying from pop to hip-hop, rock, noise, jazz, house, and post-punk. By including a diversity in genres in this research, we can explore how VI.BE's support programs impact various genres and communities and paint a more nuanced picture.

To reflect the different stages of artists within the music industry, the respondents also vary in size and popularity. The research includes both artists who are just starting out, as well as artists who already have significant followings and success, with some artists being not yet present on Spotify, while others have a reach of >1,000 monthly listeners on that same platform.

To refer back to the categorisation of Leenders et al. (2015, pp. 1808-1809), there is a mix of 'Emerging Stars', 'Independents', 'Question Marks', and 'Hobbyists'. Given the small size of the Flemish music industry, and to maintain clarity during the in-depth interviews, this research will not include 'Regional Stars' (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1809). To avoid any ambiguity, this research will define these categories in a more straightforward way, focusing on their simple characteristics rather than the specific traits specified by Leenders et al. (2015):

- 'Emerging Stars' are artists who are signed with a label;
- 'Independents' are artists who are not signed with a label and release their music independently;
- 'Question Marks' are artists who have not yet achieved significant success, but might do so in the future;
- 'Hobbyists' are artists who have no intention of building a professional career and merely engage in music as a hobby.

Furthermore, there is a mix of artists who have participated in prominent contests like 'Sound Track', 'Humo's Rock Rally', and 'De Nieuwe Lichting', and those who have not.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 18 artists that were interviewed for this research. By having a blend of bands, solo artists, genres and sizes, the research aims to provide a well-rounded overview and understanding of how artists perceive VI.BE's presence in the Flemish music industry, and how VI.BE influences their experience of navigating the digitalised music scene.

Table 1

Overview of interview participants

#	Solo/band	Genre	Category	Monthly listeners on Spotify
1.	Solo	Indie-pop	Independent	> 50,000
2.	Band	Post-punk	Emerging Star	> 20,000
3.	Band	Indie-rock	Emerging Star	> 6,000
4.	Band	Noise	Emerging Star	> 3,000
5.	Band	Psychedelic, post-punk	Independent	> 1,000
6.	Solo	Electronic pop	Independent	> 1,000
7.	Band	Noise, post-punk	Independent	> 1,000
8.	Band	Psychedelic, rock	Emerging Star	> 1,000
9.	Band	Punk	Question Mark	> 300
10.	Solo	Hip-hop	Question Mark	> 100
11.	Solo	Indie-pop	Hobbyist	> 100
12.	Solo	Indie-pop	Question Mark	> 100
13.	Band	Rock, post-punk	Question Mark	> 100
14.	Band	Alternative punk	Question Mark	< 100
15.	Band	Soul, jazz, funk	Question Mark	< 100
16.	Solo	Blues, indie	Hobbyist	N/a
17.	Solo	House, disco, electro	Question Mark	N/a
18.	Solo	Pop, rock	Question Mark	N/a

3.3.2. In-depth interviews: organisational perspective

To comprehensively understand VI.BE as an organisation and its role within the digitalised Flemish music industry, this research includes in-depth interviews with key figures within VI.BE's management and employee base. This will give more insight in VI.BE's role within the Flemish music industry, the strategies they employ to empower small artists, and the impact their support programs and collaborative projects have on artist visibility. This way, more insights can be gathered about VI.BE's mission, vision, and overarching goals to foster the music ecosystem in Flanders. The participants for these interviews consist of:

(1) a representative from VI.BE to gain insights in how the organisation was founded, what it core principles are, what its current role in the Flemish music industry is and how its role has evolved in the past decades, and what its long-term vision is. This in-depth interview will provide some context for understanding VI.BE as a support system;

(2) a representative from VI.BE who is responsible for overseeing important support programs such as Stoemp! and Sound Track;

(3) a representative from VI.BE who coordinates advisory and training services for artists;

(4) a VI.BE representative who is responsible for the web coordination and VI.BE platform.

3.4.   Data analysis methodology

After conducting the in-depth interviews with 18 artists and four VI.BE representatives, the recordings will be transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. For the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews, an AI-tool will be used for time-saving purposes (see Appendix A). By doing so, common themes and patterns can be identified, which will lead to new insights, gathered from various perspectives. The following chapter will further define the used theoretical frameworks for the data gathering and analysis in more detail.

3.5.   Theoretical framework

This study will make use of qualitative research methods, such as the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and coding techniques (Mortelmans, 2020, pp. 401-447), to later help build a theoretical framework. This Grounded Theory approach allows for this study to create a theoretical framework based on the collected data from a real-world setting (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, pp. 3-4), in this case small artists, and representatives from VI.BE. This way, the findings of this study can, in the future, be applied to real-world settings and scenarios (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p. 237). For example, the theories that are drawn from the data-analysis of the in-depth interviews can be used by governments and institutions in other countries to gather more knowledge on how to approach the support of small artists in the digitalised music industry.

The qualitative analysis of the gathered data, (i.e., in-depth interviews of artists and VI.BE representatives) will be approached in different phases, as described by Mortelmans (2020, pp. 369-370). First, the gathered data will be digitised, in this case by transcribing the recorded audio from the in-depth interviews to a written format. In the next phase, the data will be prepared for analysis by organising and archiving it properly, e.g., by anonymising the data. Third, the gathered data will be broken down and then rebuilt through coding. Using the 'open coding', 'axial coding', and 'selective coding' methods, as described by Mortelmans (2020, pp. 401-447), the data will be respectively organised, categorised, and integrated. During the 'open coding' process, the transcribed interview data will be thematically labelled, followed by the 'axial coding' during which the different themes will be categorised in overarching themes. Finally, during the last phase of the coding process, 'selective coding' the overarching reoccurring themes will be analysed and connections between themes will be made, to construct a theory. Finally, the developed theory will be presented, as well as the implications of the findings, the potential limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 4. Results and analysis

4.1. Identifying the main obstacles for small artists in the Flemish music industry

The main objective of this research is to determine how small and upcoming artists in Flanders navigate the digitalised music industry and what the role of support platforms like VI.BE is in their success. To do so, it is essential to identify what the current main obstacles are for these artists on a day-to-day basis. This part of the results will dive deeper into these obstacles, gathered from the in-depth interviews with 18 small and upcoming artists in the Flemish music industry.

4.1.1. Venue accessibility and performance opportunities

One of the main themes that occurred throughout the interviews, is the challenge of finding performance opportunities and venues that are willing to give their stage to less experienced artists. While securing playing opportunities in established venues is crucial for an artist to grow their audience, it seems this is a barrier most of the artists that are just starting out are encountering. This challenge is multi-faceted in nature, as it is related to reputation, genre, networking, and even geographical barriers.

When it comes to reputation, some of the participants expressed having difficulties in accessing venues, stating that a lot of venues tend to not give their stages to artists that are less known or have no proven track record, which is a considerable barrier for artists that are just starting out. This creates a paradoxical scenario for emerging artists: they can't secure playing opportunities without having established themselves, yet they can't establish themselves without securing any playing opportunities.

Second, this barrier of not finding playing opportunities extends into the realm of genre, as some artists experienced venues not being open to give up their stage because of the genre they are performing in. When performing in 'less mainstream' genres, such as jazz, funk, or hip-hop

genres, artists tend to face this additional hurdle of their performances being less commercially attractive to venue owners. This again contributes to a vicious cycle, a self-fulfilling prophecy where these genres are not given the chance to perform for audiences, simply because they are less mainstream. For example, Artist 15, whose music can be situated in the jazz and funk genres, stated:

> It was very difficult when we sent emails to small cafés or something: very often, they had a specific image of what they wanted in their café. And that was never really what we were, so we also received a lot of emails saying: "Not our thing, sorry." This made it very difficult in the beginning to navigate, okay, where can we play? (Full interview transcripts are presented in Annex 3)

Finally, many of the interviews revealed that the Flemish music landscape is somewhat isolated and competitive, also contributing to the challenge of finding open stage. One reason for this is that many venues and festivals often have to deal with very little financial means, which results in them wanting to book the act that will most likely guarantee them a high enough return on investment. One of the VI.BE representatives stated that: "Choices have to be made in programming, in money, in new ways of fair pay for the artists, and so on." These financial constraints result in a huge disadvantage for small artists that are trying to establish themselves by securing opportunities to play live.

Besides the economic reasons, the small market size of Flanders means that there is only a limited number of venues, and thus playing opportunities available. Without a solid entourage, such as a booker or manager, it is very difficult to secure one of these limited slots all by yourself.

4.1.2. Financial challenges

Throughout the conversations with the small and upcoming artists, it was clear that many of the obstacles came down to one crucial thing: finances. This financial challenge seems to be ubiquitous, as most artists starting out have little means to get themselves started. This manifests itself in different ways: (1) very low payment for live gigs; (2) the recording, producing, and marketing of music; and (3) low revenue from streaming platforms.

1) Very low payment for live gigs

For few artists, performing live can make for a primary source of income. However, for the majority of artists this is not the case, as the payment for live gigs for small artists that are just starting out can be extremely low, as many venues in Flanders offer low to no compensation for live performances. On the one hand this issue can be attributed to a self-evident over-supply of artists with too little venues to perform in. There is a large number of emerging artists who are all competing for just a few opportunities to perform live, which not only creates a competitive environment, but also gives venues a large pool of artists to choose from, resulting in a very low payments for gigs. On the other hand, this issue is linked to venue owners not perceiving live music as something valuable, but rather something supplementary.

According to some artists, a third additional reason for the low payment for live performances, might be that many venues offer playing opportunities as a means for artists to gain exposure and build their audience, rather than a paid engagement. Artist 4, one of the 'Emerging Star' participants (Leenders et al., 2015, pp. 1808-1809), stated that: "In the beginning, you have to play for free, or for a coke and a beer, and if you're really lucky a pack of fries". In short, there is often the assumption that the experience the artist can gain during performing live, and the exposure they can get on stage, is a sufficient reward.

Together, all of these factors make it very challenging for artists to get their career launched. Often times, artists feel compelled to accept the small amount of money they are paid for a live gig because it is the only way to get playing opportunities and show themselves to the world.

2) Recording, producing, releasing music

Besides being paid very little for live performances, many upcoming artists also struggle to find budgets for the production, recording, and marketing of their music, even though these budgets are so important to impact their initial growth. While more and more emerging artists seem to take the independent route when starting, there are very high costs associated with recording, producing, and releasing music. One of the VI.BE representatives stated: "It's very expensive to make recordings. If you want to go to a fancy studio, that costs a lot of money." Consequently, many artists opt to self-produce their music to cut costs, but this can compromise the quality and thus the marketability of their music. For instance, some of the participants speculated they often might not get selected for playing opportunities because their song demos are not good enough to make the cut.

3) Low revenue from streaming platforms

Finally, this financial issue also extends into the distribution of music, as platforms are now taking remarkable cuts, and not renumerating artists sufficiently (Marshall, 2015, p. 181). Some artists highlighted the minimal revenue they receive from streaming platforms, such as Spotify. Even though it is fairly easy to share your music onto the platform, and there is a small possibility to be picked up by Spotify's algorithm, the actual financial return of this platform is negligible (Marshall, 2015, p. 179). One of the VI.BE representatives explained briefly how Spotify's royalties system works:

> How Spotify works is all streams of a country are simply thrown into a pile. It is just fairly distributed – democratically, so to speak: all of the money Spotify earns from a subscription, and from advertising revenue, is then divided over the streams. If you don't have a share in the streams, then yes, it doesn't make much money. That's just how it works.

While Spotify keeps growing and profiting, most artists are not able to make a tangible income by uploading their music onto the platform. Artist 11 emphasised that "you don't get any income

from it, it's just necessary for visibility." These findings show a stark discrepancy between the exposure a platform such as Spotify offers, versus the actual financial return it provides. Spotify is by many artists perceived as an opaque platform, and Spotify's royalty systems are no exception to this (Marshall, 2015, pp. 185-186). Because of the opaqueness of Spotify as a platform, and the low payment artists receive for streams, most artists must still rely primarily on live performances for revenue (Tilson et al., 2013, p. 4631).

4.1.3. Navigational challenges: rights management and administrative tasks

The digitalisation of the music industry also brought along many new navigational challenges for artists, especially for those who are just taking their first steps in the industry and have no network surrounding them. Navigating rights management and administrative responsibilities has become more prevalent in this digital age (Thomson, 2013, p. 515), and many artists are unsure of how to tackle this. The complex web of regulations, compensation systems, rights management organisations, legal entities, and the fast-changing landscape, makes it overwhelming and confusing for many small and upcoming artists to commence their journey.

First, many of the participants expressed that they feel bewildered when having to deal with rights management organisations, such as Playright, the organisation that manages the neighbouring rights of performing artists (Playright, n.d.), and Sabam, the Belgian association that manages the copyrights of authors, composers, and publishers (Sabam, n.d.). These entities are perceived as opaque organisations, leaving many artists unsure of how to deal with them. Without clear guidance or a network that can help them navigate these complexities, many artists feel lost in this complex landscape.

Besides that, the Flemish music landscape is characterised by constant regulatory changes, affecting the music industry widely. For example, on the 1st of January 2024, the small fees scheme for artists ('kleine vergoedingsregeling' or 'KVR') was reformed to an amateur arts compensation ('amateurskunstenvergoeding' or 'AKV') (Cultuurloket, n.d.). This reform

brought along some striking changes in how artists are compensated for their performances and creative works. For instance, the 'AKV' introduced a reduction in the maximum amount of compensation per service for artists, lowering the number from €147.97 to a cap of €70 (VI.BE, 2023). Additionally, the amateur arts compensation be used no more than 30 days per year (VI.BE, 2023). Because of these limits and changes, many artists are now compelled to move into some form self-employment, e.g., part-time self-employed or as a non-profit organisation (VI.BE, 2024b), as this would allow them to bypass this restriction and ask for more money for performances (Delport, 2024). However, many of the participants described how setting up such formal structure is a very bureaucratic process, that acquires the right knowhow and experience. Besides the lowering of the compensation for artists, the transition from 'KVR' to 'AKV' mandates that all payments are now registered through a new platform (Cultuurloket, n.d.), bringing about an extra administrative load for artists. This recent example of the transition from the small fees scheme for artists to amateur arts compensation is a good illustration of how artists continuously have to adapt to a rapidly evolving landscape, and how this poses a lot of difficulties, especially for those who have no support network surrounding them (Thomson, 2013, p. 523). For smaller, independent artists, who lack the resources to quickly adapt, these changes can be overwhelming.

These findings correspond with Thomson's (2013) idea of the "artist as entrepreneur" (p. 516), where contemporary artists have to take on multi-faceted roles. In this case, the necessity for artists to manage multiple aspects of their careers, such as rights management and administrative tasks. Artists are increasingly required to handle the business-aspect of their careers by themselves, which is a daunting responsibility for many.

4.1.4. Networking and building a supporting team

While networking is a fundamental aspect of an artist's career, it simultaneously is one of the most significant obstacles for emerging artists in Flanders. The process of building a network is tedious and requires the right skillset, such as socialising, and being able to market yourself

to other people. Due to the industry's isolated nature and opaqueness in many aspects, networking is challenging for many small artists.

Overall, many artists referred to the Flemish music scene as a close-knit community ("hun-kent-hun-wereldje" or "ons-kent-ons-wereldje"), where personal connections and relationships are crucial to advance in your musical career. The industry is perceived as "closed", making it easier for those who have pre-existing connections to receive opportunities, while it is more difficult for others to gain a stable position. Some of the participants described feeling like outsiders when they started out, as it was difficult to penetrate in this close-knit community where it appears everyone knows each other already.

Besides that, building up one's network involves active participation in industry events, performances, and social gatherings, which is a very labour-intensive and overwhelming task for those who have little experience in this. Many artists described this aspect of their career as exhausting and daunting, even though they recognise the importance of it. Besides that, "selling yourself" to others is challenging, as it requires some marketing skills, which many artists do not possess.

As there is very strong competition in an over-saturated market with artists vying for the same opportunities, networking is a skill that requires a lot of time, effort, and dedication. It is a significant barrier small artists must overcome to set their first steps in the industry, but breaking through the industry's close-knit community remains a considerable challenge for many.

4.1.5. The Flemish music landscape and cross-regional recognition

Managing small market dynamics

The Flemish music landscape presents a small, but complex environment for small and upcoming artists who are seeking to launch their career. Some artists highlighted that operating in such small market brings along some difficulties, especially if they want to make a significant impact or sustain their career long-term within this geographical scope.

First, a small market also means a relatively small audience base, which could restrict an artist's reach when first releasing music, or if they want to reach a more international audience. For example, Artist 6 mentioned: "I certainly don't want to limit myself to Flanders or Belgium, because they are indeed so small. I think it's a shame that many artists get stuck in that."

On the other hand, related to the challenge of not finding playing opportunities mentioned in 4.1.1., the small size of the Flemish market also means the market is somewhat saturated, with many artists having the aspiration to find playing opportunities and grow their audience. Many artists are vying for the same, limited spots in venues and on festivals, making competition abundant and resulting in some artists struggling to set their first steps in the Flemish music industry.

The Flemish music scene is sometimes perceived as conservative

Besides the small market size of the Flemish music landscape, some of the participants described the Flemish music scene as culturally conservative, especially in terms of its receptiveness to non-mainstream genres, such as hip-hop, funk, and jazz. This conservatist outlook on music manifests itself in different ways, impacting how artists from non-dominant genres have to pave their way to success.

First, while there might be some support coming from smaller niche communities, the main impression is that the vast majority of the venues is more interested in commercially safe genres

(as mentioned in 4.1.1.). Artist 10, whose music can be situated in the hip-hop genre, remarked: "I just think we're afraid to try new things and listen to new things."

Another takeaway from the in-depth interviews with the participants was that there's a lot of difficulty trying to get your music played on the radio. For example, some artists from more distinct genres such as electronic pop and hip-hop felt that Flemish radio stations are quite reluctant when it comes to giving these genres exposure through airplay.

Overall, the Flemish music market is described as culturally conservative, with a strong preference for mainstream genres a reluctance to embrace alternative musical expressions. This conservatism can bring along some major struggles for artists in less mainstream genres who are just starting out. They might feel discouraged, and this favouring of popular genres might even cause artists to rethink their artistry to try to make it more commercially viable, which could in the end stifle creativity.

Expanding horizons in Wallonia and the Netherlands

As Flanders is sometimes perceived as not only a very small, but also a conservative local market by many artists, many of them have increasingly looked at neighbouring regions or countries to find playing opportunities, get airplay on radios, and engage with more broad and diverse audiences. For example, some artists felt that overall, Wallonia and the Netherlands are more open to diverse musical expressions. So, while the Flemish music scene appears to be more conservative and commercially driven, other regions seem to be more receptive to new musical talent, resulting in artists seeking playing opportunities outside of Flanders and pushing them further away from the borders of the Flemish music industry.

Positive perspectives within the Flemish music scene

Despite the challenges mentioned above, it is important to note that there were also a lot of positive sentiments about the Flemish music landscape, as many artists remarked that they feel a sense of community and a supportive environment in Flanders. Some of the artists emphasised

that their audience base is primarily local and provides them with the support they need to keep growing. Besides that, the small size of the Flemish music industry has its charm according to some of the participants, as it is easier to navigate as a small artist and you can build up your network relatively quickly, which would be more difficult in a very large market. For example, it is very common for artists to frequently attend each other's shows and engage with each other afterwards, which creates a feeling of camaraderie where artists can help each other grow, rather than feeling the need to compete with each other. So, while the Flemish music scene and the size of the market does bring along some challenges for artists who are just starting out, there are also positive aspects that were highlighted by many of the participants.

4.1.6. Digital marketing and social media presence

While social media is a very useful tool for many artists to make themselves visible to the world, share their music, and grow their audience (Cho et al., 2018, pp. 103-104), it appeared that the social media aspect of their careers also brings along some important challenges for small and upcoming artists. Even though all artists recognised the necessity of being active on social media, some of them expressed a dislike for this aspect of their professional engagement, for a variety of reasons. From general negative sentiments towards social media, to issues with becoming visible, to concerns about maintaining authenticity and dealing with algorithms: several key issues related to digital marketing and social media presence emerged during the interviews. This section will dive deeper into the most important challenges surrounding social media that were highlighted by the participants.

Negative sentiments towards social media

During the in-depth interviews, some artists expressed negative sentiments towards social media and maintaining an online presence. In the first place, some artists highlighted how they often feel stressed about continuously having to manage and think about their social media profile, as creating content is a very time-consuming task and demands a creative approach.

The increased workload that comes from having to maintain an online presence is not only time-consuming, but also draws away from time that could be spent on creating music.

Besides that, the superficial nature of online interactions, combined with its demand for continuous self-promotion, is something some of the participants felt uncomfortable with. For instance, artist 16 stated that: "Sometimes, it is more about the acting, or more about the entertainment factor, which is more important than what you're actually doing." It seems some artists have difficulties with actively promoting themselves online, as this might clash with their own intrinsic motivation to create meaningful art.

Becoming visible on oversaturated online platforms

A second important challenge many artists encountered is the issue of market saturation on social media, which makes it hard for artists to make themselves visible. Today, everyone has the resources to create and distribute their own music on digital platforms (Wikström, 2009, p. 147), resulting in an abundance of artists sharing their work online. Some artists pointed out that the number of artists present on platforms like Instagram makes it difficult to stand out. Artist 8 commented on this ambiguity: "It has its pros and cons. . . . It's easier to do it [being present online], but there's a much larger supply [of artists online], which makes it much harder to stick out." So, while the industry is democratised by social media platforms, there is a flip side, as these platforms are now flooded by content, which makes artists having to rethink their online strategy as they are trying to triumph this constant competition for visibility.

Additionally, there is the issue of non-transparency of algorithms (Bucher, 2018, p. 41), and figuring out how to see through them. Some artists feel lost when trying to adjust their content strategies to align with what the algorithm favours, but not always seeing results. This remains a process of trial and error, and according to some of the participants, being picked up by algorithms might just be a matter of "having good luck". This correlates with the findings of O'Dair and Fry (2019), who state that there is no "secret sauce" (p. 75) to deal with the opacity of these algorithms.

4.2.   Artist visibility: current strategies in music

Due to the competitive nature of the Flemish music industry, artists must adopt different visibility strategies in order to reach their audiences and sustain their careers. This chapter explores the various visibility-enhancing strategies that are employed by artists in Flanders, by drawing insights from the in-depth interviews. First, traditional methods, such as networking, creative processes of making music, and marketing strategies will be discussed. Additionally, this chapter delves into the digital strategies employed by artists, and how they leverage digital platforms for visibility and success.

4.2.1. Traditional strategies for becoming visible and marketing music

The importance of networking for artists

From the in-depth interviews, it quickly appeared that networking remains one of the most important cornerstones when it comes to gaining visibility and success in music. Artist 1 stated that "a network is everything". Even though it is no self-evident thing for a small artist to build up their network from scratch – as mentioned in chapter 4.1.4. – it is a crucial skill for artists who are in the pursuit of music career, as these connections may provide pivotal resources to move forward (Cartwright & Smith, 2014, pp. 444–445).

The interviews revealed that artists' networks encompass a wide range of people that can each contribute in their own way, such as venue owners, managers, bookers, record labels, producers, and even other artists and musicians. All of these nodes in the network help an artist to advance in their career, as they can act as a bridge to receiving first playing opportunities, getting airplay on a local radio station, creating high-quality music, getting the chance to play at a local festival, and so on.

Overall, the participants perceived networking to be "almost as crucial as music-making itself", as "knowing people" can significantly decrease many of the initial obstacles small artists are faced with.

The role of labels

The rise of digital platforms raises the question how relevant labels are today, as artists can now bypass this intermediary and directly share their music with an online audience (Hviid et al., 2018, p. 265). Overall, artists had mixed views about the role of labels in enhancing visibility, as there are a lot of benefits when working with a label, but on the contrary, there are also many substantial drawbacks.

On the one hand, artists described how labels can provide support in many aspects, such as networking, promoting, and financial support, which can greatly enhance an artist's visibility in the music industry, and thus help them grow. The resources a label can provide are perceived as very valuable, especially considering the obstacles small artists are faced with, such as not finding playing opportunities, having no connections in the industry, and financial challenges. Thanks to their expertise, labels can open many doors for artists, which might otherwise stay closed. This correlates with the findings of McCubbin (2012, p. 343), stating that labels are still appealing for artists for these reasons.

Additionally, labels possess the right knowledge on how to market music to a broad audience. Where artists might lack expertise in this aspect, labels can provide well thought-out marketing campaigns, that might extend their reach tremendously. As these labels often times have a big network at their disposal, they can help artists with the release and promotion of their music, ranging from press and public relations (PR) campaigns to digital marketing strategies and radio promotion. Artist 5 described how labels can play a big role in creating visibility: "It's fun to do it yourself, but professionals are professionals for a reason. They can simply do it better."

However, some artists felt that labels can be like a double-edged sword, as they might come with a trade-off in creative freedom. Therefore, 'Independents' and 'Question Marks' (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1809) – who are not signed by a label – expressed that they would consider signing with a label, only if there is a strong and genuine connection with the people behind it, and they would remain cautious of sketchy contracts.

Finally, artists emphasised that there is a shift in the relationship between artists and labels, as labels nowadays prefer to engage with artists who have already achieved some level of success. By signing artists with a proven track record, labels are able to better predict sales and streaming numbers, and thus minimise the financial risks for themselves. However, this shift has important implications for small artists, as they now have to independently establish their careers in order to be considered by labels.

Other strategies for marketing music

Besides networking, there are other traditional strategies artists employ to enhance their visibility, such as strategic release planning, engaging traditional media, and establishing professional collaborations and partnerships. Even though these are more traditional strategies, they are still pivotal when it comes to marketing music and enhancing artists' visibility in the industry. This section takes a closer look at the different strategies artists employ to market their music, apart from networking and social media.

Creating music: creative process

Of course, for many artists, high-quality musical output lies at the core of being able to market your music to the public. According to some of the participants, the quality of the music must meet the industry standards in quality and consistency, and every release must meet the expectations that are set by previous works, or even exceed them. Artist 3, one of the 'Emerging Star' participants (Leenders et al., 2015, pp. 1808-1809), emphasised the importance of high-quality recordings:

> What's really important in your growth process as a band is that you record music and that you can record it in high quality, so that you have something to send around. . . . If you don't have good quality recordings that are well mixed and well mastered, you're not going to get anywhere.

Alongside this high-quality music, many artists believe visual content has become one of the most fundamental things if you want to market your music to a broad audience. This includes

music videos, promotional imagery, and album artwork. These elements are not merely aesthetic, but serve as tools to make music more engaging and shareable to the audience. According to the participants, audiences on dominant platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are very visually oriented, which makes investing in visual content a good strategic choice. According to Artist 3, it is beneficial to maintain the same visual style throughout the online and offline aspects of your career:

> Take a photographer with you and he or she edits the photos in a certain style. And also, when you release singles or an album, there is artwork around it that has a bit of a story and the same visual accents. You should also try to maintain the same visual style on stage.

Finally, when it comes to music creation, some of the participants emphasised the benefits of collaborations and partnerships with other musicians. By partnering up with other creatives, artists are able to access blend genres, innovate their style, and – most importantly – reach new audiences. Overall, collaborations seem to be a common strategy for artists who want to branch out in style, which can possibly broaden their demographic appeal and market reach.

Marketing music

Turning to the marketing aspect, according to many artists, a strategic release planning is one of the most crucial things since the timing of and build-up to a release can dramatically impact its reception by the audience. To maximise chances to exposure, artists must consider things such as launch dates, touring dates, and important events where they can plug their new release.

This release strategy extends beyond just the release of music; even post-release, artists must make sure to keep the momentum alive, which requires to plan far ahead. Artist 4 described this as "reverse calculating time", thinking about where they want to be with the release of their music within a certain period of time.

Second, traditional media still play a crucial role for many artists when it comes to music promotion today, despite the rise of digital platforms. Some of the participants highlighted how they try to make connections with journalists from radio, television, and print media, as these people can help plug their releases in the press and reach a demographic that might be less present on social media, which might allow the artist to reach a more diverse audience base. Connecting with traditional media requires some specialised promotional skills, such as compelling press releases and engaging in interviews with journalists, which makes this aspect challenging for many artists.

However, as mentioned in 4.2.1., marketing music becomes a more bearable task when surrounded with a network that can give a helping hand. Managers, publicists, and agents can provide artists all of the necessary industry expertise and help guide them through the strategic decisions they must make to market their music. Besides that, some artists get additional help from music pluggers or other promotional agencies, that can help to get the artist's music featured on Spotify playlists and secure press coverage.

4.2.2. Leveraging digital platforms for visibility and success

In the modern landscape of the music industry, social media has become a predominant way for artists to gain visibility and engage with audiences, especially for 'Independents' (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1813). From the in-depth interviews, it became clear that all artists agree on the idea that nowadays, being present on social media is more important than ever before, and artists who fail to jump on that bandwagon will possibly lack behind.

This part of the thesis will dive deeper into how artists perceive the impact of social media on their visibility, their preferred platforms, and the actual strategies they utilise to enhance their visibility on online platforms and engage with their audience.

Social media as a contemporary gateway to the music industry

Social media platforms have marked a break with the past, where artists had to face many entry barriers that discouraged them from entering the music industry. Before the digital age, artists depended heavily on record labels, who acted as gatekeepers, given that they had all of the right resources (Wikström, 2009, p. 143). Today, platforms like Instagram and Spotify allow artists to bypass these traditional gatekeepers, such as labels, and present themselves – and their artistry – directly to a global audience (Hviid et al., 2018, pp. 272-273; Wikström, 2009, p. 7).

Strategies artists employ to become visible on social media

Artist 12 described how social media makes it easier to make yourself visible to the public: "It's easier to try to stand out. Because back in the day, if you didn't have a label, or you didn't have anyone to promote you, then you couldn't promote yourself. So, in that respect it's easier." However, paradoxically, becoming visible on social media was perceived as more challenging:

> At the same time, it is also much more difficult, because anyone can do it. So, you have a lot more competition . . . You're in a much bigger pool of artists and people fighting for the most streams and radio stuff [airplay], and so on.

Even though many of the participants do not have a specific social media strategy, or are still experimenting with their profiles, there are a few ways in which they try to become visible online. One fundamental aspect that was highlighted in several interviews, is the importance of maintaining a professional and clean aesthetic in social media posts. In order to establish credibility and attract the right audiences, it is beneficial for artists to invest in their online presentation. Some artists highlighted the importance of high-quality social media content, as this can directly influence the audience's perception of you and, by extension, your chances to become successful in the industry. Therefore, many of the participants emphasised the need for high-resolution images, well-edited videos, and a coherent visual theme across posts, as this will significantly contribute to an artist's professional image.

In the same way, creating and maintaining a unique brand identity in social media is another strategy that is employed by artists in order to become visible. From creating a unique tone-of-voice, to adopting consistent visual styling, and thinking about the persona you want to project to your online audience: creating an online brand identity is an important way for artists to stand out. Artist 7 described it as just another way of being creative: "Extend a bit of your artistry to another platform, another instrument, another tool that is not a musical instrument." In relation to this, artists also emphasised the importance of authenticity, underscoring that a social media profile should reflect your artistry, rather than a forced façade. Some artists try to do this by sharing behind-the-scenes content or storytelling, as this type of content creates a more genuine and personal social media presence.

Third – related to the issue of online visibility, mentioned in 4.1.6. – understanding algorithms is crucial when trying to become visible on social media. However, because of the opacity of algorithms (Bucher, 2018, p. 41), many artists are not sure how to deal with them. Some of the participants described how they try to experiment with different types of content, posting times, and engagement strategies, to see what works best, even though they are unsure of how effective these strategies are, as they don't fully understand how algorithms work. Specific examples that were highlighted were using relevant hashtags, creating engaging content (e.g., call-to-actions, questions, …), posting regularly, and engaging with followers.

Finally, artists pointed out the pivotal role social media plays in releasing new music. The period leading up to and following a music release is crucial, and many artists will adopt a music release strategy for social media, such as posts anticipating the upcoming release. Artist 12 recalled asking other artists for advice on how to deal with upcoming releases on social media:

> I've talked about it with other artists who had already done that and asked them: 'How do you do that?' And they simply said: 'start promoting two weeks before and two weeks after the release.' . . . Well, I had planned that out pretty well, like: that day, I'll post that photo, and then I'll post that, and then, I'll post that video, . . .

Instagram

Overall, Instagram appeared to be one of the more favoured platforms among artists. This platform stands out as a favourite, mainly for its visual nature. Several artists mentioned Instagram as the platform that allows them to "show the world who they are", which signifies artists not only use Instagram as a promotional tool for their music, but also as a space to build a close connection with their following. Overall, most artists felt like audiences today are noticeably visually oriented, and a platform such as Instagram with its emphasis on visual content with the ability to create engaging posts, stories, and reels, seems to align well with an artist's need to display their identity and craftmanship.

Facebook

Despite this shift to more visually engaging platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, Facebook continues to exist and is still commonly used by artists, mainly for its ability to create event pages, which allows artists to easily announce and promote upcoming events. Besides that, Facebook's integration with Instagram also makes it possible to easily synchronise posts, which makes maintaining a Facebook page pretty much effortless. However, artists seem to use this platform less, since younger audiences are shifting away from this platform.

TikTok

Finally, when asking artists which platforms they utilise most frequently, TikTok seems to be the odd man out, as this platform offers a unique challenge: its algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 2). TikTok is characterised by its short and catchy clips (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 1), that can be easily consumed by the viewer. However, many of the participants had mixed sentiments towards TikTok as a platform, as this short-form content would squeeze them into a box, where they might have to oversimplify or alter their artistic expression to cater to TikTok's fast-paced and trend-driven environment.

Many of the participants remarked that many people who are present on TikTok try to change or alter their personality to grasp the audience's attention, which is something they are reluctant of doing, as it would push them far back from their artistry. Artist 5 noted that trying to adapt to TikTok's quick-form content might feel a bit like 'selling oneself':

> Yes, I am positive about it [TikTok], but it's a bit like selling your soul, because it's a far cry from making music. Or a little bit further. You are creating content that is created to promote your music, but the content itself has less to do with that. So, it's actually a catalyst for your career that you could skip, but you still use it to become popular faster.

It is important to note that this resistance to having to change your personality to be able to stand out more on TikTok, seemed to be most prevalent among artists from the post-punk scene, who generally take a critical stance against mainstream pop culture, by emphasising authenticity and trying to resist commercial pressures, especially when it comes to social media.

A last concern that was raised, is the sustainability of audience engagement through the TikTok platform. Many artists question whether viral popularity on TikTok necessarily translates into new listeners, a strong fanbase, and new playing opportunities, or if it mainly produces a short moment of quick attention. The ephemeral nature of TikTok makes many artists think it might not be worth it investing a lot of time and resources in creating captivating TikToks, as they might be forgotten by the next minute. Artist 12 highlighted how, unlike Instagram, where followers can see a sequential build-up of an artist's work and updates, TikTok operates on a more random basis, which does not allow for a gradual engagement with content. An artist has to capture the audience's attention with just one TikTok, which makes it difficult to create a story and build long-lasting relationships with an audience. This fast consumption cycle seems to keep many artists reluctant from using the platform to this today.

4.2.3. Performing live remains important

Although participants acknowledged that being present on social media is pivotal for enhancing visibility, many artists felt that there is a certain discrepancy between online success and tangible industry recognition, questioning if digital popularity will necessarily result into real-world success. According to some of the participants, having a lot of likes or streams won't always correlate with deeper fan engagement or audience growth at live events. This disconnection between the online and offline realms makes some artists question how effective social media might be for building a loyal fan base. For example, Artist 6 highlighted:

> Now, there are many artists who have a lot of streams, but whose shows actually don't sell well at all. Which in itself is very interesting and also fun, that that is possible. But yes, it sometimes gives a distorted picture. Just because you have a lot of streams doesn't mean you are successful. That's a bit misleading.

Because of this discrepancy between online and offline success, the significance of live performances cannot be underestimated. Live music continues to play a critical role in building and sustaining an artist's career, and according to some of the participants, it is still more important to focus on live performances rather than simply relying on social media, as these gigs are crucial for enhancing visibility and deepening audience engagement. The direct interaction that is possible at a live event is invaluable, and some of the participants believed this allowed them to build a much deeper connection with their audience than they could on social media and helps contribute to the artist's authenticity.

However, it is important to note this emphasis on live performances might also be a genre-related concern, as a big majority of the artists that remarked this come from genres like post-punk or jazz, where the emphasis on performing live has always been more prominent. As one artist remarked, genres like pop or hip-hop might be able to benefit more from social media than other genres. Nevertheless, it appears that many artists still believe there are unique advantages to performing live, such as authenticity and immediate engagement.

4.2.4. Building the bridge between live performances and social media

Building the bridge between live performances and social media is an increasingly vital strategy for artists in the Flemish region. As it is clear that both being present on social media platforms and focusing on live performances are equally important, artists try to connect these two aspects of their career as a strategy to become visible. There appears to be a reciprocal tie between posting on social media and performing live: as live events can fuel social media engagement and attract new followers, social media can in turn amplify live attendance and participation. By strategically integrating both of these aspects, artists aim to increase their visibility, both in the physical and digital realm.

On the one hand, artists will make efforts during live performances to guide the live audience to their social media profiles. This is achieved through simple, yet effective gestures, such as verbally mentioning their artist or band name, making staff wear merchandise, or by explicitly plugging their social media details during the show. These simple, straightforward actions seem to be effective, as they lead to an increase in social media followers.

Vice versa, artists use social media as a tool to draw their online following to their live performances, by announcing upcoming shows, creating Facebook events, and creating buzz around the event on their profiles. This is self-evident, considering that there are practically no costs associated with promoting events on social media (Cho et al., 2018, p. 111). Artist 2, one of the 'Emerging Star' artists highlighted how there is a direct correlation between social media posts and ticket sales:

> My phone was broken, and I didn't feel like spending money on it, and I noticed that a phone-free life was actually quite nice. But then we really noticed a downward trend in many things. For example, ticket sales went down a bit because there were no more posts. Spotify listeners even went down a bit to notice how important it is. Then management told me: 'Please buy a phone again and post things!'

By then mapping out a posting schedule and tracking engagement, Artist 2's band could forecast how many posts it would take to sell out a live event, illustrating the importance of anticipating an event online.

In conclusion, there appears to be a strong interplay between live performances and social media when it comes to enhancing artists' visibility. By blending both aspects, and building a bridge between live performances and social media presence, artists are able to reach a wide audience and pave the way for sustained success in the music industry.

4.3. From Poppunt to VI.BE: historical evolution and expanding roles throughout the decades

Before diving deeper into how artists perceive the effectiveness of a support platform like VI.BE in the digitalised music industry, this chapter will present a comprehensive picture of VI.BE's transformation in the past decades, transforming from a mere volunteer organisation to a pivotal industry support platform in Flanders. The VI.BE representatives sketched a full image of VI.BE's history and its evolution over the years, as well as its current role in supporting musicians in the digital age.

4.3.1. Establishing Poppunt: origins and aspirations

To understand VI.BE's role as a support platform today, one should go back 26 years in time, to the time when the organisation was founded. VI.BE was originally established as 'Poppunt', already in 1998, as a response to the lack of a coherent pop music policy in Flanders. The founders were driven by their own experiences as musicians who had to seek for playing opportunities abroad, in countries such as the Netherlands and Germany. When Minister of Culture, Luc Martens, announced that there was a possibility to start thinking about a pop policy, this inspired the founders to create an organisation that would aim to support a future generation of artists. The main initial goal of the original founders was to nurture young talent in the music industry by providing playing opportunities, so that these artists could grow within

their local context. In an interview for Flemish newspaper 'Het Nieuwsblad' in 1998, Els Michiels, one of the co-founders, described Poppunt's mission as follows:

> We want to support young people who are actively involved in music. These can also be young bands still rehearsing in mum and dad's garage. The intention is to provide guidance and opportunities for the small, ignorant groups in particular. Musically, there is no limitation. Anything outside traditional classical music can come to Poppunt Vlaanderen. From pop and rock to ska and dub, to techno and singer-songwriters. (De Dobbelaere, 1998)

In the beginning, there was some resistance to let Poppunt sit at the table during policy discussions, mainly because back then, these discussions were primarily being driven by established clubs and venues, who believed pop music needed policy from a top-down perspective. However, this way of policymaking failed to consider the bottom of the pyramid (i.e., small and upcoming artists), causing these groups and their specific needs to be ignored and overlooked. But, eventually, Poppunt managed to secure a seat at the table by highlighting these overlooked needs in the bottom of the pyramid.

The year 2000 marked a big breakthrough for the organisation, as it finally received government recognition and the need for a subsidised support system for pop music was recognised. Shortly after, VI.BE received its first subsidies, which were essential for further investing in support programmes and other projects that could help guide young musicians through their journey.

And so, by continuing to push for the inclusion of the foundational levels of the music industry, Poppunt was invited to participate in what became back then known as the Flemish Pop Forum ('Vlaams popforum'). This new organisation aimed to unify the complex Flemish music landscape by advocating for a more coherent pop policy and encouraging cooperation among the different stakeholders (Van Den Broeck, 1998). Poppunt participated in the Flemish Pop Forum and by doing so, was able to emphasise the importance of supporting once again not just the top of the pyramid, but also the entry-level segment of the music industry.

In 2008, Poppunt launched 'VI.BE', a community website to facilitate interaction between artists on the one hand and industry experts on the other. The first newspaper publication where this new VI.BE platform was mentioned appeared in 'De Morgen', and was described as the "Flemish pop variant for MySpace and Facebook" (Van Assche, 2008). This comparison to these already existing, well-established platforms is remarkable, as this implies the VI.BE platform was seen as a social media platform from the start. However, from the beginning, there was a big emphasis on VI.BE being a more locally focused network, designed specifically to cater to the needs of upcoming artists within the non-classical music category in Flanders.

4.3.2. Key milestones: transitioning to VI.BE

Over the years, the organisation transitioned and its roles within the Flemish music industry began to shift. While Poppunt was initially founded to support 'pop' musicians, the rebranding to VI.BE represented an inclusive shift, where the organisation's target group now encompassed a wider array of musical genres besides pure 'pop' music, like folk, jazz, electronic, and other genres that fall outside of the traditional 'classical music' category. From now on, artists that were part of these other categories were part of this supportive umbrella. The name change from Poppunt to VI.BE was a way for the organisation to better connect with the evolving music industry.

Before 2020, VI.BE primarily existed to support emerging artists, by providing them with the right tools and resources to get started, such as offering a platform where artists can find playing opportunities and sign up for contests. However, it became clear that support was needed beyond just small and upcoming artists: professional artists should also be supported from now on, so that they too can navigate the complex Flemish music landscape effectively. The entire music industry was changing rapidly, due to digitisation, and one could feel very strongly that "an amateur was an amateur today, but could be a professional tomorrow." And so, from 2020 onwards, under the guidance of Minister Gatz – who was then Flemish Community Minister of Culture, Media, Youth, and Brussels – VI.BE shifted its focus. From now on, VI.BE's scope also included professional musicians besides just the small and upcoming artists, in order to

create a more robust music ecosystem that supports artists throughout their entire career trajectory. To effectively support this new target group, new programs and services were introduced in order to meet the specific needs of professional musicians, for example, VI.BE invested more in advice and knowledge on legal matters, financial planning, and digital marketing strategies.

4.4. Perceptions of VI.BE's role and effectiveness in supporting Flemish artists

Today, it is clear that VI.BE has significantly evolved throughout the years. Starting out as 'Poppunt', a support platform primarily catered to pop artists, VI.BE has transformed into a broad support system for all artists from all music genres across Flanders. Paired with this expansion of the organisation also came a broadening of its scope, in order to cater to the distinct needs of artists from various backgrounds, genres, and career stages. Today, VI.BE offers a wide range of services and support programmes in order to aid artists.

This section explores the participants' perception of the role and effectiveness of VI.BE as a support platform for small artists in the Flemish music industry. By drawing insights from the in-depth interviews with Flemish artists who are registered on the VI.BE platform, this part of the thesis will examine how artists utilise VI.BE's services, such as playing opportunities, big contests, and the advice and knowledge centre, as well as the impact these services have had on their careers so far.

4.4.1. Playing opportunities

With over 20,000 artists registered on the platform, it seems like most artists in Flanders own a profile on VI.BE platform. When asked about how common it is for artists to be present on the VI.BE platform, almost all of the participants recognised that nearly every artist in their network has a VI.BE profile, and that it is quite a self-evident thing to register on the platform when starting out, as it provides you with your first playing opportunities. This part delves further into the playing opportunities provided by VI.BE through its platform, and examines how artists perceive and utilise the opportunities provided by VI.BE.

VI.BE platform as a gateway to gigs

As discussed in 4.1.1., finding playing opportunities is a major obstacle for nearly all small artists in the Flemish music industry. According to the participants, VI.BE's primary strength lies in its platform, which provides artists with a comprehensive listing of gigs, festivals, and other events. For many artists who are just starting out, the platform serves as a crucial intermediary in the Flemish music scene, allowing them to connect easily with venues who are providing performance opportunities. For example, when asked where to find playing opportunities if VI.BE wouldn't exist, Artist 10 responded: "I would contact people myself, but not everyone is comfortable with that. VI.BE really is the hub for connecting with other people." Overall, VI.BE seems to be an easy entry point for artists at the start of their careers, providing them a more accessible way to public exposure through live performances and lowering the traditional barriers new artists face when looking for playing opportunities.

Early career boost

Starting out as a small artist is a slow process. According to the participants, taking part in competitions that are provided through the VI.BE platform speeds up the process of becoming a successful artist. For example, Artist 15 stated that:

> I do feel that it [VI.BE] has accelerated it [the artist's trajectory]. I do think that we would eventually have reached this point where we are now. But I have the feeling that because of VI.BE, this has now moved very quickly in just a few months.

The platform is perceived as invaluable for emerging artists, as it provides them with their first opportunities to perform live, getting the ball rolling. Thanks to VI.BE, small artists can more easily introduce themselves to audiences, start building a reputation, and get their first experiences on stage. Some artists highlighted how, without VI.BE, the process of establishing themselves would've taken a lot longer.

Besides that, the VI.BE platform serves as a networking hub, allowing small artists to easily connect with people in the music industry. As discussed in 4.1.4., networking poses a substantial challenge for small artists who are just starting out, as they often times have no connections in the industry. VI.BE is appreciated by artists as an intermediary, by connecting them with venue owners, industry professionals, and peers, uncomplicating the process of building a network for small artists. Artist 13c described the significance of VI.BE in growing their network:

> I, for instance, am more of an introvert, I think, or less likely to approach people. So, a platform like VI.BE is more accessible for people like me to shoot their shot. You don't have to go to a café and talk to people.

Finally, winning playing opportunities through VI.BE also allows artists to build their portfolio, as the credibility associated with being selected for a showcase through VI.BE lends additional legitimacy to their careers.

Influence on artist visibility

Many artists expressed how the VI.BE platform has helped increase their visibility within the industry. According to the participants, simply creating a profile on the VI.BE platform, is a first step in increasing your visibility in the industry, as it allows industry stakeholders to find your profile and connect. Self-evidently, tangible visibility is also gained through the playing opportunities that artists receive through the VI.BE platform, as it allows them to reach and build an audience. Moreover, winning playing opportunities also provides these artists with online visibility, as the VI.BE platform sorts artists based on who has most recently won a playing opportunity. For instance, Artist 11 recalled being contacted by people who have seen their name on the VI.BE platform, and reached out to them:

> Sometimes it happens that I receive a message from someone saying: 'I saw your name on VI.BE and I am contacting you', regardless of an opportunity. That happens less often, but it happens. So, it definitely increases your visibility. Certainly.

Challenges and selection processes

Despite the positive experiences with the VI.BE platform, some artists highlighted a few challenges they encountered when trying to secure playing opportunities. Just like the rest of the Flemish music industry, there is an over-supply of artists on the platform and limited playing opportunities, making it difficult for some artists to be selected. This can be discouraging, especially when rejections accumulate. Second, some artists experience not being paid fairly by venue owners and festival organisers when receiving playing opportunities through the VI.BE platform. One artist remarked: "Almost all the shows we have secured through VI.BE are rallies or showcases… And it's all just: 'We're going to make you big, and you don't earn anything.'" Additionally, the playing opportunities provided on the VI.BE platform are often small and regional. While these smaller gigs can provide artists with valuable experience – especially smaller artists – they may not offer the scale of exposure some artists are looking for to advance their career.

Besides that, some artists expressed frustration about the selection criteria, with some of the artists not being able to sign up for certain playing opportunities based on genre, and in some cases even based on age. For example, one of the participants recalled not being able to sign up for a playing opportunity because their drummer was over the required age limit:

> The drummer I often work with is 75 [years old]. . . . That person has a lot of experience, is now retired, and has a lot of time. He really likes to play along. But often times, things come up like 'you all have to be under thirty', or whatever comes up.

Despite the drummer's extensive experience, this age restriction means the band as a whole is ineligible to apply for certain playing opportunities. These selection processes pose challenges for some artists and bands, as they exclude talented musicians based on questionable criteria.

Finally, concerns were raised by some of the participants about the selection processes, as these were sometimes perceived as opaque or biased. Some artists were unsure about the decision-making process behind these playing opportunities, speculating that artists might sometimes be

chosen based on popularity or their accumulated portfolio, leaving out other, smaller artists trying to shoot their shot.

4.4.2. Big contests: 'Sound Track', 'De Nieuwe Lichting', and 'Humo's Rock Rally'

Within the Flemish music industry, there are three big music contests that have great prestige among artists: (1) 'Sound Track'; (2) 'De Nieuwe Lichting'; and (3) 'Humo's Rock Rally'. Each of these contests play an important role in the industry, as they often act as a launching pad for emerging artists' careers and are closely monitored by industry professionals, such as managers and record labels. While VI.BE does play a role in 'De Nieuwe Lichting' and 'Humo's Rock Rally', 'Sound Track' is the only competition that is organised directly by VI.BE (along with Clubcircuit, Ancienne Belgique, and Brussels youth centres). This section will explore the participants' perspectives on these contests in greater detail. Given that 7 out of the 18 participants have had direct experience competing in these events, their experiences can provide an understanding of the contests' overall impact and significance.

'Sound Track'

Throughout the in-depth interviews, 'Sound Track' was recognised by the participants as a crucial contest for up-and-coming artists in Flanders. The first edition took place in 2019-2020 ("VI.BE," 2024a), and was launched with a clear goal to discover and nurture new talent in Flanders. In just a few years, the contest has grown to be an event that is closely followed by industry professionals and is extensively covered in different media outlets. Therefore, many artists perceive this contest as a "springboard" that can significantly boost their visibility within the Flemish music industry.

According to the interviewees, there is one key aspect that makes 'Sound Track' very different from the other two 'big competitions': its deep commitment to supporting the industry. One of the artists highlighted:

Yeah, I think Sound Track is – even for me, a cynical person – I think that's the only competition that really [is] all about the bands and the artists . . . Sound Track is the only competition that really keeps this scene alive and buzzing. And clearly: it's not about the organisation. It's about the people who participate. It's about connecting with each other. It's about making everyone stronger. It's about helping as many people as possible. So, for us, that [Sound Track] is *the* [emphasis added] competition.

This commitment to supporting the industry is illustrated by the many resources that are provided to the 18 laureates of the competition (three in each province and Brussels), as they are provided with the opportunity to attend a bootcamp, where they can engage in workshops, receive personal mentorship, and get extensive networking opportunities. Some of the participants described this bootcamp as a real "gold mine", where many key figures from the industry are present: "Forget the know-how when you're at the bootcamp. All the labels are there, all the interesting people are just sitting there. From bookers, to labels, to sound engineers." Besides that, a lot of crucial, career-enhancing information – information that might otherwise be hard to access – is shared on these bootcamps. By winning Sound Track, an artist is provided with all of the right skills and connections that are needed to start navigating the complexities of the music industry.

Generally, the interviewees who participated in 'Sound Track' look back on their journey very positively, even if they did not emerge as laureates. The impact of participating in 'Sound Track' is long-lasting, as participants often still receive opportunities to perform at major festivals and more prominent venues. This is a testament of how a reputable contest such as 'Sound Track' can be a true game-changer for many artists, as it enhances their marketability, without pushing them into a commercial trajectory. All of these things makes 'Sound Track' is highly appreciated among artists, and consequently, it is deemed as an important addition to the 'big three contests'. By focusing on the artistic merit, rather than on 'market readiness', 'Sound Track' is able to differentiate itself from contests like 'De Nieuwe Lichting' and 'Humo's Rock Rally', that – according to some of the participants – seem to be more commercially focused.

Alongside 'Sound Track', 'De Nieuwe Lichting' and 'Humo's Rock Rally' complete the trio of major music contests in Flanders. According to Wikipedia, 'De Nieuwe Lichting' is an annual contest that was first launched in 2013 by Belgian radio station Studio Brussel, and is aimed at discovering new emerging talent in Flanders ("De Nieuwe Lichting," 2024). Every year, Studio Brussel's audience selects three bands or artists who are then awarded airplay on the radio station, are featured on the cover of weekly magazine 'Knack Focus' (VI.BE, n.d.-c). Besides that, these artists also receive personalised guidance from the VI.BE team (VI.BE, n.d.-c), hence why VI.BE is one of the partners in this competition. On the other hand, 'Humo's Rock Rally' is a biannual contest that is created by weekly magazine Humo. According to Wikipedia, 'Humo's Rock Rally' has existed since 1978, and has throughout the years established itself as one of the more prestigious music contests in Flanders ("Humo's Rock Rally," 2024). The winner is rewarded with a cash prize and receives a lot of media exposure. Many big names in the industry have come forth from both 'De Nieuwe Lichting' and 'Humo's Rock Rally', such as Brihang, Tamino, Portland, Noordkaap, The Black Box Revelation, and many more. The registration for all three major contests happens on the VI.BE platform, which creates a big incentive for many artists and bands to create an account on the platform, in addition to the playing opportunities.

Out of the 18 participants, three artists competed in 'De Nieuwe Lichting' and three artists competed in 'Humo's Rock Rally'. Four of the participants competed in both 'Sound Track' and one of the other two major contests, which allowed them to make an extensive comparison. Just like 'Sound Track', the other two major competitions in Flanders act as crucial stepping stones for the artists who go home with the prize. Once the finalists are announced, labels, bookers, and managers keep a close eye on them, and often times, the winners of these competitions are quickly taken under the wings of these industry professionals.

However, some concerns were raised by the participants about the commercial orientation of these contests, particularly 'De Nieuwe Lichting'. Some artists feel that this contest might be less about discovering new talent, and more about launching artists who are already somewhat established, or at least market-ready. The contest appears to favour artists who can already deliver a more polished, "finished product", whereas 'Sound Track' tends to consider an artist's potential more significantly. Some of the interviewees – who had not yet participated in either of the three contests – felt somewhat frustrated by this, as they felt they might never be selected for these contests, just because their demos are not of great quality, or they don't have a big social media following. However, it is important to note that this stance was quickly nuanced by artists who had already participated in these contests. Even though they can on the one hand understand these frustrations, on the other hand, it might just be the case that these artists are not good enough – or at least not yet. Every year, many artists are vying for a spot in these competitions, and the jury faces the challenging task of selecting participants from this vast pool of emerging talent, with each of these artists aspiring to make it big in the industry.

Finally, some frustration was noted concerning the overlap in timing and participant pools among the three contests, as they often take place in the same year. Some artists feel like the overlap of these contests often leads to a saturation of exposure for some bands, which makes it even more difficult for smaller bands to partake and advance in these competitions. For example, in 2022, BLUAI, an indie-folk band from Antwerp, won all three major competitions, which consequently resulted in an enormous amount of exposure for them. Some smaller artists felt slightly disheartened by this, as they feel it is "always the same people" who receive exposure, making them feel like it is more difficult for them to shoot their shot. However, this was once again nuanced by artists who had already participated in these contests, as they feel like these negative comments might come from artists who are not quite ready yet to participate in such competition. One artist urged these people to consider whether their pursuit of music is driven by passion, or by the aspiration of fame. In the second case, many of them will be disappointed, as it is difficult to make it big in music due to the intense competition.

4.4.3. Advice and knowledge

Besides the VI.BE platform, where artists can find playing opportunities and sign up for contests like 'Sound Track', 'De Nieuwe Lichting' and 'Humo's Rock Rally', VI.BE also provides an advice and knowledge centre, where artists can ask for advice on a wide range of topics that are highly relevant for them. Not only does VI.BE provide advice and knowledge on its website with detailed texts on relevant topics, but artists can also personally contact VI.BE through mail or phone, or book an in-person meeting with one of VI.BE's employees to receive further guidance. Throughout the years, it seems like VI.BE has firmly established itself as an important resource for artists to ask for advice and guidance when trying to navigate the complex landscape of the Flemish digitalised music industry. This part will dive further into the participants' perception of VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre, the main subjects they inquire advice about, and some points of improvement.

Scope of advisory services

Throughout the interviews, it appeared that VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre was used quite frequently, especially by artists who are already a bit further along in their journey. Once these artists are a bit more established and are ready to take the next step in their musical career, VI.BE's advice comes in quite conveniently, as it is quite hard to navigate the complex landscape of the music industry on your own (as mentioned in 4.1.3.). According to one of the VI.BE representatives, there is an average of 150 artists that ask for VI.BE's advisory services every month. Artists recalled a few instances for which they called for help, such as for financial guidance, music release strategies, legal and contractual guidance, and technical advice.

When it comes to financial guidance, artists received knowledge surrounding managing finances, budgeting, accounting, royalties, and how to navigate the complex subsidy landscape.

Besides that, some artists also rely on VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre for their music release strategies. When starting out, it can be daunting for an artist to go through all of the steps of music release by themselves. VI.BE offers guidance in this, by providing the right tools

and resources, such as promotional plans or detailed checklists, that the artists can use to start planning out the release of their music to maximise the impact of their release as much as possible.

A third area artists have relied on VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre for, is to get advice on legal and contractual matters. For example, when negotiating a contract with a label, one of the participants turned to VI.BE to ask for guidance and to check whether they didn't miss any important marks in the contract. Furthermore, many of the participants who were looking to set up their own non-profit organisation – as they want to take the independent route – searched for VI.BE's assistance to help guide them through the legal intricacies of setting up such organisation.

Finally, VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre also helped some artists to gather some technical advice, for example when it comes to understanding common terms in the world of music and live gigs, such as information about riders or DJ licenses. In essence, it appears from the interviews that VI.BE acts as an important resource centre where artists can find valuable advice, tailored to their specific needs.

Positive aspects

Overall, it seems like small artists who are trying to navigate the complexities of the Flemish music landscape find a reliable ally in VI.BE and its advice and knowledge centre and perceive it as a useful resource that can help guide them.

In the first place, VI.BE's website is appreciated by artists for its comprehensive and accessible information. The organisation succeeds to provide detailed, accurate, and accessible information across a wide range of topics, as mentioned above. Whether the artist inquires more information about financial management, music release strategies, or legal advice, they find this information easily and in one place. Artist 9a described their experience when looking for advice on VI.BE's website:

Any question I have about the music industry, I can actually look it up. I can actually

be like, 'What is a booker?' 'What is a backline?' I can really do that... Any question...

VI.BE doesn't care that you're an imposter. I really like that. They really are with you,

from start to finish.

Moreover, this information is tailored to all of the unique challenges the music industry

presents, offering a wide range of advice for both small and more advanced musicians, guiding

artists all through their professional journey. The knowledge that is provided on VI.BE's

website is also for its clarity and relevance, as it is very difficult to find any comprehendible

knowledge on these topics on any other websites, let alone any trustworthy or impartial source.

This informational hub that is provided by VI.BE helps artists overcome the obstacles they face

when trying to overcome navigational challenges.

Lastly, artists commend VI.BE for its quick and responsive support. Emails are quickly

addressed, phone calls are immediately answered, and if needed, the artist can easily book an

in-person meeting with the VI.BE employees who are responsible for advice to get further help.

Overall, VI.BE is used by many artists as a main source for advice and knowledge and has

earned a high level of trust among the industry, as the advice provided is not only helpful, but

is also delivered in a way that is impartial and respects the artist and their journey. It allows

artists to become savvier about the business aspects of their careers, which is something many

artists often struggle with (as seen in 4.1.3.).

Points of improvement

While VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre is highly appreciated by many artists for broad

scope of subjects, and clear language, there are a few areas where artists feel there could still

be some improvement to further enhance this service. First, some artists expressed a need for

some more in-depth information when it comes to more specialised topics. For example, while

artists can easily find basic guidelines on how to set up a non-profit organisation on VI.BE's

website, the finer details that are needed to completely go through this process are sometimes lacking, which causes some artists to resort to other websites in the end.

Another point of improvement noted by some artists was the clarity surrounding very specific or less common issues, as this required some deeper digging through multiple pages on the website. However, it is important to note that this issue is quite self-evident, as it would be quite difficult for VI.BE as a non-profit organisation to gather all information, given its limited resources.

A third and final point of improvement is that while most artists in Flanders seem to be aware of the existence of VI.BE platform and the playing opportunities and bigger contests one can find on there, it seems like many artists are unaware of the advice and knowledge centre within the organisation. Many of the participants were not aware that they can directly contact VI.BE for personalised advice or even book an in-person consultation with them. Artists often rely on the information that is provided on the website, social media, or that they picked up from peers, but never realised that they can receive more tailored and direct support.

4.4.4. Who is VI.BE most relevant for?

This section of the research will dive deeper into whom VI.BE is most relevant for, by making use of the categorisation of artists specified by Leenders et al. (2015, pp. 1808-1809). During the in-depth interviews, the participants were asked about how they think VI.BE could play a role for these specific categories of artists: 'Emerging Stars', 'Independents', 'Question Marks', and 'Hobbyists'. For the purpose of this study, the category 'Regional Star' was intentionally excluded, based on two considerations (1) the relatively small geographic scope of Flanders diminishes the relevance of having 'Regional Stars'; and (2) to maintain clarity during the in-depth interviews by limiting the number of categories discussed.

As discussed in the literature review, the 'Emerging Star' group consists of artists who have achieved a certain level of success and are often signed with music labels (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1813). In total, 4 out of the 18 participants belong to this category. Despite being signed with a label and already having achieved a certain level of success, these participants still make use of VI.BE's services regularly. From the interviews, it appeared that these artists mainly benefit from VI.BE's specialised support such as personal advice and guidance, for example advice surrounding legal matters. To illustrate this, many artists resort to VI.BE for contract reviews when first signing up with a label. VI.BE is highly valued by artists for this advice, as they act like an impartial organisation that can provide a second opinion and help protect the artists' interests and make sure there are no important oversights.

Besides that, often times, there are specialised services that are not covered by labels – especially smaller labels – as they lack a thorough understanding of Belgian laws and industry standards. A good example of this was highlighted by one of the participants who is signed with a Dutch label. When asking their label for advice about how to request an exemption for mechanical reproduction rights from Sabam, their label didn't know how to tackle this, which ultimately led to the artist having to resort to VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre to get more specialised advice. In these instances, VI.BE is still a valuable resource that artists who are signed with a label can still rely on when needed.

Third, it appears that some of the artists who are further along in their career still make use of the VI.BE platform for playing opportunities, for example when there are opportunities to perform on bigger festivals or to enrol for one of the contests. As one artist mentioned: "the bigger you get, the better it works", meaning that it will be easier to be selected for playing opportunities through VI.BE when you are already more established. However, there seems to be a certain point where artists do leave the platform and its playing opportunities behind, as

there is no need for it anymore since they have plenty of playing opportunities available, thanks to the extensive network surrounding them.

Finally, some of the participants remarked that more established artists, such as the 'Emerging Stars', can now reverse the roles and create playing opportunities for others on the VI.BE platform. For example, by hosting support shows, other small artists could gain exposure and get the chance to perform along a more established name in the industry. By creating such opportunities for smaller artists, 'Emerging Stars' do not only further develop their own reputation, but also engage in a form of reciprocity, by supporting the very ecosystem that once supported them and guided them through the obstacles that come along with being a small artist.

Independents

'Independents', according to Leenders et al. (2015, p. 1813), are characterised by an independent management of their career, as they are operating without a record label. According to all of the interviewed artists, the 'Independent' category is one of the categories that a support platform such as VI.BE can mean most for (alongside the 'Question Mark' category). By offering advice, playing opportunities, and visibility through the platform, VI.BE is an essential support platform for these 'Independents', who are managing their careers autonomously. Out of the 18 participants, 4 participants belong within the 'Independents category', as they are not signed with a label and have founded their own non-profit organisation to manage their careers independently.

One of the main things VI.BE can help out with when it comes to the 'Independents' category, is providing the right information and advice that can guide these artists through the complexities of music promotion. Where 'Emerging Stars' get the promotion and marketing of their music taken care of by their labels, 'Independents' navigate this part of their careers unaccompanied, which makes it sometimes difficult to know if they are on the right track. For example, a few artists mentioned how they turned to VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre to ask for guidance surrounding the release and promotion of their first single or album, as there

are a lot of uncertainties about the proper steps that should be taken before. VI.BE provided them with a detailed release planning, that covered the necessary steps. Rather than taking over the process of the release, VI.BE ensured the artists that they were on the right track and provided additional advice and guidance where needed, allowing them to execute their music release with more self-confidence and fostering a sense of professionalism among independent artists.

Along with providing advice and guidance to the 'Independents' category, playing opportunities through the VI.BE platform also remain important for this group. Even though some 'Independents' might work together with bookers to secure gigs, they often times still rely on the VI.BE platform for additional playing opportunities, beyond what their immediate network offers them. Through the platform, these artists get additional opportunities to play on festivals and showcases, which allows them to expand their network and strengthen their professional portfolio.

Question Marks

Along the 'Independents' group, the 'Question Marks' are the artists who can benefit most from VI.BE's platform and services, according to the participants. Leenders et al. (2015, p. 1809) characterise the 'Question Marks' category as artists who have a potential for success, but who have not yet achieved any substantial breakthrough. According to the Leenders et al. (2015, p. 1809), the trajectory of these artists can go either way, as some of them might break through in the future, but others never will.

Out of the 18 participants, 8 artists can be assigned to the 'Question Marks' category, as they are still navigating their path to success and show potential for growth in their careers. For this group, that is still trying to secure a spot in the industry, there are a lot of uncertainties and obstacles to be dealt with. VI.BE can provide these artists a helping hand, thanks to the tailored advice and many playing opportunities that can be found on its platform.

Overall, the participants agreed that VI.BE can be most valuable for artists within the 'Question Marks' category. For these artists, the VI.BE platform acts like a cornerstone for their development and success. This platform opens doors for these smaller artists, as it acts as a mediator between them and some of the most important key stakeholders within the Flemish music industry. As it is quite difficult for an artist to go out and build a network all on their own, but now, VI.BE facilitates this aspect of an artist's career – or at least facilitates this process – as the platform allows artists to be put in contact with venues, festivals, and other stakeholders, just a few mouse clicks away. This way, the playing opportunities that are available on the platform offer a solution to the obstacles that small and upcoming artists are facing when it comes to finding playing opportunities.

The opportunities on the VI.BE platform range from smaller, local gigs to more prominent showcases, which are great ways for small artists to set their first steps in the music industry. It allows them to perform, refine their skills, and start connecting with their audience. This initial exposure is crucial, as it helps many of these emerging artists to gain the experience that is needed to build confidence and work on their professional skills, including networking. Many of the 'Emerging Stars', who are further along in their career, started out with the smaller playing opportunities secured through the VI.BE platform and worked their way up by building their portfolio and securing more and more gigs. Overall, it appears that the VI.BE platform serves as an essential starting point for 'Question Marks', as it enables them to navigate the complexities of being a small artist more easily.

Besides these initial playing opportunities, contests like 'Sound Track' also hold a big value for artists within the 'Question Marks' category. For many of these artists that win these competitions, the exposure that is gained allows them to grow a more established name in the industry.

Lastly, VI.BE is particularly valuable for artists in the 'Question Marks' category when it comes to providing advice and knowledge. As mentioned in 4.1.3., there are many navigational

challenges small and upcoming artists encounter when starting out, such as administrative hurdles. VI.BE offers the right resources to help these artists understand and navigate these complexities. For example, by providing them knowledge on how to produce better demos, secure live performances, and effectively market themselves. Through workshops, seminars, and networking events that are organised by VI.BE, these artists can now better overcome these stumbling blocks and learn the ins and outs of operating as a small artist within the Flemish music industry.

Hobbyists

Finally, when it comes to 'Hobbyists', artists had mixed views on the relevance of VI.BE for this category. Many of the participants argued that VI.BE's primary focus is fostering the professional growth of 'Question Marks' and 'Independents', and that the scope of their services may not resonate with 'Hobbyists', whose engagement with music is solely for personal enjoyment.

Despite these arguments, the 'Hobbyists' that were interviewed for this research did make use of the VI.BE platform and argued that this platform still offers them valuable resources that can help them enhance their musical experience – even if it is just recreational. For example, smaller playing opportunities, such as 'Lokale Helden', offer hobbyists the chance to perform in a setting that is non-competitive. Besides that, there are particular tools on VI.BE's platform that are relevant for 'Hobbyists', such as 'mzkt zkt mzkt' ('musician searches musician') – a page on the VI.BE platform where musicians can place advertisements to look for new band members – and 'repetitiekoten' ('rehearsal spaces'), which helps musicians find rehearsal spaces. These features allow hobbyists to perform and network in the industry, while keeping their interest in music leisure focused.

Conclusion

From the in-depth interviews, it appeared that VI.BE is relevant for all categories of artists distinguished by Leenders et al. (2015, pp. 1808-1809), as there are different needs that come

along the different career stages. While 'Question Marks' and 'Independents' might benefit a bit more from the wide range of services VI.BE offers, it appears that 'Emerging Stars' and 'Hobbyists' still utilise VI.BE on a regular basis, albeit in a slightly different way. Overall, there seems to be a consensus that VI.BE is particularly important for 'Question Marks', as the organisation can help this group overcome a lot of the initial barriers that artists face when starting out.

4.4.5. What does a support platform like VI.BE mean for artists?

Overall, VI.BE is widely perceived as a significant pillar for artists, that is relevant at various stages of their careers. All of the 18 participants – ranging from 'Hobbyists' to 'Emerging Stars' and even more established names – indicated that VI.BE is not only a platform that serves as a gateway to an artist's first playing opportunities, but also acts a foundational support system for artists in the Flemish music industry, that they can undoubtedly rely on. Without VI.BE, there would be a certain emptiness in the Flemish music industry, a gap, where artists might be even more lost at the beginning of their careers, due to all of the challenges that were listed above. The Flemish music sector would look vastly different without this support system, which has throughout the years transformed into a vital part of the music ecosystem.

Artists consistently acknowledged VI.BE as a platform that can help launch an artist at the start of their music career, as the platform offers many opportunities which open new doors in the future. By registering on the platform, you can set your first steps in the music industry, without having to build up your entire network first – which, as discussed in 4.1.4., is a big challenge for artists who are just starting out. This initial exposure that small artists are getting these playing opportunities is crucial, with many artists acknowledging that without VI.BE, their career trajectories probably might have looked a little different. Without claiming that VI.BE singlehandedly changed the entire outcome of their careers, many artists emphasised that VI.BE platform has accelerated the path of their professional journeys by providing them with a platform that connects them with the entire music industry. For example, Artist 5 described the significance of VI.BE throughout their career: "I wouldn't be standing where I am now without

VI.BE. And that's not to flatter them, it's actually true. Without all those opportunities, I wouldn't have met all those people. I couldn't have done all those performances."

The advice to "register on the VI.BE platform" is frequently shared among artists, as it is the best place to get started when looking to find playing opportunities and build your network. This reflects the organisation's status as a vital first step for artists who are looking to establish themselves in the industry. Creating an account on the platform opens the doors and provides you with the right resources to find venues to play in and build your network.

Many of the participants also expressed their appreciation for VI.BE's impartial stance in the music industry, as they provide unbiased support and advice that is catered to the needs of each individual artist.

Overall, the interviews indicate that VI.BE platform is not seen as a 'magic bullet' that will swiftly launch one's career to further heights; it is rather a loyal and steady companion that will help guide you through the initial difficulties of being a small artist in the Flemish music industry. According to one of the interviewees, and according to VI.BE representatives, registering on the platform and assuming it will launch you to success is an unrealistic expectation. VI.BE should be regarded an organisation that operates on the sidelines of an artist's career, and that provides a helping hand where necessary.

4.5.   Discussion and analysis

4.5.1. Cross-theme analysis

The role of VI.BE in overcoming obstacles

Throughout the interviews, it appeared that artists in Flanders face some considerable obstacles, such as (1) venue accessibility; (2) financial challenges; (3) navigational challenges; (4) networking challenges; (5) challenges related to the Flemish music landscape; and (6) challenges in digital marketing and social media presence. From the interviews, it appeared that VI.BE plays a critical role in helping artists navigate and overcome the various obstacles they face when starting out:

(1) VI.BE addresses the challenge of venue accessibility by providing a platform that allows small artists to get their first playing opportunities, which are crucial for setting their first steps in the industry and establishing an audience. Thanks to the VI.BE platform, the traditional barriers to enter the music industry are lowered, which allows artists to gain practical experience and build their audience, even when they have no proven track record.

(2) While VI.BE does not directly solve financial issues that small artists are facing, the organisation still helps these artists to navigate these challenges, by providing valuable advice and knowledge, either through their website or in person. This guidance ranges from managing finances, to securing subsidies, and understanding the economics of the music industry.

Additionally, the playing opportunities artists can secure through the VI.BE platform might also provide crucial exposure that can lead to better-paying gigs. However, it is important to note that some artists still encounter obstacles when it comes to compensations for these playing opportunities, as the compensation is often on the lower side. Besides that, there is a notion among venues that they provide a stage to artists in return for exposure – rather

than a financial compensation – which causes some artists to settle for lower-paying playing opportunities.

(3) Many artists feel overwhelmed by the complexities of rights management, legal regulations, and administrative tasks. VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre helps artists overcome this obstacle, by providing detailed information on various topics. Artists can easily find all necessary information on a wide range of topics on VI.BE's website, or they can contact VI.BE personally to receive further guidance. Thanks to VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre, artists are able to handle these bureaucratic processes more effectively.

(4) Playing opportunities address the obstacle of networking, as the VI.BE platform acts as an intermediary and connects artists with venues, festivals, and music stakeholders all over Flanders. Additionally, thanks to the playing opportunities artists can secure through the VI.BE platform, they are able to establish real-life, tangible relationships to advance their careers.

Besides the VI.BE platform, contests such as 'Sound Track' play an important role in helping artists to build their networks and establish their first connections in the industry. The bootcamp for 'Sound Track' laureates brings artists in contact with key industry figures, who can help them further advance in their careers.

(5) Some artists perceived the Flemish music industry to be over-saturated and conservative, which poses some challenges, especially for artists in non-mainstream genres, such as jazz, funk, or hip-hop. Even though VI.BE provides a platform that brings together various stakeholders in the industry, the playing opportunities on the platform often still reflect the conservative nature of the market. For example, some artists have difficulties finding playing opportunities because of the genre they perform in, and sometimes even because of age limit criteria. Moreover, the oversaturation of the Flemish market is also reflected on VI.BE's platform, as competition remains high, making it difficult for some artists to secure playing opportunities.

(6) Many artists struggle with the demands of maintaining a social media profile and standing out in the oversaturated online market. On its website, VI.BE offers a lot of advice on how to create compelling social media content, understanding algorithms, and how to engage with audiences online. Besides that, VI.BE also offers workshops and in-person advice sessions, which can help artists to further enhance their social media strategies.

Nevertheless, despite VI.BE's efforts, it appears many artists still face significant difficulties when it comes to standing out online. In the future, VI.BE could expand its support in this area to further guide artists through the challenges and obstacles of online platforms.

VI.BE's role in supporting a combined strategy of traditional and digital visibility

From the in-depth interviews, it appeared that small and upcoming artists in Flanders navigate the digitalised music industry through a balanced strategy of traditional visibility methods, combined with digital age strategies. Despite the rise of digital platforms, it appears that live performances still remain a critical component for artists to build their careers and become visible to an audience. The tangible, immediate interaction that live performances allow, cannot be underestimated, and many artists believe this fostering of a deeper connection with an audience cannot be achieved with an online strategy alone. However, this emphasis on live performances does not take away from the importance of being online. Overall, the most favoured strategy among Flemish artists is to build a bridge between the online and offline realms, by leveraging live performances to boost social media presence, and vice versa, by using digital platforms to increase audience engagement at live events, as this fosters a deeper audience connection and maximises engagement in both spheres.

VI.BE plays a crucial role in helping artists bridge this gap between the online and offline realms. Thanks to the gigs, festivals, and other playing opportunities artists can secure through the VI.BE platform, they can gain their first stage experiences and start reaching a real-life audience. These first playing opportunities are crucial, as they get the ball rolling, giving artists

their initial exposure, and allowing them to then guide this real-life audience to their social media profiles, contributing to a robust online presence.

4.5.2. Recommendations

This chapter will provide some practical recommendations for VI.BE and other industry stakeholders, based on the findings from the in-depth interviews.

Playing opportunities: control over fees

From the interviews, it quickly appeared that finding playing opportunities and being paid fairly for opportunities is a struggle for many small artists. While VI.BE is doing its part to create more playing opportunities through its platform, fair pay still seems to be an issue for many artists – which is out of VI.BE's control. While minimum fees might not be the solution, as this would exclude some artists (VI.BE, 2023), more could be done to ensure transparency about payments for live gigs.

Encourage venues and festivals to make playing opportunities more inclusive

Second, some of the interview participants experienced not being selected for certain playing opportunities because of criteria such as genre, the region they're based in, or even based on age. While some criteria do make sense (like the criterium based on genre), other criteria, such as age, make little sense, and exclude talented artists and bands from playing opportunities. In the future, VI.BE could try to ensure that venues on the platform provide more inclusive criteria.

More transparency about visibility on the platform

Some of the participants addressed an area for improvement regarding transparency. Currently, the VI.BE platform provides artists with some visibility, as it sorts them based on who has most recently won a playing opportunity or other contest. While many of the participants agreed this might be the fairest (and most feasible) way of sorting artists, as there are more than 20,000 artists registered on the platform (VI.BE, n.d.-e, VI.BE, n.d.-j), some of them had issues with the non-transparency of the platform in this regard. As the sorting filter on the platform is

collapsed, it is not clear that the artists are sorted that way. A simple solution, according to some of the participants, could be to simply clap open the sorting filter, as this would make it more clear why artists are displayed in that manner.

Visibility beyond musicians … or not?

Even though VI.BE primarily operates as a 'by musicians for musicians' platform, some artists felt although VI.BE might be able to do a bit more to make artists visible to the general public (i.e., the end-listener), as this is also a part of 'supporting artists'. For example, this could be achieved by highlighting artists more actively on social media. However, in the end, most participants felt that it is more important for VI.BE to focus on its core tasks, namely creating playing opportunities and sharing advice and knowledge with small artists, as these things also contribute to visibility.

4.5.3. Integrating literature review and interview findings

It is clear that the digital transformation of the Flemish music industry has had its impact on small and upcoming artists, in both positive and negative ways. Even though some authors suggested digitalisation would make it easier for artists to reach audiences, it appeared that reality is more complex than that. For example, following Anderson's (2006, Chapter 1) theory of the 'long tail', it would become easier for artists from non-mainstream genres to reach their audiences online. It is true that many independent artists use social media to grow their careers (Leenders et al., 2015, p. 1813), but reaching audiences online remains challenging, due to the abundance of artists online, which corresponds with the findings from Bostoen and Vanherpe (2021, p. 35).

Independent artists can now bypass traditional intermediaries, such as record labels (Hviid et al., 2018, p. 260), but this also requires some additional context. First, and corresponding to the findings of Leenders et al. (2015, p. 1813), record labels still play an important role, especially for the 'Emerging Star' category. Second, if artists do decide to take the independent route, having some entrepreneurial skills is essential. Even though this correlates with the findings of

Thomson ([2013](#), pp. 523-524) and Hviid et al. ([2018](#), p. 260), that artists must become more entrepreneurial in order to bypass the traditional intermediaries, this too needs some nuance. As Bittencourt and Domingues ([2019](#)) stated: "No one is born an entrepreneur" (p.189). VI.BE as a 'music incubator' (Bittencourt & Domingues, [2019](#), p. 174) seems to be crucial in this aspect, as they play a vital role in guiding artists to develop these entrepreneurial skills, by offering tailored advice and knowledge.

Overall, it appears that the argument from Leyshon et al. ([2005](#), pp. 180-181), that the changes in the music industry should be looked at more broadly than just digitalisation, still holds up. There are many other forces that play a role. For instance, the observation from Leenders et al. ([2015](#), pp. 1812-1813) and Tilson et al. ([2013](#), p. 4631), that live music is still important for independent artists, was confirmed by many artists. However, finding these playing opportunities remained challenging.

Also, Bourdieu's ([1989](#)) 'social capital theory' is still highly relevant, as networking emerged as one of the most crucial aspects for artists if they want to grow their careers. But this too appeared to be a major obstacle for small and upcoming artists in the music industry. All of the traditional obstacles small artists are still facing, indicate that there are other forces besides digitalisation (Leyshon et al., [2005](#), pp. 180-181), making it difficult for them to establish themselves.

4.5.4. Synthesis of Grounded Theory

This section synthesises the findings from the in-depth interviews by addressing the research question: 'How do small and upcoming artists in Flanders navigate the digitalised music industry, and what is the role of support systems like VI.BE in their success?'

(1) What strategies do small and upcoming artists in Flanders employ to adapt to the digitalisation of the music industry?

Small and upcoming artists in Flanders navigate the digitalised music industry by combining live performances with digital strategies. Live performances remain important,

as this is the primary way for (most) artists to establish an authentic connection with audiences. Besides that, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are essential for sharing work, engaging fans, and retaining an audience. Online, artists focus on high-quality content, storytelling, and trying to understand platform algorithms. One of the primary strategies for artists to become visible in the industry is bridging the gap between offline and online presence, by promoting live events on social media on the one hand, and by directing live audiences to their social media profiles on the other hand.

(2) What role do organisations such as VI.BE play in supporting and empowering small and upcoming artists in Flanders in this evolving digital landscape?

VI.BE is crucial in supporting and empowering artists in the Flemish music industry. Most importantly, the VI.BE platform provides artists playing opportunities, which are essential for gaining experience and building an audience, as playing live is still the aspect artists are most focused on to foster their growth in the industry. Furthermore, VI.BE offers advice and guidance for artists in all career stages: from beginner to professional. This way, VI.BE helps navigating the difficulties and complexities small artists face when starting out.

4.5.5. Limitations of the study

In order to interpret the findings accurately, it is important to note that there were several limitations while conducting this study. These limitations can be taken into consideration for future research in this field.

One of the primary limitations of this research is its sample size. Although the participant pool was moderately expansive, as there were 18 artists and several stakeholders interviewed, this scope might not fully represent the Flemish music industry's diversity. Future research could expand the participant pool, by adding more artists from more diverse backgrounds, for example by including more genres and artist categories.

Second, there are some geographic limitations, as this study focuses on Flanders only. Because of this, the research might not necessarily be applicable to other regions. The distinct cultural,

economic, and regulatory landscape of Flanders might differ from other countries and regions. Future research in other regions could validate or contradict this research, by finding out whether the observations are consistent across music industries.

By conducting in-depth interviews only, this study is inherently qualitative in nature. This undeniably creates important biases, such as interviewer bias (Salazar, 1990) and selection bias (Henderson & Page, 2007), which can affect data accuracy. In order to reduce biases as much as possible, future research could address this limitation by introducing additional research methods, such as surveys or quantitative research methods.

Finally, it is important to note that due to rapid technological changes, the findings of this study might become less suitable over time. Nevertheless, this research provides a valuable snapshot of the Flemish music industry anno 2024, which might be useful for future research and other stakeholders to better understand the trajectory of changes.

Chapter 5.   Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the role of support systems such as VI.BE in supporting and empowering small and upcoming artists in Flanders, within the context of the digitalisation of the music industry. By doing a literature review, conducting in-depth interviews with 18 artists from diverse genres and categories, and by going into conversation with some VI.BE representatives, this research has revealed the multifaceted impact of VI.BE on small and upcoming artists in the digitalised Flemish music industry.

The findings demonstrate that a support system like VI.BE plays a crucial role for small artists, especially 'Question Marks', in overcoming the obstacles they face at the beginning of their careers. Most importantly, the platform provides playing opportunities, which are vital for small artists, not only to refine their performance skills, but also to introduce themselves to the industry. By securing live gigs through the VI.BE platform, artists are able to reach their first audiences, and build the bridge to online visibility by guiding these audiences to their social media profiles.

Besides that, VI.BE's advice and knowledge centre plays a crucial role for artists who have difficulties navigating the complexities of the Flemish music industry. By offering advice and guidance on various aspects, such as administrative tasks, rights management, and digital marketing, artists are able to navigate these complexities more easily.

Overall, artists perceive the VI.BE platform as a cornerstone for their development, as VI.BE acts as a convenient intermediary that connects small artists with important stakeholders in the Flemish music industry. By providing artists a wide range of support mechanisms, the organisation accelerates the journey from small artist to established performer, as it reduces the barriers for entering the music industry.

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Appendices

A. Statement of AI use

During the course of writing this thesis, I made use of a few AI tools to assist in different stages of the process, such as for the transcription of the in-depth interviews, finding relevant academic articles, and for improving the general tone of my writing. Annex 8 shows a full overview of the AI tools that were used during the writing of this thesis.

B. Overview of annexes

1. Informed consent template
2. Topic lists
3. Anonymous interview transcripts
   3a. Transcripts and analysis per participant
4. Data analysis
5. MAXQDA codes export
6. MAXQDA coding file
7. Coding tree
8. Statement of AI use
9. News articles