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# Media Innovation Strategies for Sustaining Competitive Advantage: Evidence from Music Download Stores in Iran

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**Abstract:** This study explores the value of media innovation strategies for driving business success within the Iranian e-market of music downloads. It argues that the context of music e-markets in emerging countries differs markedly from that of developed economies by highlighting the political and cultural challenges that local e-music platforms in Iran are continuously facing. As literature is scarce in this specific area, and this study is one of the first attempting to gain a comprehensive understanding, a qualitative approach has been applied, and 14 digital music industry experts were interviewed in Iran. Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and then analyzed with a qualitative coding approach. This paper revealed that issues such as copyright challenges and governmental permission barriers are limiting the capabilities of digital music distributors to reach a sustainable competitive advantage.

**Keywords:** music industry; media innovation; competitive advantage; music e-retailing; Iran

## 1. Introduction

Thanks to the new opportunities provided by digital technologies, many industries have been transforming themselves in order to take advantage of this new landscape [1,2]. The music industry is an example, in which digital technologies have not only affected the structure of established companies but have also allowed the emergence of new businesses that did not exist before [3,4]. We can say that digitalization has basically revolutionized the music industry in all its dimensions [5–7]. As Rogers highlighted [8], digital technology can be considered to be a ‘transformative player’ in the music industry, specifically in the area of music distribution.

Among all the components of the music industry, ‘distribution’ is one of the most important areas in terms of revenue generation in developed societies [9–12]. The digital distribution of music has brought new opportunities for artists, enabling them to be independent from legacy labels. For example, they are now able to present their musical products to the audience directly via digital technologies, without the need to gain support from major music companies [13]. On the other hand, digitalization has highly intensified the competition for listeners’ attention among music industry operators. While prompting many independent emerging musicians to digitally produce and distribute their content, it is driving their profit margins to zero [14].

Focusing on the bright side of digital music distribution, however, Eiriz and Leite [6] argued that the new digital ecosystem allows music artists to become, in some cases, successful entrepreneurs in

the music industry. Using the opportunities offered by new technologies, music operators have been able to create and develop new business models (see [6]).

As the popularity of online shopping is growing among the customers of various communities, online sales of songs have also collected significant revenues in the music industry [15], especially in some emerging markets [3]. According to the IFPI report (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry), music sales on digital platforms (in the forms of download and streaming revenues) have increased from 0.4 to 9.4 billion dollars during the period between 2004 and 2017 [16]. Although there are some insightful reports regarding these developments within Asian digital music markets such as Japan, China, and India, the authors could not find such data from a certified source concerning the Iranian digital music market. Nonetheless, using different financial reports—some of which presented by digital music businesses in Iran—this gap was considerably filled, as it will be shown in the next section.

The Iranian music industry is in turmoil, mostly in part due to a lack of effective business strategies [4]. As a result, and as shown in the next section, it is not an economically prosperous industry in which to be involved. In addition to the economic dilemmas, the Iranian music industry is being confronted with many other issues such as political struggles, government legislations, cultural and religious constraints, as well as the international sanctions against Iran. All this is causing a very turbulent environment for Iranian digital music distributors to efficiently and effectively operate in the market.

In particular, as it will be precisely discussed later, Iranian musicians are in a situation where they must deal with many legal obstacles. As Doyle argued, in the digital age media firms need an environment that is less regulated in order not to constrain their innovative capabilities [17]. In her explanation, instead of issuing limiting laws, governments should rather create the conditions for small digital businesses to become successful actors in the international arena. Before creating a new song or offering a new digital product, Iranian artists or companies must think about the legal issues and obtaining governmental licenses. Such issues greatly reduce the speed of interaction between key players in the digital music industry and ultimately make it difficult to timely respond to some of the customers' needs. Considering that knowledge is limited about the Iranian digital music industry and the main challenges it faces, this research aims at addressing the following questions:

Research Question 1: Which innovation strategies can Iranian digital music distributors adopt in order to reach a competitive advantage over their local and international competitors?

Research Question 2: What are the main challenges for local music download shops in Iran and how might they deal with these dilemmas?

This study thus focuses on the digital music industry and attempts to contribute to the literature on media innovation by analyzing how the Iranian distributors of music gain competitive advantage in the emerging Iranian digital music market. This study also addresses how the process of gaining competitive advantage for the local music download shops in Iran suffers from issues such as copyright challenges and permissions barriers. To this end, the paper is structured as follows. First, it presents a concise overview of the evolution of the digital music industry in Iran. Second, a theoretical background for the research, including concepts such as competitive advantage, media innovation, and music distribution, is provided. Third, the approach and method are clarified. Fourth, our findings are reported into some separate themes and discussed. Finally, in the concluding section, some theoretical and practical implications are outlined.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. *The Digital Music Market in Iran*

Around 1993, as the Internet began to expand in Iran and its popularity increased, and some music companies started to offer their products on their websites. Kereshmeh was the first music

company to start selling products such as cassettes through its website back in 1999. The company Iran Melody followed and officially began its operations in the new digital space in 2000 [18]. Since then, the activities of other musical companies in the digital ecosystem have been steadily increasing in Iran. However, such activities initially concerned only the sale of physical music products online. It was only in 2012, when the Bleepunes website officially started operating in Iran that legal sales of digital music files (in the form of downloading) took off [19]. Later on, in 2017, another local website named Ritmo started to sell music downloads. These Iranian websites only sell single tracks and full albums, which have previously received a legal license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Iran.

Local music download stores in Iran have been lately faced with a crucial challenge created by a digital music service, Radio Javan, which was established outside Iran in 2004. Using this streaming service, Iranian users can listen to all Iranian songs, both licensed and non-licensed ones [20]. The website of Radio Javan is now filtered in Iran. Although some popular international music streaming services including Spotify and Deezer are also filtered at the moment, SoundCloud is for instance available for people in Iran [21]. Maybe this is not too surprising, as the Iranian music archives of SoundCloud are not as complete as those present on Radio Javan.

According to the report presented by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, as of December 2018 there were 403 record companies in Iran [22], none of which are international. A tremendous growth in music production has been recently registered. In 2017, the number of produced song tracks was equal to 1150, a figure that is 11 times higher than the music tracks produced in 2015 [23]. According to the Iranian Ministry of culture, a total number of 2124 song tracks and 259 full albums were created during the last nine months of 2019 [24,25]. Clearly, digital technologies have been stimulating the music market. However, with an increasing music production challenges for both artists and music operators come along, too.

## 2.2. *Competitive Advantage*

To ensure its success in the future, a company needs to perform better than its competitors do. This is obviously one of the main concerns of all for profit organizations [26]. To explain this concept more precisely, one might state that a firm has a competitive advantage when its profitability is greater than the average profitability of all companies in the industry. Further, a company reaches a 'sustainable' competitive advantage when it is able to earn a long-term profitability, which is higher than the average in the market 'over the years' [27,28]. In general, innovation is the means by which most businesses make their competitive advantage sustainable [29–32].

Using a critical lens, Grant takes a transformational approach to explain the concept of competitive advantage [33]. As he pointed out, in its deepest sense competitive advantage aims at distinguishing a company from its competitors. Even if the organization's competitive strategies may reduce its revenue relative to its competitors in the short term, their aim is to build a long-term differentiation so that the company's approach cannot be easily imitated by competitors. In other words, striving for a competitive advantage involves the organization's continuous efforts to excel in one, many, or even all aspects of its business in comparison to its competitors.

In this respect, one of the questions management researchers have always struggled with is how competitive advantage is practically shaped in the different industries and how the process of shaping competitive advantage differs [27,29,33,34]. In their conceptual framework, Hill et al. pointed out the significant factors that are usually effective in achieving competitive advantage for companies, which include superior efficiency, quality, innovation, and customer responsiveness [27]. According to their study and as already mentioned above, innovation seems to be the most important component of competitive advantage in a long-term strategy: innovations may in fact lead to the addition of unique features—not employed by competitors—to the organization and its products, and thus to a sustainable competitive advantage [35,36].

### 2.3. Media Innovation

Innovation can be generally defined as “the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already done, in a new way” [37]. The term has been widely classified as “either radical, incremental, architectural, modular or niche, based on the effects which it has on the competence, other products, and investment decisions of the innovating entity” [38]. In addition to fostering the growth of a company, innovation might be considered as a crucial antecedent to the direction that a whole industry takes [39].

As mentioned above, innovation helps companies to gain a sustainable competitive advantage [40–42]. However, it also represents a survival factor for companies in many sectors—and even more sharply in the media industry [43–45]. Because of the role it plays, innovation is an ubiquitous concept that has attracted the attention of academic researchers in many different fields, and particularly in the field of business studies [46]. Despite this, scholars are still debating about the definition and significance of this concept. For example, Goffin and Mitchell argue that innovation only involves delivering new products to the market [47], while many other scholars have attempted to more broadly conceptualize the term [48,49]. For the purposes of this study, innovation will also be quite extensively understood as an activity involving mixtures of ideas, knowledge, and resources, whose new combinations create new opportunities within our social and economic systems [50].

In the field of media management and economic studies the concept of innovation has gained particular importance for researchers [51–53]. Besides being an intrinsic feature of media works [54], Küng highlights that innovation “is critical to success in media markets” [55]. Many efforts have thus been made by media management scholars to specifically conceptualize media innovation [50,56–60]. As Krumsvik et al. stated, “innovations in media occur for a variety of reasons, take place within a variety of conditions, and take shape in different ways inside and outside of media firms” [61]. Indeed, as Lomborg and Helles noted, media innovation is a term used not only to describe transformation processes within traditional media organizations, but also to depict new business models and enterprises based on digital technologies [57]. Aiming to create a better understanding of the nature of media innovation, Dogruel provided a comprehensive description of the concept that refers to the whole innovation process [58]. In other words, media innovation includes new digital technologies and products, as well as new business opportunities that have emerged because of these technologies.

Based on the study of Francis and Bessant [62], Storsul and Krumsvik introduced a model to describe the various aspects of media innovation [50,61]. This model took the form of a holistic framework whereby media innovations are categorized in terms of product/service innovation, process, position, as well as paradigmatic and social innovations [63,64].

### 2.4. Music Distribution in the Digital Age

In the early societies, because of the lack of technologies such as recording and broadcasting, music existed in the forms of live and sheet music. As concerts and theatre life began to grow, according to Sun, “the distribution of sheet music for public performances in concerts or operas became an important business for music publishers” [65]. Since then, with the emergence of recording technologies, the two main forms of music presentation included recorded music and live music performances [10]. However, Nordgård attempts to explain the dynamic, complex, and irrational nature of the music industry [66]. As music is tightly related to people’s emotions, he stresses the need to “escape one-dimensional explanations [of the music industry’s nature] and focus on the human relations and cultures that constitute the music industries”.

As technology progressed, music came to be considered a promising source of income in many developed societies. Currently, the music industry is arguably one of the most popular industries in terms of entertainment services [67,68]. Within this context, digital music distribution services play a critical role. They act as a fundamental intermediary in the media market, as they facilitate the relationships between companies, artists, and audiences [10,65].

Spilker classified different regulatory models of digital music distribution [69], in which the roles of artist, music, and user are specified (see Figure 1).

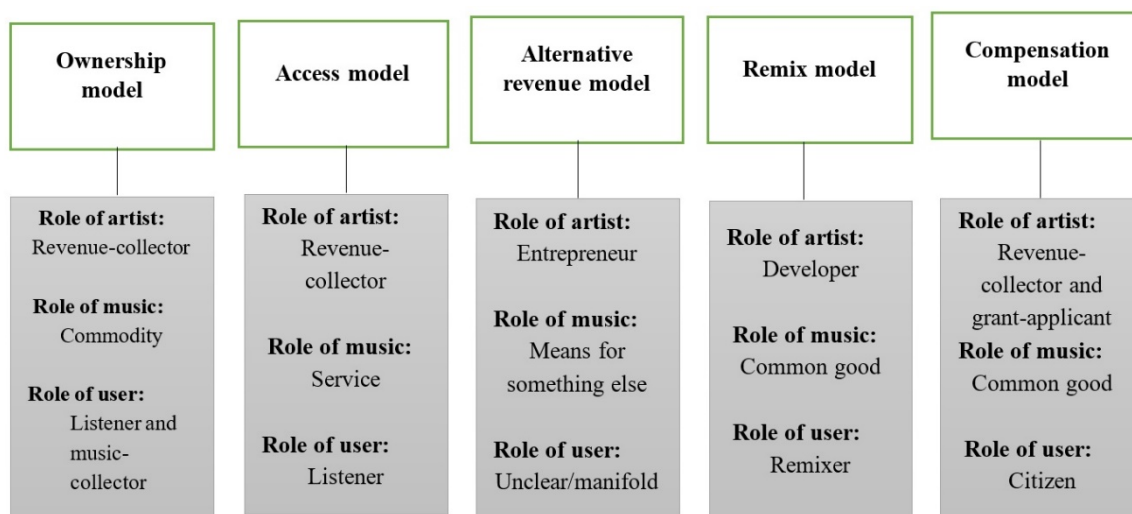


Figure 1. The five regulatory models and the assignment of roles [69]

According to Figure 1, the ownership and access models have one feature in common, that is, the music content is sold in markets. Nonetheless, these are completely different in terms of their business models (i.e. commodity versus service business model). On the other side, the alternative revenue model involves another business logic in which other things, instead of music content itself, such as merchandise, events, brand profiles and so on, are sold. Music becomes thus the mean to sell other products. Additionally, “rather than being an entity to be shuffled around in markets, the basic rationale behind both the remix model and the compensation model is that music is first and foremost a shared cultural resource and a common good” [69]. More clearly, in the remix model there is a participatory culture according to which the user can be involved in “remixing, co-creating, redistributing and spreading music content”. While in the compensation model, the user is generally engaged as a responsible citizen (e.g., pays taxes, fees of various services) who has musical rights (e.g., access to music via public channels including radio, libraries, etc.). The present study aims to draw attention to the ownership model of this classification by focusing on the unique cultural, political, and economic structures inside an emerging country, Iran.

### 3. Method

As this type of studies—placed at the intersection between media innovation and digital music industry studies—is not common in the academic literature, a qualitative approach, that is, an expert interview method, was employed. When there is a paucity of extant research in a particular field, as it was the case here, this approach is appropriate because the resulting output helps to provide a basis for the foundation of future studies [70–72].

Following qualitative research guidelines [71,73], the research design involved a purposeful sampling approach, that is, finding our interviewees by asking our participants to introduce another informant person. Our data were collected through 14 in-depth and semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Tehran, Iran, between March and June 2018. Table 1 shows some detailed information concerning the people that were interviewed as well as the duration of each interview. The number of interviewees was determined based on the theoretical saturation logic [71,72,74]. Accordingly, the data obtained in the 12th interview suggested that the saturation point was reached. However, in order to strengthen the final conceptual model, the interview process continued until the 14th interview. Questions to the informants included the following: “how can local digital distributors innovate in terms of product/service, position, process, etc.?”, “how are copyright

issues affecting the performance of these businesses?”, “what are the main problems encountered by such businesses and how are they dealing with them?”, also, “how are international competitors impacting on local digital music retailers in Iran?”

**Table 1.** Detailed information about interviewees.

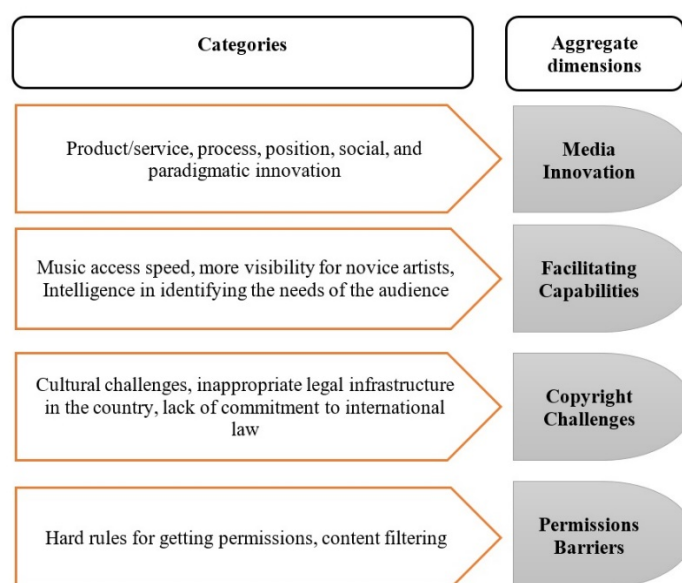
No.	Interviewee Code	Main Activity	Educational Experiences	Professional Experiences	Interview Length (min)
1	1ASH	Music artist	M.A. student in management	More than six years of experience in conducting live music performances	66
2	2MP	Music artist	M.A graduated in engineering	Publishing several professional songs on famous Iranian music websites	43
3	3HS	Digital music industry professional	Ph.D. candidate in sociology	Music expert in the Ministry of Culture	59
4	4ESH	Digital music industry professional	Diploma	Founder and CEO in a music company	35
5	5AMSH	Digital music industry professional	B.A. in Arts	Marketing manager in a digital distribution service	92
6	6FH	Digital music industry professional	Ph.D. in engineering	Founder and CEO in a digital music distribution service	37
7	7MJ	Media researcher	M.A student in media management	Consultant and researcher in the field of digital business	79
8	8EN	Media researcher	M.A student in media management	Consultant and researcher in the field of digital business	60
9	9JN	Media researcher	Ph.D. in media management	Consultant and researcher in the field of digital business	92
10	10DKH	Media researcher	Ph.D. in media management	Faculty member and researcher in the field of digital business	48
11	11SHJ	Business researcher	Ph.D. candidate in strategic management	Strategy consultant and researcher in digital business	60
12	12SS	Media researcher	Ph.D. in media management	Faculty member and researcher in the field of digital business	52
13	13RS	Digital music industry professional	MBA graduated	Founder and CEO in a music company	66
14	14SL	Media researcher	Ph.D. in media management	University lecturer and researcher in digital business	45

As our main aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of local digital distributors of music in Iran, we selected the interviewees from three specialized fields (five digital music industry



professionals, seven media and business researchers, and two well-experienced music artists). In the first group of study's informants (i.e., digital music industry professionals), we tried to make sense of the challenges of digital music distribution within the Iranian music industry. Moreover, this group could help us to understand not only the interactions between major actors in digital music distribution in Iran, but also the strategies that they adopt in order to sustain a competitive advantage in a specific business environment such as Iran. The second group (i.e., media and business researchers) could enable us to look at digital music distribution critically in terms of scientific aspects. Thus, the first and second groups together paved the way for familiarizing ourselves to this type of business from inside and outside the industry. Finally, through the input of the third group (i.e., well-experienced music artists), although it was a small group, we sought to delineate issues related to the creative production of music from the standpoint of the artists themselves.

The coding of data followed the open, selective, and theoretical coding steps [74,75]. As Holton explained, in the open coding process, initial codes and then categories are identified [74]. In this regard, MAXQDA software version 12 was used to generate 248 initial codes—identifying specific text segments related to the aim of the study—extracted from the informants' quotations directly. In a following step, we integrated these initial codes and were able to select 78 secondary codes. Then, through a further analysis and synthetization of these codes, we identified 14 categories, which were combined to finally result in four aggregate dimensions, characterizing the context of, and the innovative strategies followed by, the digital music operators (selective coding, according to Holton, 2007). Figure 2 details our data structure.



**Figure 2.** Data structure.

In order to maintain trustworthiness, according to Elo et al. [76], all stages of the research, including the preparation, organization, and reporting of the findings, have to be carefully considered. To strengthen reliability, which relates to the stability of findings, in this project we attempted to control the coding stages by collaborating with several researchers to attain consensus on emerged themes during the analyzing process. Moreover, regarding the validity of the research, which is related to the reality of the observations, attempts were made to analyze the data using a triangulation strategy and by providing evidence from the text of the interviews. Furthermore, a member check was conducted according to the work of Bitsch [77]. In this regard, after analyzing the interview texts and extracting the codes, the resulting narratives were verified with and reconfirmed by each interviewee.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In this section, the key findings of this research are presented according to the four aggregate dimensions that we identified above. In addition, some of the key quotes from interviews are included in the text since these are considered as the most informative expressions related to each dimension.

##### 4.1. Media Innovation

As previously explained, according to the work of Storsul and Krumsvik [50], media innovation can be divided into five categories including product/service, process, position, paradigmatic, and social innovations. All together, these categories build up the media innovation dimension of the strategies that we could extract from the interviews and examine in this study. Such strategies, along with an example of the interviewees' quotations, are presented in Table 2. From the viewpoints of the study's informants, this table depicts in detail the most critical innovative strategies through which local digital music download shops in Iran can obtain a competitive advantage over their local and international competitors in the Iranian music market. However, implementing these strategies inside the Iranian market has its challenges, as we shall explain in the following sections of this paper.

**Table 2.** Media innovation strategies.

Media Innovation Categories	Key Innovative Strategic Actions	Evidence from Interviews
Product/service	Preservation of musical identity in the presentation of new products	"Product innovations in the digital distribution of music must be such as to preserve their musical identity and not move musical works to non-musical works since in this way the target audience will generally change, and the business will face serious challenges" (10DKH).
	Product offer based on customer's mood	"Before we can create a new product, we need to design a mechanism to match the best product to the audience's mood, for example, to create a product that can be played by giving the keyword of the song you want" (9JN).
	A special presentation of new talent works	"Introducing products of music talents (new faces) to people, and these new talents will improve their work in the future" (8EN)
	Selling products in a package form	"The audience is interested in the package. If we can make a package of products, it can be useful" (7MJ).
	Selling related products	"You can sell items related to an album, such as bracelets and necklaces that are related to them (artists), or you can sell their concert tickets" (5AMSH).
	Selling playlists of celebrities	"You can make a list of famous singers, what songs your favorite singer listens to" (10DKH).
	Leveling products based on professional criteria	"For example, according to professional standards, we level the products. These categories make the producers more careful about quality" (1ASH)
	Music-by-order	"We can have digital services in music that we can order for ourselves to the production of a special music, either for a person or organization and even for special occasions like weddings" (11SHJ).



Table 2. Cont.

Media Innovation Categories	Key Innovative Strategic Actions	Evidence from Interviews
Process	Simplify the purchase process	"I think it would be possible for the audiences to buy their favorite music in a simpler way" (1ASH).
	Attention to customer experience	"There should be some way to increase shopping pleasure. Now it's specialized: cheaper, faster, and better quality" (7MJ).
	Preview products in the buying process	"We have thirty seconds previews, which most artists give us to tell us which part of it is better. Sometimes our musicians do it" (5AMSH).
	Pay attention to aesthetic issues in the buying process	"If we consider this business as a store, where products are offered by graphical designs, then designing a website template is very important in terms of graphics and aesthetic issues" (1ASH).
Position	Accurate analysis of competitors	"One version cannot be packed for every business and instead, depending on the competitors' analysis, each business requires its own strategy" (2MP).
	Strategic alliances with other businesses	"For example, a music download store would be positioned in the minds of the people if it can be possible to find its own related businesses and engage in strategic partnerships with them" (2MP).
	Pay attention to niche markets	"We should try to identify the niche markets that others have not worked on (for example, just create a market for artists and musicians), and we will set the standards ourselves" (8EN).
Paradigmatic	Free from copyright	"The digital business model in the future will completely break copyright law and go for free. Instead, attracting the attention of the audience will be the most important factor in success" (12SS).
	Simplifications in music access	"Technology is becoming more sophisticated and the presentation of products is becoming simpler. Perhaps there is another stage in which these tools will be reduced and there will no longer be a need for a device such as a phone or a tablet. Therefore, if we care about changing the paradigm, we should think about simplifications" (1ASH)
Social	Create space for critical dialogue	"The topic of discussion is also very important. Bringing the subject of discussion and bringing people together for creating a critical dialogue and challenge" (7MJ).
	Holding real events	"Also, these businesses can, at some point, hold real events and bring their audience together in a real world" (10DKH)
	Encouraging the audience to create content	"Encouraging the audience to create content and become part of the music production system" (2MP).

#### 4.2. Facilitating Capabilities

Facilitating capabilities in this context mean that digital music distributors are constantly trying to explore needs and requests of their customers; this includes introducing new actors for making sure that those new needs and requests are perfectly met. In general, facilitating capabilities are presented here in two ways, consistent with the work of Kjus [10]. First, the availability of new channels for responding to needs increases significantly. In other words, digital media innovations occur in an

ecosystem in which the speed of responding to the needs of the audience increases thanks to the availability of many actors inside the system able to respond to those needs. Second, demands that were previously neglected, are now considered thanks to a constant effort in exploring emerging needs. Thus, by identifying and covering new needs, new actors enter the market and this eventually leads to the development of a more prosperous, differentiated music industry.

One of the key facilitation features, according to some of the interviewed experts, was the speed of access to music. In order for the audience to access music, some specific tools need to be provided. In this regard, reducing the number of these tools would facilitate and speed access and, thus, be appreciated by the audience. A music artist pointed out, “surely, if there were fewer tools needed to achieve the goal, we would feel more comfortable because we think we can respond faster to their needs. The same tools, which will be removed one by one, make us less distant with our favorite music, which is an important point” (1ASH). It should be noted that access to Iranian music (i.e., those songs that have legally received a license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) is simple from a technological point of view, but because of high connection costs, it is not very affordable. However, the access to songs except for licensed ones (i.e., those international and the non-licensed songs) is an entirely different issue as at the moment many international music distributors are filtered in Iran.

Another key finding concerning the facilitating capabilities was the fact that online music websites in Iran are an appropriate place for introducing new artists to the local community. According to some interviewees, in the music industry’s current environment, live performances have a crucial role to play in the artist’s earnings. However, before filling the concert halls, the artist’s songs need to be most widely listened to by potential enthusiasts. Digital distribution services are thus one of the most important tools to help artists become well known. In this regard, one senior executive, interviewed by the authors, in a digital music store said, “if the artist’s work is not seen, his concert will not be welcomed. We are looking for a way that, at best, new artists can be seen and taken into consideration” (5AMSH). However, we need to specify that this issue is just related to Iranian men artists, as the release of women’s songs is forbidden in the Iranian music market. Nonetheless, Iranian women artists are allowed to hold live concerts just for women audiences, most often in the capital, Tehran.

According to a few experts, mostly those belonging to the scientific section of our interviewees, if we are able to understand the needs of the audience in an intelligent manner, then we can properly think about how to meet those needs more efficiently. The more needs can be identified, the more actors can enter the business cycle to satisfy those needs, and wealth creation will thus be strengthened. Algorithms and artificial intelligence seem to be key in this respect. Indeed, as one of our interviewed faculty members pointed out, “considering the artificial intelligence and data that a company has from its audience, it can provide a package of music that the audience is likely to be interested in and is personalized according to the audiences’ preferences” (12SS).

### 4.3. Copyright Challenges

Copyright laws represent one of the challenges to which almost all interviewees paid special attention. The experts pointed out that the copyright laws are not correctly understood by the public. In other words, the copyright culture has not found an appropriate place in the everyday life of the Iranian people yet. A founder of a music company noted: “We did not properly interpret copyright law in our country, and we refer to it as a violent and police law. Rather, it’s not a harsh discussion; it is about transparency (like giving a taxi fare), so this culture must be created in our future” (13RS). It is worthwhile to note that the share of music distribution via digital platforms in Iran is 70%, compared to all other music distribution models in this country. Moreover, out of this number (i.e., 70%), 80% is surprisingly devoted to music piracy on these platforms [19].

The fact that copyright laws are not accepted by people is not only due to the lack of understanding of such laws, but also to the fact that some cultural institutions have not made enough of an effort to deal with this problem. In line with this, an expert said, “an album that is not yet on the market, is available on cyberspace for free or for a very little amount of money. In fact, there is technology, but

there is no proper culture and education for using it, and there is no institution for training people about the right use of music" (3HS). However, Beptunes (as a local music e-retailer in Iran) faced the copyright challenge by collaborating with some international companies such as Apple, Telegram, and Google. For example, according to Beptunes' request, Google has removed some major Iranian piracy websites from its search engine [78].

One of our interviewees was even more critical. He argued that cultural institutions have not made an effective attempt to resolve the copyright issue because the people who have managed these institutions so far did not have the appropriate knowledge to do so. He asserted, "The way of looking at the copyright laws is not deep and not considered by cultural institutions. The solution is that the Ministry of Culture should engage cultural leaders/experts. At the moment policy makers who are in the field of music, have no experience in music" (7MJ).

According to the experts interviewed, the Iranian music industry suffers from a lack of legal infrastructure to protect copyright laws. In fact, this problem does not only concern music, but also almost all other media products in Iran. The importance of this issue is so high that one interviewee claimed, "we cannot solve copyright problems because it is not legally protected" (10DKH). Accordingly, experts suggested that specific policies should be developed in this area with policymakers, artists, as well as ordinary people being involved and playing a significant role in the process.

As described above, policymakers do not consider copyright laws to be important. This lack of consideration and action in the field of copyright has created many problems for music creators and business practitioners. However, besides the cultural and legal issues that we have so far considered, some interviewees believe that another major problem is the fact that Iran has not formally been a member of international treaties such as the Berne Convention yet. Not being a formal member of the Berne Convention makes Iranian music markets less attractive in terms of investment target for international record companies. As a result, local digital music stores in Iran cannot distribute music products such as international songs through legal channels to their audiences. In a clear statement, one of the interviewed faculty members argued, "we cannot create an internal copyright culture without being committed to international copyright" (14SL). This dichotomy has always existed in the media industry in Iran, where operators must support domestic media products, and the rights of international media products are not addressed.

#### 4.4. Permissions Barriers

The music companies that want to sell their products in the Iranian market must first be granted a license, for each single music product, from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In order to obtain a governmental license, the music companies applying need to require the ministry's verifications for all lyrics, poems, singers, composers, track's titles, as well as all other musicians who have collaborated in the production of the music product in question. Everything needs to be addressed by the government from the standpoint of political and religious issues. Furthermore, none of the artists involved, according to the current restrictions on the Iranian Music industry, should have collaborated with foreign satellite channels (e.g., GEM TV, Manoto TV, and so on) and/or other international websites (e.g., BBC, Internet Radio Javan, and so on) in their past experiences [79]. In general, it takes at least two weeks to get a permission for a song, while for a full-length license it takes from a few weeks to several months. It should be stated that Iranian artists can individually request the governmental permission only for three songs per year [80].

According to some of the interviewees, these bureaucratic obstacles demotivate artists and negatively affect their attempts and motivation to innovate. The rules that music production needs to respect, as mentioned by some interviewees, are not very flexible. One musician, as one of our interviewees stated, "due to the existence of a non-flexible permission system in Iran, the releasing speed of innovative work in music is slow" (2MP).

Getting permission is not the only problem that artists and businesses in the Iranian music industry face. Another problem relates to the content filtering of songs. This may also have the effect

of discouraging musicians from producing innovative works. Some of the participants in our study argued that artists seem to systematically refrain from pursuing innovation because they do not want to get into trouble during the required process of obtaining permission from governmental institutions. As a music business practitioner argued, “the main challenge is the difficulty of obtaining permission from the Ministry of Culture and of the content filters used by them. In Iran, content production and singers’ activities are decreasing. Due to legal issues, we cannot have a lot of diversity and we also cannot adequately meet market needs” (5AMSH). Another interviewee noted that “legal structures have a restrictive impact on these businesses and less interference would help us to achieve more success” (6FH).

Not all music styles in Iran are allowed to be sold within the Iranian music industry legally. At the moment, for example, only pop and traditional music genres can be legally commercialized in this country [81]. As another example, selling music products and holding live performances belonging to the rap genre are forbidden by the regulatory systems in Iran. Further, there is unfortunately a gender discrimination in Iran. Because of Iranian religious beliefs included in the legislation [82], women singers cannot receive legal permission to pursue artistic activities [83]. This very issue has created a significant challenge to digital music distributors in Iran, as they are bound to ignore the potentialities of women artists and their creative artworks.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, by focusing on digital music stores in Iran, we tried to explore the process of gaining access to competitive advantage through media innovation. In doing so, our research has both some theoretical and practical implications.

In terms of theoretical implications, we have brought some new and fresh insights to the operationalization of the media innovation framework proposed by Storsul and Krumsvik [50], by applying it to the Iranian music industry. Moreover, the present paper contributes to the collection of empirical data on the regulatory models characterizing digital music distribution in emerging markets, and specifically on the ownership model (see Figure 1) of music distribution in the digital ecosystem [69]. Recognizing digital music stores as intermediaries in the music industry, this paper has systematically shown how these services might help the music industry to reach an efficient media market in emerging countries, consistently with previous evidence [84–86].

Specifically, we aimed at answering two main questions. In terms of international competitors, we need to recall that, at the moment, most of those online music services (such as Deezer, Spotify, etc.) are filtered in Iran. It is thus difficult for Iranian users to enjoy them. Even if Iranian consumers can access such international e-services by VPNs, this solution is not affordable for everyone due to the high dollar exchange rates in Iran. Concerning the local competitors and consistent with some other studies [6,10,87], the authors found that ‘social innovation’ is key for gaining a competitive advantage, as the access to music is being simplified by the existence of many channels such as Iranian pirate websites. By doing so, local e-retailers in Iran might be enabled to provide a social context for audiences ‘beyond’ the music files only, a context in which audiences are invited not just for listening but for broadening their social world interactions.

As to our second research question, it became clear that issues such as copyright challenges and governmental permission barriers are limiting the capabilities of digital music distributors to reach a sustainable competitive advantage [17]. Regarding copyright challenges, first, the most critical thing to foster Iranian digital distributors is the development of a ‘copyright culture’ [88,89]. As mentioned earlier, social innovation plays a key role in gaining competitive advantage [90,91]. The authors believe that this type of innovation might help to promote copyright culture among Iranian people. Second, concerning permission barriers, the authors would like to suggest to local e-retailers to negotiate with governmental institutions the removal of such limitations. However, unfortunately, the local e-retailers need to adapt to such barriers as content ‘filtering’ by Iranian governmental bodies may represent a possible threat, too [92–94].

The present research has also some managerial implications for practitioners in this industry. This study identified some innovation strategies, quoted in Table 2, which are being applied by music download stores within the Iranian media market. If implemented as part of a systematic plan, these strategies could help similar digital distribution services to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Regarding the limitations in this paper, although this research can provide valuable insights for other emerging markets, a generalization of the findings to other communities should be considered with caution. Further, in order to have a comprehensive view, interviewees were selected from a variety of fields. However, the number of artists participating in this study was much lower than that of other groups. This may have affected the findings of the study.

Finally, this research showed that the legal restrictions in the Iranian music industry have created many problems for key actors (e.g., music artists and business practitioners). Therefore, a further qualitative study could explore in depth the narratives of those actors and thus provide a better understanding of the very nature of these constraints.

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