

Music as Cultural Currency: Symbolic and Epistemic Exchanges in Indigenous and Global Traditions



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Abstract

Research on music's aesthetic and economic dimensions has expanded, yet little is known about how musical value is generated and negotiated across Indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions at a moment when digital circulation and cultural sovereignty debates are reshaping global cultural life. This study addressed that gap by examining how music functioned as cultural currency within and across these communities. A ten-month qualitative comparative case study was conducted with 24 participants in the Mid-Atlantic United States, using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document and media analysis, interpreted through thematic and discourse approaches. Findings showed that Indigenous participants treated music as a gift and epistemic heritage sustaining ancestral knowledge; diasporic communities mobilized music as cultural memory and resistance; and mainstream practitioners navigated music as a commodity and cultural capital shaped by institutional prestige and market visibility. The study demonstrates that conceptualizing music as cultural currency offers a critical lens for understanding negotiation across traditions and informs ethnomusicology, cultural diplomacy, and decolonial practice.

Keywords

Currency, Diplomacy, Epistemology, Exchange, Identity

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Introduction

Music is a universal human practice, present in every culture and community, yet its role extends far beyond aesthetics or entertainment. It is a carrier of meaning, identity, and knowledge, shaping how people understand themselves and their place in the world. From Indigenous ceremonies where songs transmit ancestral wisdom, to diasporic festivals where rhythms sustain cultural memory, to global pop concerts where sound becomes a shared language of belonging, music circulates as a powerful medium of exchange. It is not only heard but lived, embodying values that connect individuals and communities across time and space (Cassar, 2024).

Scholars have long examined music as an art, a commodity, and a social practice. Ethnomusicology, for instance, has illuminated how music reflects cultural values and beliefs, often serving as a repository of heritage and identity (Feld, 2000; Stokes, 2004). At the same time, cultural theorists have explored music's commodification within capitalist economies, tracing how it accrues economic and symbolic value (Taylor, 2024). Despite this rich scholarship, the epistemic and symbolic dimensions of music as a form of cultural currency remain underexplored. Understanding music in this way, beyond its aesthetic or economic functions, offers deeper insight into how communities negotiate identity, power, and knowledge through sound.

The problem this study addresses is the lack of comparative analysis across indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions that foregrounds music's role in value exchange. Much of the existing literature focuses either on localized ethnographies or on global commodification, often neglecting the interplay between symbolic, social, and epistemic dimensions of musical practice (Taylor, 2020). There is a need for frameworks that capture how music operates simultaneously as a gift, a commodity, and a medium for knowledge transmission. This study fills that gap by conceptualizing music as cultural currency and examining how it generates and negotiates value across diverse contexts.

The theoretical framework guiding this research draws on Anthropological Value Theory, which emphasizes that value is not limited to economic measurement but encompasses meaning and social significance (Graeber, 2001). Complementing this are circulation theories, which examine how cultural goods move and acquire meaning across borders (Appadurai, 1996), and exchange theories, which highlight reciprocity and obligation in cultural practices

(Mauss, 1990). Together, these perspectives shape the interpretation of music as cultural currency, situating it within broader processes of negotiation, circulation, and exchange.

The central aim of this study is to analyze how music functions as cultural currency across indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions. Specifically, it seeks: (1) to examine mechanisms of symbolic, social, and epistemic exchange, and (2) to evaluate how framing music as currency reveals power dynamics and cultural negotiations. Two guiding research questions structure the inquiry: (1) How do indigenous and diasporic communities mobilize music as cultural currency in symbolic and epistemic exchanges? (2) How do global mainstream musical economies transform or contest these mechanisms of value exchange?

The article proceeds as follows. First, the theoretical framework is elaborated to situate the study within existing scholarship. Next, the methodology is outlined, detailing the comparative case study design and qualitative techniques employed. Findings and analysis are then presented, highlighting music's dual role as a gift and a commodity. Finally, the discussion considers the implications of conceptualizing music as cultural currency for ethnomusicology, cultural diplomacy, and decolonial scholarship.

Literature Review

Ethnomusicology has long emphasized that music is not simply sound or entertainment, but a cultural practice deeply embedded in social life. Feld's (2000) influential work on world music demonstrates how songs carry histories, identities, and values, functioning as vehicles of cultural meaning. Similarly, Stokes (2004) highlights music's role in shaping collective identities and negotiating belonging in a globalized world. These perspectives establish music as a medium of epistemic significance, where sound becomes a repository of knowledge and a tool for transmitting heritage across generations. By situating music as more than aesthetic pleasure, ethnomusicologists underscore its capacity to act as cultural currency, sustaining identity and meaning within communities.

Alongside its symbolic and epistemic functions, music has been extensively studied as a commodity within capitalist and global markets. Scholars such as Hesmondhalgh (2013) have traced how music industries commodify sound, branding it for consumption and circulation in global economies. Taylor (2024) expands this analysis by showing how music accrues multiple forms of value, economic, cultural, and social, depending on its context of circulation. These studies reveal a persistent tension: while music generates economic capital, it simultaneously

embodies cultural meaning that resists reduction to market value. This tension is particularly visible in mainstream contexts, where commodification often obscures music's symbolic and epistemic contributions.

Anthropological theories of value provide a critical lens for understanding music's dual role as both gift and commodity. Graeber (2001) argues that value extends beyond economics to encompass meaning and social significance, a perspective that resonates with how communities mobilize music as cultural currency. Appadurai's (1996) Theory of Circulation further illuminates how cultural goods, including music, move across borders and acquire new meanings in the process. Mauss's (1990) Classic Theory of Exchange underscores the obligations and relationships created through acts of giving, which parallels how music, when shared or performed, generates social bonds and reciprocity. Together, these frameworks highlight music's capacity to embody multiple forms of value- economic, symbolic, and epistemic- depending on its mode of circulation and exchange.

Indigenous traditions often position music as epistemic heritage, where songs transmit ancestral knowledge, spiritual values, and cultural identity. Studies of Native American and First Nations practices, for example, show how music functions as a symbolic currency that sustains community cohesion and intergenerational knowledge (Ellis, 2005). Diasporic scholarship similarly emphasizes music's role in sustaining identity across borders. Gilroy's (1993) work on the Black Atlantic illustrates how diasporic musical practices, such as reggae and hip-hop, serve as cultural memory and resistance, enabling communities to negotiate belonging in transnational contexts. Despite these insights, comparative studies that link indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions remain underrepresented. Most scholarship focuses on either localized ethnographies or global commodification, leaving a gap in understanding how these contexts intersect.

The literature reveals a lack of integrated frameworks that analyze music simultaneously as symbolic, epistemic, and economic currency. While ethnomusicology has illuminated music's cultural significance, and cultural studies have examined its commodification, few studies bridge these perspectives to explore how music operates across Indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions. This absence of comparative analysis limits our understanding of how music negotiates value in diverse contexts. Addressing this gap requires a framework that foregrounds music's role in value exchange beyond commodification, situating it as cultural currency that embodies meaning, identity, and knowledge.

By conceptualizing music as cultural currency, this study offers a new lens for ethnomusicology and cultural studies. It illuminates how music sustains identity and epistemic heritage while simultaneously navigating commodification in global economies. This framing highlights power dynamics and cultural negotiations, showing how communities mobilize music to assert agency and transmit knowledge. The study's contribution extends to decolonial scholarship, where recognizing music as cultural currency challenges Eurocentric models of value and affirms indigenous and diasporic epistemologies. It also has implications for cultural diplomacy, positioning music as a medium of exchange that fosters dialogue and understanding across traditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Anthropological Value Theory, enriched by perspectives on circulation and exchange drawn from ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology. Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which music can be understood not only as an aesthetic practice but as a medium of value creation, negotiation, and transmission across diverse cultural contexts.

Anthropological Value Theory emphasizes that value is not confined to economic measurement but extends to symbolic, social, and epistemic dimensions. Graeber (2001) argues that value is best conceived as the way people represent the importance of actions and objects within their cultural systems. In this sense, music becomes a “currency” of meaning, embodying identity, memory, and knowledge. This perspective is particularly relevant for indigenous traditions, where music often functions as a repository of epistemic heritage and a vehicle for social cohesion.

Complementing this, theories of circulation highlight how cultural goods, including music, move across borders and acquire new meanings in the process. Appadurai (1986) introduced the idea of the “social life of things,” showing how objects gain value through their trajectories of exchange. Applied to music, circulation theory helps explain how diasporic communities sustain cultural identity through sonic practices that travel and transform across geographies.

Exchange Theory further deepens this analysis by situating music within systems of reciprocity and commodification. Mauss (1925/1990) demonstrated that gifts are never free; they create obligations and relationships. Music, when performed, shared, or commodified, operates similarly, whether as a gift that strengthens community ties or as a commodity that generates

economic capital. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital also illuminates how musical practices confer prestige, authority, and symbolic power within both indigenous and global contexts.

Together, these theories justify the framing of music as cultural currency. They allow us to see how music circulates as a medium of exchange, how it embodies multiple forms of value, and how it negotiates power dynamics between indigenous epistemologies and global mainstream economies. By integrating value, circulation, and exchange theories, this study positions music as a dynamic force that mediates symbolic meaning, social relations, and epistemic contributions across traditions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how music functions as cultural currency across indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research questions centre on symbolic meaning, epistemic exchange, and social negotiation rather than quantifiable outcomes. Comparative orientation enables the identification of convergences and divergences in mechanisms of value exchange, thereby illuminating how music mediates identity, knowledge, and power across cultural contexts.

Participants were drawn from three groups: indigenous musicians and cultural leaders in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, diasporic practitioners from African and Caribbean traditions based in Washington, D.C., and surrounding metropolitan areas, and mainstream performers and educators working in classical and popular music institutions in the same region. Purposive sampling ensured that all participants possessed sustained involvement in musical creation, performance, or cultural transmission. 24 participants were recruited, divided evenly across the three groups to support thematic saturation while maintaining depth of insight.

To protect confidentiality while maintaining analytic clarity, all participants were assigned anonymized identifiers following a structured coding scheme. The prefix IND denotes indigenous participants, DIA represents diasporic participants from African and Caribbean traditions, and MAIN refers to participants situated within mainstream classical and popular music contexts. Each identifier includes a numerical suffix (e.g., IND-07, DIA-04, MAIN-02) to distinguish individual contributors without revealing personal information. These labels

function solely as category markers and not as personal identifiers, ensuring ethical transparency and consistency across the dataset.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document or media analysis. Interviews, conducted either in person or online, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and elicited reflections on music's symbolic, social, and epistemic functions. Participant observation took place during ceremonies, concerts, and community gatherings across Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., with detailed field notes documenting the dynamics of musical exchange. Document and media analysis included program notes, festival archives, recordings, and policy documents, offering insight into circulation, commodification, and representation. Data collection occurred over ten months, from March to December 2024, allowing sustained engagement with each community and enabling the capture of both routine musical practices and event-specific performances across seasonal and cultural cycles.

Analysis proceeded through thematic and discourse-based approaches. Transcripts and field notes were coded inductively and deductively, guided by the study's theoretical framework. Qualitative software supported systematic organization and retrieval of data, while iterative comparison across cases refined themes and highlighted patterns. This dual analytic strategy enabled a nuanced synthesis of symbolic meanings, epistemic practices, and discursive constructions of music as cultural currency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection, and all procedures adhered to principles of respect, reciprocity, and cultural sensitivity. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any stage. Additional permissions were sought from indigenous community leaders when research activities involved ceremonial or culturally sensitive contexts, ensuring that participation aligned with community expectations and protocols.

Confidentiality was safeguarded through the anonymization procedures described above, and all data were stored securely on encrypted, password-protected systems accessible only to the research team. Cultural restrictions on the sharing or reproduction of musical materials, particularly within indigenous communities, were strictly observed, and no recordings or descriptions were included without explicit permission. Reflexive practices were employed

throughout the research process to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and to mitigate interpretive bias, especially when engaging with culturally embedded musical knowledge.

Digital materials, including recordings, streaming platforms, and cultural organization websites, were incorporated into the dataset when they met criteria for authenticity and cultural significance. These materials were analyzed using the same thematic and discourse frameworks applied to interviews and field notes, with attention to how digital circulation shapes perceptions of musical value.

The study acknowledges its limitations. The purposive sample, while rich in depth, restricts generalizability, and access to certain indigenous traditions was shaped by cultural protocols. Digital materials may privilege mainstream voices over indigenous or diasporic ones, introducing representational bias. These constraints were addressed through reflexivity and transparency to support the transferability of findings rather than universal generalization.

Findings

The study showed that, across indigenous communities, the diaspora, and mainstream society, music plays several important roles in cultural life. Three main themes stood out. First, music acts as a way for people to share knowledge, pass down memories, and strengthen their cultural identity. It is not just something people listen to for enjoyment. It also carries important ideas, stories, and ways of understanding the world that communities want to preserve and communicate. Second, music works as a space where people negotiate relationships and values. It sits between being a gift that strengthens social bonds and being a product that can be bought and sold. Because of this, music helps build community and mutual support, but it is also shaped by market forces and economic pressures. This creates a tension between music as something shared within a community and music as something commercial. Third, music is a place where power is exercised and contested. Cultural practices connected to music can be changed, challenged, or redefined when they interact with mainstream institutions and global markets. These influences show that musical traditions are not only maintained but also reshaped as they encounter dominant systems of value and authority.

To stay aligned with the goals of the study, the results are organized around two main questions: (1) how music helps people share meaning and knowledge, and (2) how music navigates issues of power and value in different cultural settings

Music as Gift and Epistemic Heritage (Indigenous Communities)

Theme 1: Transmission of Knowledge

Across indigenous communities, participants consistently described music as a vessel of ancestral wisdom and a medium for intergenerational teaching. One elder articulated this epistemic function clearly, remarking: *“When we sing, we are not just making sound; we are teaching the young ones how to walk with the ancestors”* (Participant IND-07, 2024, Interview). Field observations at a Maryland powwow further illustrated this dynamic, where adults explained a song about river spirits to children, emphasizing that it functioned simultaneously as a prayer and as a reminder to care for the natural world. These practices demonstrate how musical performance operates as a living archive of ecological knowledge, spirituality, and communal ethics.

Theme 2: Social Cohesion and Reciprocity

Indigenous participants also framed music as a gift that sustains social bonds and reinforces reciprocal obligations. As one contributor explained, *“You don’t sell a song; you give it. And in giving, you strengthen the circle”* (Participant IND-03, 2024, Interview). Observations from a naming ceremony showed drumming accompanying the exchange of gifts, symbolizing the mutual responsibilities that bind families and the wider community. In this context, music functions not merely as performance but as a relational practice that enacts and renews communal cohesion.

Music as Memory and Resistance (Diasporic Communities)

Theme 3: Sustaining Identity Across Borders

Diasporic participants emphasized music as a form of cultural memory that preserves identity across displacement and migration. A Caribbean drummer in Washington, D.C. expressed this poignantly: *“Every beat I play is a reminder that we survived the crossing. It’s our history in rhythm”* (Participant DIA-11, 2024, Interview). African diasporic choirs similarly used call-and-response structures to maintain continuity across generations, reinforcing collective identity despite historical rupture and contemporary marginalization.

Theme 4: Negotiating Belonging and Power

Music also emerged as a symbolic currency through which diasporic communities negotiate belonging and resist erasure. At a Pan-African street festival, performances explicitly

challenged marginalization, with one participant noting: *“Our songs are our passports. They tell the world we belong, even when the world says otherwise”* (Participant DIA-04, 2024, Interview). These accounts highlight how musical practices operate as assertions of presence, agency, and cultural legitimacy within contested social landscapes.

Music as Commodity and Cultural Capital (Mainstream Contexts)

Theme 5: Commodification and Branding

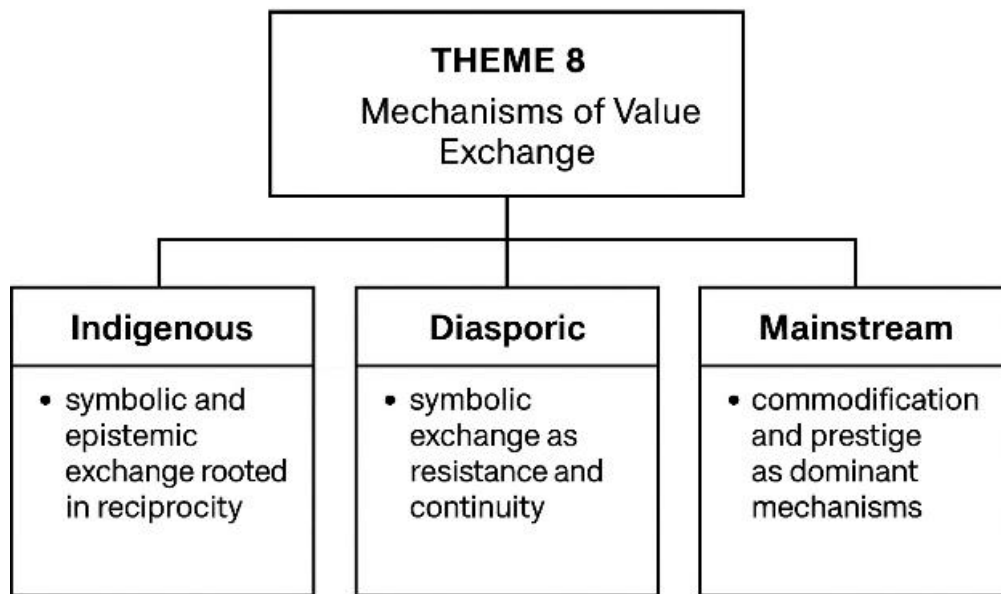
In mainstream musical economies, participants described music as deeply entangled with commodification and branding. Document and media analysis revealed that program notes from symphony concerts foregrounded sponsorship logos more prominently than cultural meaning. A classical violinist reflected on this dynamic, stating: *“Sometimes I feel like I’m selling myself as much as the music”* (Participant MAIN-02, 2024, Interview). Streaming platforms further reinforced this trend by privileging marketable genres, shaping circulation according to commercial rather than symbolic or epistemic value.

Theme 6: Prestige and Symbolic Power

Music also functioned as cultural capital within educational and institutional settings. Conservatory brochures framed classical music as a marker of elite identity, positioning participation as a pathway to prestige. As one music educator explained, *“Parents don’t just want their kids to play; they want the prestige that comes with it”* (Participant MAIN-09, 2024, Interview). These narratives illustrate how mainstream contexts often attach value to music through institutional recognition, status, and market visibility rather than communal or epistemic significance.

Cross-Case Comparative Insights

Theme 7: Dual Function of Music (Gift vs. Commodity). Across cases, music simultaneously sustained identity and navigated commodification. Indigenous communities emphasized gift exchange, while mainstream contexts leaned toward commodification. Diasporic traditions often blended both.

Theme 8: Mechanisms of Value Exchange**Figure 1: Mechanisms of Value Exchange**

The diagram in Figure 1 offers a visual summary of how music carries and negotiates value across three cultural settings: Indigenous, Diasporic, and Mainstream. At the top, the theme is introduced, highlighting the central idea that music is not just an art form but a system of exchange shaped by cultural context. In indigenous communities, music is deeply tied to symbolic and epistemic exchange. It serves to share knowledge and reinforce communal bonds, with reciprocity at its core. In diasporic settings, music becomes a tool of resistance and continuity, preserving identity and cultural memory across generations and geographies. Meanwhile, in mainstream contexts, music is often shaped by commodification and prestige, functioning within market-driven systems that prioritize institutional recognition and economic value.

By placing these three perspectives side by side, the diagram reveals the tensions and contrasts between community-based sharing, identity-driven resilience, and commercial valuation. It invites us to consider how music's meaning and function shift depending on the cultural lens through which it is experienced.

Theme 9: Power Dynamics in Circulation and mainstream economies often transform indigenous and diasporic practices. For example, indigenous songs adapted for global festivals were reframed as “world music,” altering their epistemic value. Several participants questioned the metaphor of “currency,” arguing that music resists reduction to purely transactional logic. At the same time, hybrid practices became visible, exemplified by the incorporation of

indigenous drumming into international jazz festivals, where different value systems intersected in practice. However, the expansion of digital circulation reshaped epistemic value unevenly, as streaming platforms tended to amplify mainstream voices while further marginalizing indigenous musical traditions.

The findings reveal that indigenous and diasporic communities actively mobilize music as a form of cultural currency, using it to sustain collective identity, transmit knowledge across generations, and resist cultural erasure. By contrast, within mainstream economies, these same mechanisms are reshaped and often constrained, as musical value becomes increasingly tied to commodification and prestige, frequently sidelining or contesting symbolic and epistemic forms of exchange.

Table 1: *Themes Across Cultural Contexts*

Context	Symbolic/Epistemic Exchange	Power/Negotiation Dynamics
Indigenous	Songs as ancestral knowledge; reciprocity	Negotiation through gift exchange
Diasporic	Music as cultural memory: resistance	Assertion of belonging against marginalization
Mainstream	Music as prestige-bearing capital	Commodification and branding pressures

Source: Field notes, interviews, and document/media analysis.

Table 1 summarizes key thematic patterns across cultural contexts, drawing on field notes, interviews, and document and media analysis. In indigenous contexts, music functions as a symbolic and epistemic exchange, understood as ancestral knowledge embedded in systems of reciprocity and negotiated through gift exchange. Diasporic contexts emphasize music as cultural memory and a form of resistance, with power dynamics centered on asserting belonging in the face of marginalization. In mainstream contexts, music functions as prestige-bearing cultural capital, in which commodification, market logics, and branding pressures shape power dynamics and negotiation.

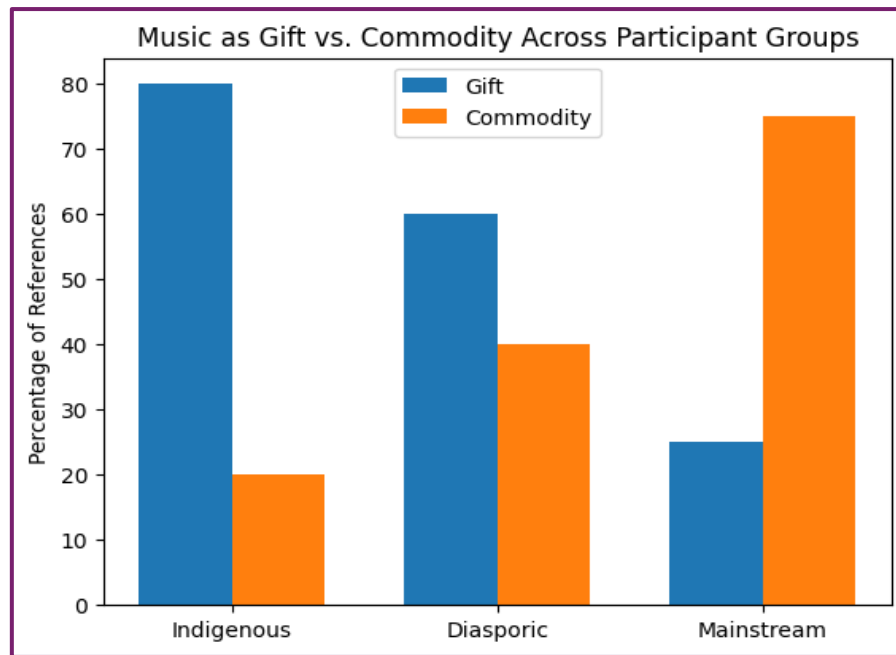


Figure 2: Music as Gift vs. Commodity
Source: Thematic coding of interview transcripts

Figure 2 shows clear differences in how music is conceptualized across groups. Indigenous participants overwhelmingly frame music as a gift (80%) rather than a commodity (20%), while diasporic participants display a more balanced perspective (60% gift, 40% commodity). In contrast, mainstream participants predominantly reference music as a commodity (75%), with fewer references to gift-based understandings (25%), highlighting divergent value systems shaping musical meaning and exchange.

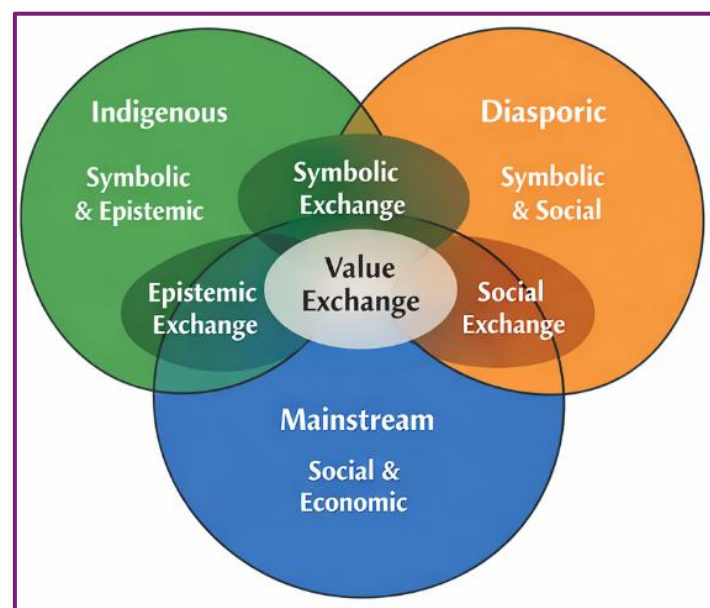


Figure 3: Mechanisms of Value Exchange

The conceptual diagram in Figure 3 illustrates mechanisms of value exchange across musical traditions through overlapping symbolic, social, epistemic, and economic dimensions. Indigenous traditions are positioned at the intersection of symbolic and epistemic exchange, emphasizing meaning-making and knowledge transmission. Diasporic traditions overlap symbolic and social exchange, reflecting identity formation and community connectivity, while mainstream traditions align social and economic exchange, highlighting visibility, circulation, and market value. The central overlap represents shared value exchange, demonstrating how different traditions engage distinct yet interconnected forms of cultural value.

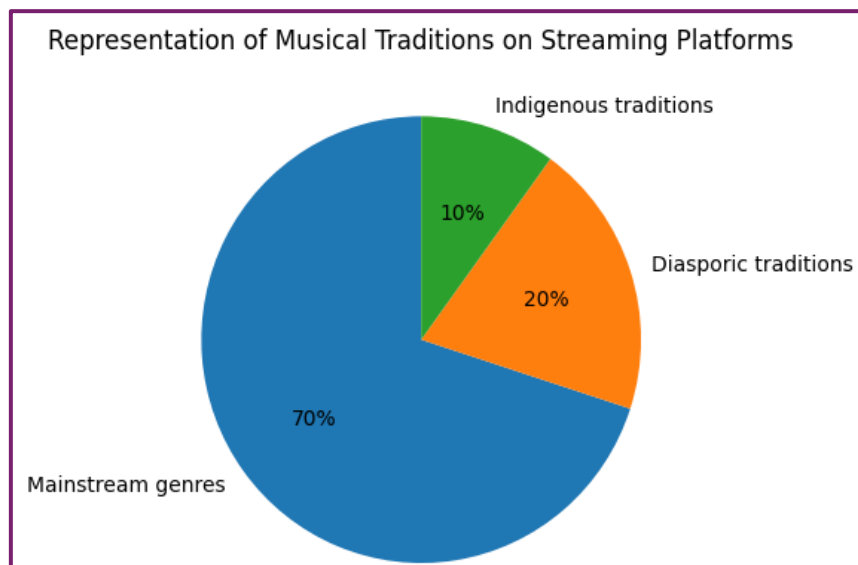


Figure 4: Digital Circulation and Epistemic Value: Representation of traditions on streaming platforms

Source: Media analysis of streaming platforms

Figure 4 shows the distribution of musical traditions on streaming platforms, with mainstream genres accounting for 70% of content, diasporic traditions 20%, and indigenous traditions 10%, highlighting the disproportionate dominance of mainstream music in digital spaces.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that music operates simultaneously as a gift, a repository of knowledge, and a commodity, revealing its symbolic, epistemic, and political dimensions across indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream contexts. Interpreting these results requires situating them within three intersecting scholarly domains: ethnomusicology, cultural diplomacy, and decolonial scholarship. Together, these fields illuminate how the mechanisms of value exchange identified in the findings, such as ancestral transmission, cultural memory, resistance, commodification, and prestige, reflect broader debates about identity, power, and

epistemic sovereignty. These insights were made possible by the study's comparative design and extended immersion across three cultural contexts, which enabled a nuanced understanding of how musical value is negotiated in situ.

Ethnomusicology has long emphasized that music is not merely sound but a cultural practice embedded in social life. The finding that indigenous participants frame music as a gift and epistemic heritage, as reflected in statements such as “we are teaching the young ones how to walk with the ancestors” (Participant IND-07, 2024, Interview), resonates with Merriam's (1964) argument that music must be understood as “human behavior.” Similarly, Nketia's (2005) assertion that African musical traditions function as repositories of knowledge and identity is reflected in the diasporic participants' descriptions of rhythm as historical testimony and survival. By conceptualizing music as cultural currency, this study extends ethnomusicology's concern with transmission and representation, showing that musical practices are not static inheritances but dynamic processes negotiated within contemporary social and political conditions. The diasporic participants' framing of music as both memory and resistance, captured in remarks such as “Every beat I play is a reminder that we survived the crossing” (Participant DIA-11, 2024, Interview), aligns with Agawu's (2003) argument that diasporic musical forms embody postcolonial struggles over continuity and representation. This reinforces the broader ethnomusicological insight that musical meaning is continually produced through lived experience rather than merely preserved across generations (Stokes, 2010).

The findings also speak directly to scholarship on cultural diplomacy, which examines how music facilitates dialogue across communities and nations. Diasporic festivals observed in this study echo Hebert and McCollum's (2022) analysis of music as a medium for recognition and belonging, where performance becomes a site of cultural affirmation. At the same time, the mainstream participants' reflections on commodification, such as the violinist who noted, “Sometimes I feel like I'm selling myself as much as the music” (Participant MAIN-02, 2024, Interview), illustrate how cultural diplomacy often operates within capitalist frameworks that privilege branding, visibility, and institutional prestige over symbolic or epistemic meaning. These dynamics underscore the tension between music as a tool for intercultural connection and music as a marketable asset shaped by global economic forces. The findings, therefore, suggest that cultural diplomacy must account for the unequal power relations that shape which music is celebrated, which is commodified, and which is marginalized.

Yet indigenous and diasporic practices remind us that music can also serve as a counter-narrative to dominant value systems. Authority (2025a) argues that Episto-Musical Pedagogy provides a decolonial framework for sound-based knowledge exchange grounded in reciprocity and cultural sovereignty. The findings of this study affirm that cultural diplomacy must move beyond soft-power logics to recognize music's epistemic and symbolic dimensions, particularly its role in sustaining identity and resisting erasure. The diasporic participant who described songs as "our passports" (Participant DIA-04, 2024, Interview) exemplifies how musical practices articulate belonging in contexts of marginalization. These insights align with Ochoa Gautier's (2016) argument that sound itself is a site of political negotiation and epistemic contestation, underscoring the need to treat musical practices as forms of knowledge rather than mere aesthetic artifacts.

The study's emphasis on power dynamics situates music within broader decolonial scholarship. The observation that indigenous songs are reframed as "world music" in global festivals illustrates how commodification can dilute epistemic value, reinforcing colonial hierarchies of representation. Bohlman's (1993) characterization of musicology as a "political act" is reflected in the ways musical circulation intersects with questions of authority, legitimacy, and cultural ownership. Decolonial scholars such as Nzewi (2007) and Agawu (2020) have argued that African musical epistemologies must be foregrounded to resist colonial frameworks, while Authority (2025b) emphasizes that decolonizing curriculum requires centering indigenous sound-based knowledge systems. The hybrid practices observed in this study, such as indigenous drumming incorporated into international jazz festivals, illustrate both the risks of appropriation and the potential for reimagining musical exchange in ways that affirm cultural sovereignty. These findings also resonate with recent work on cultural resurgence, which highlights how communities mobilize artistic practices to reclaim epistemic authority and resist extractive cultural economies (Simpson, 2017).

Taken together, these connections suggest that conceptualizing music as cultural currency offers a productive lens for ethnomusicology, cultural diplomacy, and decolonial scholarship. For ethnomusicology, the findings deepen understanding of how music transmits knowledge, sustains identity, and mediates social relations. For cultural diplomacy, they highlight the need to integrate indigenous and diasporic epistemologies into policy frameworks rather than treating music solely as an instrument of soft power. For decolonial scholarship, the findings provide empirical evidence of how communities negotiate power through musical practice, offering concrete examples of resistance, adaptation, and transformation. These insights also

point toward future research on how digital circulation reshapes musical value systems across generations, particularly as online platforms increasingly mediate cultural visibility and exchange.

In addressing the research questions of how indigenous and diasporic communities mobilize music as cultural currency and how mainstream economies transform or contest these mechanisms, this study demonstrates that music functions simultaneously as a gift, a medium of epistemic transmission, and a commodity subject to negotiation. Practically, the findings suggest that ethnomusicologists should prioritize community-centered methodologies that honor reciprocity; cultural diplomats should recognize music's symbolic and epistemic dimensions; and educators should adopt decolonial pedagogies that foreground sound as knowledge. These steps would not only preserve cultural integrity but also expand the possibilities of music as a tool for identity, diplomacy, and justice. Ultimately, if music is indeed cultural currency, then the most urgent question is not merely how it circulates, but who controls its value, and whether we are willing to allow market logics to determine the worth of our collective memory, cultural sovereignty, and epistemic futures.

Conclusion

This study examined how music functions as cultural currency across indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream traditions, addressing how communities mobilize music as a symbolic and epistemic exchange and how mainstream economies reshape or contest these mechanisms. Through a comparative, multi-site qualitative design, the study demonstrated that musical value is produced, negotiated, and contested across diverse cultural contexts.

The study shows that music's dual role as gift and commodity is a dynamic process through which communities sustain identity, transmit knowledge, and navigate power. Theoretically, it advances an integrated account of music as cultural currency that brings together symbolic, epistemic, and political dimensions (Merriam, 1964; Nketia, 2005; Agawu, 2003). Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of extended immersion and comparative analysis for revealing how musical meaning is negotiated in situ. Empirically, it provides grounded evidence of how indigenous, diasporic, and mainstream actors articulate, contest, and reconfigure musical value through performance, memory, and circulation.

Synthesizing the findings, the study shows that music operates as a medium through which communities assert sovereignty, negotiate belonging, and resist erasure, even as mainstream

economies commodify and reframe musical practices. This insight clarifies the central research problem: musical value is shaped by the interplay of cultural memory, institutional power, and economic structures. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study advances debates in ethnomusicology, cultural diplomacy, and decolonial scholarship, demonstrating that sound is not merely aesthetic but epistemic and political (Hebert & McCollum, 2022; Bohlman, 1993; Authority, 2025a; Nzewi, 2007).

The study's significance extends across disciplinary and applied domains. For ethnomusicology, it underscores the need to analyze musical practices as sites of power, circulation, and negotiation rather than as static traditions. For cultural diplomacy, it highlights the importance of integrating Indigenous and diasporic epistemologies into policy frameworks that move beyond soft-power logics (Hebert & McCollum, 2022). For decolonial practice, it offers empirical grounding for efforts to reclaim musical knowledge from extractive cultural economies and to affirm sound as a mode of sovereignty and transformation (Agawu, 2020; Authority, 2025b). These implications point toward curriculum reform, policy innovation, and creative practice that treat music as a knowledge system rather than a consumable artifact.

Future research should examine how digital infrastructures reshape the circulation and valuation of musical knowledge, particularly as streaming platforms and algorithmic curation increasingly mediate cultural visibility and risk marginalizing indigenous and diasporic traditions (Utz, 2021). Further inquiry is also needed into the intersections of music, health, and cultural resilience, especially where indigenous and diasporic epistemologies of sound challenge biomedical paradigms (Authority, 2025). Finally, transnational collaborative projects offer fertile ground for exploring how musical exchange can foster reciprocity and cultural diplomacy while navigating persistent asymmetries of power (Hebert & McCollum, 2022). These directions emerge directly from the study's limitations and unresolved tensions, particularly the uneven visibility of traditions within digital and institutional spaces.

Taken together, these contributions affirm that music is not merely entertainment or a commodity but a profound medium of identity, negotiation, and power. Recognizing this dual role challenges scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to rethink how music is valued and circulated. The most provocative implication is clear: if music is cultural currency, then its worth must be measured not by markets or institutions, but by its capacity to sustain memory, foster belonging, and transform the structures of power that seek to contain it.

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