

# Bundling Capitalism: The Commodification of Music in the Contemporary Industry

Swathy Subhash

Independent Researcher, Malappuram, Kerala,

Email: [swathysubhash11@gmail.com](mailto:swathysubhash11@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This study investigates the manner in which music has been integrated into the mechanisms of capitalist commodification, specifically focusing on the practice of album bundling. The examination utilizes Karl Marx's notions of exchange value and commodity fetishism, Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry, and Walter Benjamin's insights on the loss of "aura" associated with mechanically reproduced art. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks underscore that music, which was once primarily appreciated for its aesthetic or cultural significance, has become progressively linked to economic exchange and market rivalry. Album bundling, defined as the sale of records alongside merchandise or concert tickets, exemplifies this phenomenon in clear terms. Although such tactics enhance sales and chart rankings, they concurrently exacerbate structural inequalities, favouring major global labels and established artists while marginalizing independent musicians. Simultaneously, bundling transforms fan engagement by converting cultural consumption into transactional loyalty, concealing exploitation beneath a facade of participation. Case studies involving BTS, The Weeknd, and Taylor Swift illustrate how bundling perpetuates capitalist profitability while compromising artistic integrity. This paper contends that in the digital age, characterized by music circulation through streaming, datafication, and algorithmic platforms, bundling exemplifies the trend of culture being increasingly diminished to a mere commodity, resulting in significant implications for authenticity, equity, and creativity.

**Keywords:** music industry, commodification, album bundling, capitalism, Walter Benjamin, popular culture

## Introduction

Music has always played a significant role in human society, not just as a source of enjoyment or means of expression but equally as a method for cultural transmission, ritual practice, and identity creation. Throughout its history, however, music had been intertwined in economic processes which aim not only to form, manage, but equally commodify its production. From its initial incursion in printed musical notation in Renaissance Europe onwards, music gradually became subject to forces of commodification. With recording technologies such as the late nineteenth-century phonograph abreast in their advancements, music was promptly spread in a form dissociable from live experience. Through the twentieth century onwards, technologies such as the radio, cassette tapes, compact discs, and eventually digital downloads formed successive benchmarks in integrating music in capitalist economies. Each innovation altered valuation in music: shifting first from uniqueness within live performances to reproducibility within recordings, from owning tangible albums to fleeting dissemination by streaming media.

The progression of the twenty-first century has resulted in a heightened intensification of this historical trajectory through the emergence of digital platforms. Music is increasingly experienced not as a tangible item but rather as an integral element within a more expansive framework of data, branding, and online interaction. Streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music evaluate their worth based on play counts and subscription metrics; social media entities like TikTok elevate fragments of songs to viral status; and chart organizations, including Billboard, perpetually modify their measurement systems to both reflect and influence market dynamics. Within this framework, the cultural significance of music is progressively overshadowed by its economic and promotional roles.

The extensive historical context highlights that commodification is not a recent phenomenon; rather, its manifestations develop in accordance with advancements in technology and alterations in market dynamics. Consequently, album bundling should be perceived as an element within this more extensive historical continuum. By associating albums with merchandise or concert tickets, bundling effectively transforms the album into a calculable unit within the frameworks of chart metrics. Although this tactic enhances visibility and bolsters commercial achievements, it concurrently indicates a transformation in the significance of music from artistic expression to a transactional entity.

Critical theory offers indispensable tools for thinking about such a transformation. Marx's critique of commodities reveals the disjunction between labour and value which gets translated into exchange; Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry reveals standardization in cultural production in a capitalist economy; Benjamin's description of the diminished aura in mechanically reproduced art anticipates our digital age, in which uniqueness is translated into circulation. As a whole, such theoretical works make understandable how bundling is a paradigmatic mode of cultural commodification in late capitalism.

The research thus focuses on album bundling as a contemporary manifestation of commodification in the music industry. It explores what is historically at stake and theoretically in play about this practice and analyses case examples involving BTS, The Weeknd, and Taylor Swift in order to show how bundling reshapes fan culture, shifts ideals about artistic value, and accentuates inequalities. The argument advanced is that bundling is not simply a promotional device but a symptom of broader capitalist forces that remake music as a transactional commodity with effects on artists, fans, and the cultural economy.

## **Literature Review**

Critical theory has focused on culture's commodification since Karl Marx's "Capital" (1867). A commodity is more than an object of use to Marx; it conceals the social relations of labour as reflected in its exchange value. "A commodity is an external object that meets human wants through its qualities. Whether such cravings arise in the stomach or imagination is irrelevant" (Marx 125). A duality of use value versus exchange value is essential to understanding how cultural commodities like music generate cash. Marx discusses commodity fetishism, where social interactions in labour are hidden so that people only interact with commodities. As products, music treats tracks, recordings, and performances as commodities while hiding their labour, exploitation, and inequity.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) critique of the culture industry expanded Marx's ideas by examining culture. In advanced capitalism, cultural creation is standardized and mass-produced, putting artistic expression at the service of profit and manipulation, they say. According to Adorno, "the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises" (*Dialectic* 139). His example was mass music, where genres seem to vary but are actually repeating pre-established patterns to ensure capital unit flow. In *On Popular Music*, Adorno claims that commercially created songs are linked up in a "plug-in" format, which predestines the experiencer's experience and encourages passive consumption rather than critical thought (Adorno 302). Music stops being an artistic medium and becomes an industry focused on capitalist social relations.

The music industry's album packaging repeats Adorno's standardization, making his point relevant. Bundling turns albums into quantifiable sales units that fit with merchandise or tickets but lack a musical experience or aesthetic. This repeats Adorno's "illusion of choice": fans feel empowered by their purchase choices, while deeper forces of gain and inequity endure.

While working alongside Adorno, Walter Benjamin's 1936 classic *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* offers a parallel perspective. Benjamin claims that widespread reproduction devalues art's aura, which is related to tradition and worship. "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (Benjamin 233). With exhibition value, art's meaning depends in its transmission, availability, and display. Benjamin contends that this transition democratizes cultural items and makes them widely available, but it also risks eroding creative originality and depth.

Benjamin's study predicts 21st-century digital music economy. As songs are constantly distributed, severed from their initial contexts, and evaluated based on metrics like numerical visibility, stream counts, likes, and chart rankings, streaming services, algorithm-driven recommendation systems, and social media virality reduce aura. Album bundling worsens this by seeing albums as market tools. The record becomes part of a promotional ensemble with T-shirts, posters, and ticket pre-sales. Instead of music, its ability to spread and boost sales is pushed. Bundling represents Benjamin's concern that reproduction turns art into a commodity for mass consumption and profit.

Benjamin's aura research has shaped cultural studies. Aura is an object's unique presence and authenticity, connected to its creation and perception. Benjamin says, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (*Illuminations* 220). Mechanical reproduction in fine arts removes individuality for reproducibility and distribution. Benjamin recognized democratize promise in mass reproduction for fine arts, but he also saw risks in reducing fine arts to exhibition value—value based on display, consumption, and measurement.

Benjamin's reasoning is more relevant in the digital music business. Music streaming platforms turn songs into infinitely reproducible data files without live performances or albums. Playlists, computer suggestions, and viral social media replace such works' distinctiveness. Even more directly, album bundling promotes the album with marketing, tickets, and collector items,

adding value to it. Sales data, rating lists, and chart positions determine its display value, not artworks.

Others have expanded such critiques. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Georg Lukács defines reification as the transformation of social connections into object-like relations that exclude human agency and effort. Bundling exemplifies reification in which commodities manage the relationship between artists and listeners: emotional emotions and loyalty are converted into purchase decisions, while musical creation work is absorbed into product flows. According to Fredric Jameson's assessment of postmodern culture, commodification causes the "waning of affect," which turns cultural forms into flat surfaces for consumption (Jameson 10). By bundling CDs as commercial surfaces instead of art, postmodernity is shown.

Scholars might better grasp music's Janus-faced change within capitalism by integrating Marx's critique of commodities, Adorno's cultural industry, Benjamin's aura, Lukács's reification, and Jameson's postmodernism commodification. These theoretical modalities view bundling as a sign of societal logics that prioritize financial returns, flow, and publicity over music.

Marx, Adorno, and Benjamin provide a framework for examining capitalist music commercialization. Marx emphasizes hidden labour relations and cultural commodity fetishism; Adorno emphasizes mass-produced music's uniformity and fake individuality; Benjamin emphasizes lost aura and display value in a reproduction-driven society. These theoretical frameworks reveal how album bundling and other current practices make music a commodity and a capitalist reproduction tool. Bundling increased sales and changed fan engagement from cultural to commercial exchange.

Media and cultural studies researchers have expanded these early principles to explore how neoliberal capitalism shapes music. David Hesmondhalgh calls cultural industries "the interplay between creativity and commerce, freedom and constraint" (19). According to George Ritzer's "McDonaldization" theory of music consumption, efficiency, calculability, and predictability rule the industry (Ritzer 64). Album packaging maximizes chart performance, manipulates revenue returns, and is predictable among major artists.

Existing fan culture and media works discuss bundling earnings from fans' affective and economic investments. Jeong's K-pop research shows how parasocial identification between performers and fans drives "ceaseless consumption of newly produced merchandise" (88). This is similar to Marx's false consciousness, where fans assume their bulk purchases promote artists but reinforce inequality. Barnett notes that artists sometimes receive little cash from recording contracts while labels profit from bundling (Barnett 1097). Bundling may seem mutually beneficial, but it reinforces capitalist exploitation and dominance.

Marx, Adorno, and Benjamin's theories and modern cultural industry research enable critical study of music commercialization. Contrary to free-market theory, album bundling shows how capitalism turns culture into a profit machine. It hides labour and inequality issues, homogenizes art, erases cultural uniqueness, and turns fan interaction into transactional allegiance. Bundling as a business tactic and cultural commodification pattern typical of late capitalism can be seen in such theoretical frameworks.

## **Methodology**

This paper does not rely on surveys, interviews, or statistical data. Instead, it takes a qualitative and critical-theoretical approach, because the phenomenon under study, album bundling, cannot be understood only in terms of numbers. The aim here is to analyze bundling as part of a wider cultural and economic system, and this requires theoretical depth rather than empirical measurement.

The framework I put forward for research on digital music is an integration of three different threads of critical theory. Borrowing from Karl Marx, I use concepts such as exchange value and commodity fetishism as analytical tools for understanding how music is reduced to its role within market circulation. The culture industry critique developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer is used to explain how standardization and pseudo-individualization affect production as well as consumption within music. Finally, Walter Benjamin's thoughts on aura and reproduction are used for an explanation of how albums are no longer unique cultural items but are reproductively endlessly commoditized within digital media.

To anchor these theoretical perspectives, I consider three case studies: BTS, The Weeknd, and Taylor Swift. These artists were selected not only for their representation of worldwide success, but for representing varying aspects of bundling. BTS shows success is possible on the charts without intense reliance on bundles while still playing within an industry constructed upon cycles of merch. The Weeknd's After Hours era showcases bundling as a circumvention of chart rule by sheer merch volume. Taylor Swift's campaign for Lover reveals bundling in conjunction with parasocial intimacy converting fan devotion into bulk.

The method followed in this research is interpretive, seeking to interpret such cases within the lens of critical theory while connecting particular trade practices with universal frameworks of commodification and capitalist structures. Through connecting theoretical discourse with contemporary industry examples, this paper seeks to show that bundling is not a separate method of promotion in itself but is a cultural device which carries within it the basic tenets of late capitalism.

## **Discussion**

Inquiring about the criteria that determine the quality of music is complex. The duality of excellent and poor has perpetually been tumultuous, inciting disputes over classical and popular music and their respective qualities. Individuals such as Theodor W. Adorno interrogate and critique popular music, positing that "good" music ought not to be universally accessible, as its quality diminishes when it is. It may be unjust to artists and fans to evaluate a superior option. As the music industry increasingly commercializes, such boundaries may become inconsequential.

The distribution of music is crucial for examining its status as a commodity. For an entire generation, cassettes and tapes constituted the sole medium for music consumption. Physical music is more secure than digital music as it is not governed by copyright laws. Owing to audio file compression, analog recordings frequently exhibit superior sound quality compared to their digital counterparts. Nonetheless, this does not imply that physical distribution is flourishing.



Following the advent of digital distribution, sales of physical albums have diminished. Notwithstanding digital distribution and streaming, artists and record labels continue to anticipate record sales, particularly in the late 2010s. The record's physicality enables listeners to maintain it as part of a collection or instills a sense of ownership, while allowing artists to market their music with pride, recognizing competitive sales dynamics. However, there is additional information. Chart positions are determined by record and digital album sales. Music charts are significant for growth and development. Charts illustrate the success of artists and compositions.

Chart rankings indicate prevailing trends and auditory preferences. Record companies and musicians scrutinize the music charts as they influence their promotional and marketing methods and the distribution of their "product." Streaming metrics such as stream count and broadcast duration significantly affect chart rankings. Streaming has facilitated the ascendance of independent musicians and specialized genres, hence democratizing the music industry. Currently, all musicians possess the capability to distribute and stream music, rendering chart positions unreliable. Record sales declined as streaming data democratized the industry, enabling lesser-known musicians to achieve success, thereby making album sales the primary distinction. Smaller artists require financial support, making record sales challenging. Record production and distribution require financial support. Major entities concentrate on achieving record sales to enhance their chart positions. Achieving chart-topping status can significantly enhance a musician's career. It provides them with new opportunities and may maybe initiate their career. Popular songs are streamed, downloaded, and listened to with greater frequency. This can enhance a musician's revenue and quality of life. An effective marketing strategy is essential for achieving a high ranking. Artists and labels have employed album bundling for many years. Albums may be packaged with merchandise or concert tickets. Music record merchandise bundles sometimes comprise goods associated with the artist or band. In addition to the album, these sets frequently comprise T-shirts, posters, stickers, and various items. These packages enable artists and record labels to enhance album sales while providing fans with exclusive collectibles and benefits. The music industry is progressively utilizing item packages to captivate customers and enhance record sales.

An artist provides a merchandise package that includes a T-shirt, poster, socks, and additional items, along with a complimentary record. This transaction influences the album's chart ranking. Tour packages include a complimentary album and a performance ticket, while certain artists utilize "order now, pay later" options for record bundles. When unable to sell records, some performers package their albums to alter sales statistics. A prime illustration of music transforming into a commodity is merchandise bundling. This technique prioritizes the quantity of records produced over their income.

The Billboard charts, renowned globally, feature Indian artists and music. Every singer aspires to get chart status as it signifies success. The RIAA confers Gold and Platinum album awards, representing a significant accolade for musicians. The RIAA asserts, "Initially designed to recognize artists and monitor sound recording sales, Gold & Platinum Awards have evolved into a standard of achievement for any artist—regardless of whether they have just launched their inaugural song or a Greatest Hits compilation." "RIAA Gold and Platinum."

Both Billboard and RIAA possess regulations regarding album bundling; nonetheless, Billboard's guidelines have sparked controversy, resulting in several disputes and antics among artists to attain the number one position. DJ Khaled's *Father of Asahd* is marketed with energy beverages. He was nearly equal to "Tyler the Creator" in streaming for the chart-topping position. Only sales records may be significant. Tyler and Khaled's records arrived in bundles; however, Khaled's encompassed bulk sales of energy drinks, which were prohibited.

The majority of chart-topping artists are American or British pop musicians. Their financial resources and networks are more extensive. Warner Bros. commenced the practice of bundling concert tickets in the late 2010s. Seth Hurwitz, an indie music producer and proprietor of Anthem View in Washington D.C., asserts, "It's simply a blatant scam to inflate first-week album sales" (Brooks). The 2020 Billboard Charts regulation mandates that "all albums bundled with merchandise or concert tickets must be marketed as an add-on to those purchases to be included on the charts" ("Forbes"). If this alteration had been implemented earlier in the year, numerous naturally emerging musicians would have performed better on the chart. In 2020, Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, 6ix9ine, Nicki Minaj, and the Weeknd were the leading artists. The Weeknd led the rankings with 444,000 sales of *After Hours*, which the RIAA certified as double multi-platinum. A combination of an album ticket and merchandise, comprising nearly 80 items, was sold. *After Hours* premiered at No. 1 following its publication. Of the 444,000 units, 275,000 are attributed to album sales from merchandise bundles.

The Weeknd entered at No. 1 on the list with the most sales ever, beating BTS, who debuted in February with the previous record for album sales. They made their debut on the Billboard Hot 200 with 422,000 album sales. The album *Map of the Soul: Persona* by the ensemble achieved chart-topping success without merchandise or ticket bundles. Taylor Swift, who packaged her album *Lover* with merchandise, sold a greater number of physical albums than the others. Album bundling prompts us to scrutinize the impulsive popularity of our preferred artists.

BTS is among those musicians who are underappreciated despite their exceptional talent. Independent artists lacking a record label or marketing team fail to attract attention, as success is dictated by charts, and they do not thrive when sales are artificially manufactured. Major labels can efficiently construct bundles, which attracts their leading performers. These artists have cultivated fan communities that are more inclined to purchase bundles. This disadvantages lesser-known artists, particularly those affiliated with smaller record labels. The influence of bundles on chart performance may be excessive for them. This exacerbates the disparity between prominent and lesser-known artists. Individuals now purchase albums based on chart rankings rather than the quality of the song or the musician. Fans evolved into stans, leading to competitive fandoms that dedicated hours to streaming music for higher metrics. Inflation charts call into doubt artistic integrity. Bundles frequently comprise t-shirts, caps, canvas bags, and similar items. These products require energy and resources for their production. Inability to sell all products results in resource wastage and heightened energy use. If bundles remain unsold, they are discarded in landfills. Synthetic materials may require centuries for decomposition and occupy substantial area. Aerum Jeong, a Professor of Korean Culture at Arizona State University, asserts that K-pop entertainment companies have intentionally

encouraged bulk purchasing, particularly of photocards, resulting in waste. There is a perpetual advertising of freshly created products, accompanied by peer pressure among fandoms to purchase recordings and continuously stream music. This materialism is attributable to various factors, including parasocial relationships between idols and followers (Lui).

Record corporations and streaming platforms govern the creation, distribution, and promotion of musical content, enabling them to establish professional partnerships. This power disparity enables businesses to benefit from these entities while evading financial risk and accountability. The absence of transparency and accountability in contracts adversely affects musicians' careers. Artists may lack the resources or authority to negotiate fair compensation, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and discord. To attain influence and advance their careers, artists frequently must acquiesce to subpar content inside the competitive music industry (Hesmondhalgh 3593). Typically orchestrated by marketing teams, bundling strategies emphasize commercial material that resonates with professional pursuits and leisure activities, hence impacting musicians' creativity. Artists may experience pressure to conform to industry standards and produce content that is more captivating than their own vision and integrity (Qu et al. 700). The income disparity within the music industry reflects capital relations. Artists generate revenue-producing content yet receive a minimal percentage of bundled revenues. The artistic, labour, and cultural exploitation within the music industry originates from its capitalist foundation. Packing albums with merchandise diminishes their perceived quality. You likely want the merchandise and were unable to find it elsewhere, prompting you to purchase the CD. Billboard's recent policy of selling albums and merchandise separately may restrict this. Nevertheless, enduring solutions such as assigning greater weight to individual purchases or abolishing merchandise bundles are essential. In an era dominated by billion-dollar gaming economies, the degradation of art by capitalism is not a novel phenomenon. Culture, literature, and art are commodities.

## **Conclusion**

The study examines how album bundling boosts sales. Digital music distribution and consumption cannot be limited in a technologically dominant culture. Now only a collector's item, actual records are no longer used for music listening.

Cultural items become fungible through album bundling. Bundling tactics value content over aesthetics, turning cultural artifacts into commodities. Beneficiaries internalize and reproduce capitalist narratives, perpetuating exploitation and alienation (Lin et al. 1026). Well-established musicians who receive considerable revenue from sales, streaming, and copyrights can easily bundle merch or tickets for records, making them more accessible to the people and increasing their revenues. Artists invest in album sales for returns, not customer value. Even though several musical charts have changed bundle sale rules, fans may feel pushed to acquire undesired things. Since most music is distributed digitally and streaming is easy, artists and record labels rely on album sales to maximize profits. Only artists with high numbers can profit from streaming; otherwise, it takes a lot more streaming to equal an album sale. Independent and impoverished artists are disadvantaged regardless of their means. Culture is commodified beyond buying and selling. Popular culture products should benefit people. Merchandising questions album format and waste production more than it does art. Bundling's effects are



shown by campaigns like “Kpop4planet” to reduce album trash. They worry about streaming and physical waste, as five hours of streaming might emit more carbon than an album. The campaign for “sustainable” industrial operating proposed the “green album option”. This approach allows fans to order and receive any amount of albums. Buying 30 albums but only receiving 3 will be an option. By doing this, they can reduce waste and help artists climb the charts. Regardless of how sustainable this method seems, promoting inorganic popularity and sales, mostly for chart places, threatens music's artistic and aesthetic value. This research concludes that album bundling, the modern musical industry model of culture commodification based on capitalistic and materialistic aims, has socio-economic and environmental impacts. This behavior by record labels and musicians will hurt artists that rely primarily on music for exposure. They will be denied opportunities as the influential gain power and can promote and sell their music. Commodifying music devalues it as a cultural commodity.

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