

1. Cover page

Social Media Reinforces Existing Inequalities in Musical Theatre Rather Than Dismantling Them

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Social Media Reinforces Existing Inequalities in Musical Theatre Rather Than Dismantling Them

3. Introduction

3.1 Topic Overview

In recent years, social media has become a dominant force in shaping cultural industries, including musical theatre, with approximately “5.66 billion social media user identities” recorded as of October 2025 (Datareportal, 2025). Digital platforms increasingly function as infrastructural gatekeepers within contemporary musical theatre, shaping not only promotion and audience engagement but also professional recognition. For performers, these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for visibility and self-promotion, enabling people to bypass traditional gatekeeping structures and, in some cases, achieve rapid recognition. (Boffone, 2022). However, despite this apparent accessibility, it remains unclear whether social media genuinely disrupts inequalities within musical theatre or instead reproduces them in new and less visible forms. As Paul (2023) argues, social media not only reflects real-world disparities but may actively exacerbate them. Historically, access to success in musical theatre has been shaped by factors such as race, class, gender, and professional training, a pattern reflected in recent data showing that white actors held “nearly 59 percent” of roles in the 2018-2019 season (Rojas, 2022). While digital platforms challenge these barriers by offering performers a way to bypass traditional institutions, audience bias and algorithms continue to decide what content users see and the order in which users encounter content (Germano, Gómez and Sobbrío, 2026). This dissertation therefore explores the extent to which social media reinforces existing inequalities in musical theatre rather than dismantling them. It focuses specifically on how exposure, access, and professional opportunities are mediated through digital platforms and whether the

digital space provides a meaningful route for unrepresented performers. In doing so, it considers the challenging narratives that frame social media as a democratizing force and positions online environments as complex sites in which professional access and structural disadvantages co-exist.

3.2 Research Rationale

The significance of this topic lies in its connection to several key areas of academic study. Historically, research in this discipline has been concentrated on stage performances, written work, and the evolution of theatre over time. However, the growing influence of digital media demands a shift in focus towards understanding how online platforms are reshaping the industry. This research contributes to that shift by examining how social media is not merely a promotional tool, but a platform that facilitates performance, visibility, and professional development, aligning with broader discussions of online self- presentation and identity work (Baym, 2015). Beyond the field of theatre, this topic is situated within broader contemporary debates about the role of social media in society. While digital platforms are often celebrated for their accessibility and inclusivity, there is growing recognition that they can also reproduce systematic inequalities. Although “diversity” has become a “ubiquitous institutional buzzword”, many initiatives function more as symbolic commitments rather than structural interventions, reflecting the critique of how organizations mobilize diversity for image building rather than transformation (Ocak, 2025). As José Van Dijck (2013, p.6) argues, social media platforms are not neutral intermediaries but shape the performance of social acts, highlighting their active role in structuring visibility and interaction. Issues such as algorithmic bias and unequal access to digital resources further demonstrate how influence and control are distributed unevenly across online spaces, with research showing that these systems can reinforce racial, gendered and socioeconomic inequalities (Eubanks, 2018). By applying these discussions to musical theatre, this research offers a case study through which wider recurring patterns can be understood. This dissertation therefore contributes to an emerging body of scholarship examining how digital infrastructures reshape cultural labour and visibility within creative industries. Additionally, this topic holds personal and academic relevance as it reflects engagement

with current industry practices and emerging trends. As the boundaries between digital and live performance continue to blur, it becomes increasingly important for scholars and practitioners to critically assess the implications of these changes. This dissertation therefore not only contributes to academic knowledge but also has potential relevance for performers navigating the industry.

Social media is framed as an accessible platform for performers where its usage can have numerous positive impacts on the theatre industry “reaching populations that are not exposed to more traditional marketing materials” and “producing content that has the opportunity to go viral” (Pontelandolfo, 2022) leading to viral success stories such as performers Hannah Lowther with three hundred thousand Instagram followers (hannahlowther, n.d.) supporting the idea that talent can emerge independently of traditional structures reflecting the importance of sustained digital branding and algorithmic exposure. This optimistic narrative frames social media as having the potential to dismantle inequalities within the musical theatre industry. However, this optimistic perspective on it is often opposed, where scholars increasingly question whether social media genuinely disrupts structural inequality. While access to platforms is widespread, visibility within them is uneven and often governed by algorithms. Prioritizing content that aligns with existing trends, audience preferences, and engagement metrics, which may inadvertently reinforce dominant norms around race, body type, aesthetic appeal, and performance style. As a result, performers who already possess certain social, cultural, or economic capital may be in a better position to succeed online. For example, a study by UCLouvain in Belgium of European Theatre Convention member theatres found that only “43% of stage characters” were female compared to “57% male”, alongside a noteworthy near-absence of staff from minority backgrounds, including those defined by sexual orientation, ethnicity, trans identity, and disability. (European Theatre Convention, 2021).

3.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent does social media shape visibility and opportunity within musical theatre?
- In what ways might social media reproduce existing inequalities particularly in relation to class, race, and gender?

3.4 Methodological Approach

This dissertation adopts a theoretical and research-based methodological approach, drawing primarily on existing scholarships to explore the relationship between social media and inequality in musical theatre. This study is situated in a critical literature review and supported by primary data gathered through a survey, engaging with key debates across musical theatre studies, performance scholarship, and digital media theory, recognizing that literature reviews are central to “building a cumulative body of knowledge” (Bryman, 2016, p.99). The survey utilised voluntary participant sampling and responses were analysed through thematic analysis. The research incorporates conceptual and thematic analysis to examine how ideas of visibility, access and opportunity are shaped within both academic discourse and industry practice. This includes analysis of existing case studies, scholarly commentary, and examples of online performance, allowing comparative exploration of how social media operates across different contexts. Case study approaches are widely recognized as useful for examining complex contemporary phenomena in depth, particularly where boundaries between context and subject are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018, p.15). This is especially relevant to digital platforms, where visibility and performance are shaped by dynamic and evolving systems. This approach is informed by wider theoretical frameworks within digital culture. By integrating perspectives from a range of academic fields, the study aims to develop a detailed understanding of whether social media functions as a democratising force or reinforce existing inequalities within musical theatre. Overall, this methodological approach enables a critical examination of the topic through a combination of theory and existing research, providing a foundation of analysis that follows (Creswell, 2023). Further details on the selected sources and analytical frameworks are outlined in the methodology chapter.

3.5 Structure

This dissertation is structured as follows. The literature review examines existing scholarships on social media, inequality, and performance, establishing a theoretical framework for the study. The methodology section outlines the research approach used to analyse digital content and industry perspectives. The analysis chapters explores key themes relating to visibility, access, and inequality within social media spaces. Finally, the conclusion reflects the findings and considers their implications for both musical theatre and wider discussions of digital culture.

4. Chapter 1: Literature Review

4.1. Introduction

My topic examines how social media platforms shape exposure, casting opportunities, and audience engagement in musical theatre, often reinforcing existing inequalities related to race, gender, and disability (O'Brien, 2020). Social media is becoming central to how performers are discovered, marketed, and assessed within musical theatre, with performers increasingly required to develop online identities and forms of "micro celebrity" (Stith, 2017). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok shape performer branding and the circulation of performer content, shaping who is seen and who is cast. Visibility within these platforms is structured through algorithmic systems that prioritise certain content over others often amplifying dominant norms (Riemer and Peter, 2021). This then raises the question of whether social media expands access to the industry or instead reproduces existing inequalities in new and less visible ways. This literature review focuses mostly on contemporary sources published from 2015 onward, reflecting the rapid development of social media within performance industries. While broader discussions of digital performance are considered, the primary focus remains on musical theatre within mainstream commercial theatre, particularly Broadway and the West End. Key themes explored include digital visibility, algorithmic bias, and representation. Overall, this review aims to critically evaluate whether social media functions as a tool for increasing accessibility or reinforcing structural inequalities within musical theatre. In doing so, it highlights the growing need for critical engagement with digital practices within both academic scholarship and industry contexts.

4.2 Theoretical and Contextual Framework

This review draws on digital media studies and performance theory to explore how social media shapes visibility and inequality within musical theatre. While early narratives have framed social platforms as democratizing spaces, scholars in both fields increasingly challenge this assumption. Central to this debate is the concept of algorithmic visibility. As Tarleton Gillespie argues, platforms are not neutral conduits of information but actively curate and organise visibility (Gillespie, 2018, p.184) highlighting the role of algorithmic systems in shaping what content is seen. However, Gillespie's argument can risk overstating the power of platforms by positioning users as relatively passive within algorithmic systems. While algorithms shape visibility and participatory culture also influence which performers gain traction online. This suggests visibility emerges through an interaction between platform infrastructure and audience behaviour rather than algorithmic control alone.

Building on Tarleton Gillespie's work, algorithms operate as key gatekeepers of public knowledge, determining not only what information is visible but how relevance itself is defined. These "public relevance algorithms" are far from impartial as they embed assumptions about popularity and credibility. As Gillespie (2013) argues, platforms "must decide what is relevant, and for whom," meaning that visibility is always shaped by underlying social, cultural, and institutional structures, highlighting how visibility is not objective. But structured to privilege certain voices and marginalize others. The ways in which content is included or excluded, as well as criteria for evaluation, determine what content is surfaced and what remains hidden.

This is further supported by Taina Bucher's (2012) concept of the "contingent calculation of worth," which further demonstrates how algorithmic systems continuously evaluate cultural value through engagement-driven metrics. This suggests that visibility is not simply earned through content quality alone but is produced through the shifting algorithmic judgement which can advantage some content yet limit others. For cultural industries such as musical theatre, this has significant implications. Performers and productions already aligned with dominant norms whether that is through institutional

backing, audience size, or marketability are more likely to be amplified by algorithmic systems which is consistent with Saha's (2018) argument that cultural industries disproportionately reward those who fit established aesthetic expectations. As a result, these systems therefore influence not only what becomes visible, but which forms of cultural participation gain legitimacy online. This study will combine case study analysis of contemporary performers with algorithm studies to explore how social platforms shape visibility. Performance analysis and discourse analysis will further examine how musical theatre is presented and discussed online. Contemporary performers, such as Jj Nieman and Hannah Lowther, demonstrate how platforms like TikTok disrupt traditional pathways into the industry. Whereas performer Lea Salonga represents a more traditional route through training leading major theatre productions, Miss Saigon, while demonstrating the importance of global representation in the industry.

Beyond algorithmic visibility, existing structural inequalities within musical theatre also shape digital participation. Historically, musical theatre has operated with a structured and exclusionary system, with access to stages such as the West End and Broadway mediated by training, industry networks, and social status. Practitioner Andrew Lloyd Webber referring to the industry as "hideously white" as well as urging drama schools to make 50% of their places accessible to low-income students (The Guardian, 2016), exposes the reality of the limited representation of diversity within the industry. While 34.7% of the UK population aged 23-69 has a parent employed in a working-class occupation the figure among those in the cultural and creative industries is only 18% in 2016 (O'Brien et al., 2016). This underrepresentation reflects unequal access to this experience and knowledge is what Pierre Bourdieu would call cultural capital (Caolfionn Yenney-Henderson, 2026). The unequal distribution of cultural capital in the industry means that lower-class backgrounds struggle in the industry. In this growing industry, cultural capital is still a present issue as a barrier with a lack of industry connections and education inequality, and a lack of industry knowledge needed to succeed. In this current world, we are facing rising inflation, declining philanthropic income, and heightened international trade tensions, posing a growing threat to the sector's financial sustainability (Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre, 2025). For example, West End

plays often initially require an investment of over £1 million (Society of London Theatre & UK Theatre, 2025). These rising costs create barriers for performers who cannot afford to sustain careers within the industry, leading to speculations over the idea of “stunt casting” in hiring ticket sales. However, while Bordieu’s concept of cultural capital remains highly relevant, social media complicates traditional understandings of access by enabling alternative forms of exposure that are not always dependent on institutional legitimacy. Viral content occasionally disrupts conventional pathways into musical theatre, suggesting that digital visibility can operate as a new form of cultural capital itself.

4.3 Thematic Review of Literature

A significant body of this literature emphasises that musical theatre is shaped by long-standing inequalities that predate the emergence of social media. Scholars consistently argue that access to the field is unevenly distributed, with class, education and social networks playing a decisive role in determining who can participate and succeed (Levinson, Geron and Brighouse, 2022). Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is described as “a sociological concept linked to social inequality and social position” and as “a set of cultural competencies which a person needs to acquire to participate in a whole range of cultural activities.” (Goulding, 2008, p.235). This definition highlights how access to cultural participation is not simply about personal ability, but about possessing the learned skills that enable individuals to navigate and be recognised within cultural fields. For Bourdieu, entry into cultural fields is not governed by only individual talent; rather it depends on the accumulation of cultural knowledge, and institutional credentials that indicate credibility within the field, a pattern that continues to shape access into creative professions (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). In the context of musical theatre, this includes exposure to the arts from an early age, and the ability to invest in specialised training. Research on performing arts education highlights the substantial financial barriers that shape who can access professional pathways. Drama school tuition, private singing and dance lessons, audition fees, and the expectation of taking unpaid or low-paid early care

actices often rely on personal recommendations, existing professional relationships, and knowledge of the industry, which tend to privilege individuals from privileged backgrounds as they typically hold more valuable social capital, giving them access to better opportunities and reinforcing unequal patterns of advantage (Adler and Ayala-Hurtado, 2025). Studies of the performing arts employment market show that opportunities frequently circulate within closed networks, (Pollard et al., 2017) making it difficult for newcomers particularly those from marginalised or unrepresented backgrounds to gain visibility and secure roles with access to work often being “mediated by networks of social and professional contacts rather than open competition” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Taken together, this literature demonstrates that musical theatre is characterized by hierarchies that shape who can enter, remain in and progress within the field. These barriers shape who enters the industry long before performers engage with digital platforms. The following themes explore how social media, algorithms and digital work practices interact with these structural barriers, raising questions about whether online visibility genuinely expands access or simply reinforces the hierarchies already embedded into the industry.

A second major theme within the literature review concerns the role of social media platforms in shaping cultural visibility through algorithmic systems. While social media is often framed as a democratizing force that enables performers to bypass traditional gatekeepers, scholars in digital media studies challenge this assumption by emphasising the unequal dynamics embedded in platform infrastructures (Gillespie, 2018). Central to this discussion is algorithmic visibility where content being viewed is not governed by merit alone but by platform-driven metrics such as engagement and popularity. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) argues, platforms actively curate and organize visibility, meaning that they do not simply distribute content but rather work create significant obstacles for individuals from lower-income backgrounds. This is reflected in a wider industry pattern where eight out of ten people aspiring to work in theatre have not applied for a job within theatre due to financial barriers (Snow, 2021). These economic barriers are intensified by the concentration of training institutions' performance opportunities in major cities which further restricts access for those without the means of relocating.

Beyond formal training, scholars also point to the importance of professional networks in sustaining inequality. Casting pr ut instead play an active role in shaping cultural visibility and public attention. The prioritization of engagement can amplify existing economic, social, and racial inequalities, as content that aligns with dominant norms is most likely to be promoted (Noble, 2018). Although platforms are often designed to present users with content that they are most interested in (Shah, 2025), this process is not impartial; it reflects and reproduces wider structural biases, challenging claims that social media offers a fair and accessible space for cultural participation.

However, while Gillespie's framework is useful in exposing the power of platforms it remains generalised, and does not fully account for how these dynamics operate within specific cultural industries such as musical theatre, where structural inequalities are already deeply embedded. In this context, algorithmic curation may not simply shape visibility but intensify existing hierarchies, privileging performers who already possess forms of social or economic capital. Research on algorithmic ranking shows that digital systems often amplify already existing advantages, enabling those with greater resources or status to become more visible within digital platforms (Beer, 2019). As Safiya Noble (2018) demonstrates, algorithmic systems often reproduce racialised and gendered biases, meaning that visibility online is unevenly distributed rather than democratically accessible. This has implications for musical theatre, where casting and recognition are increasingly influenced by digital presence. While platforms such as Instagram and TikTok offer new routes into the industry, the prioritisation of engagement and popularity risks reinforcing dominant norms and aesthetic preferences. Consequently, rather than dismantling traditional gatekeeping structures, social media may reconfigure them in less visible but equally exclusionary ways. This supports the argument that digital platforms, far from being an impartial tool of access, can function to reproduce and even amplify existing inequalities within the musical theatre industry.

A third key theme in the literature concerns the persistence of structural inequalities within theatre and wider cultural industries. Research consistently demonstrates that access to creative careers is shaped by class, race, and gender rather than by talent (The class ceiling in the creative industries, 2024). Studies on creative work highlight

that individuals from more privileged social and economic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in the industry, reflecting persistent barriers to entry. This challenges the narrative often associated with performance industries. Empirical research by O'Brien and Friedman (2017) supports this argument by demonstrating that cultural industries remain disproportionately dominated by individuals with access to significant economic and social capital, with "cultural industries marked by persistent inequalities of access and outcome" (O'Brien et al., 2017). Their findings suggest that these industries are not open or purely equal in opportunity but instead continue to reproduce existing class-based inequalities through education routes, and informal networking. This shows that success in the sector is shaped more by structural advantage than by talent alone. Although such inequalities long predate against the rise of social media, their continued persistence raises important questions about the extent to which digital platforms genuinely challenge advantage and inequality. On the surface, social media lowers barriers to entry by enabling performers to self-promote and achieve visibility beyond traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. However, this view can hide the fact that existing inequalities affect who is best able to use these platforms. Within the context of musical theatre, where professional training is costly and industry networks play a vital role in career progression, social media is unlikely to act as an equalising factor. Instead, it often operates as an extension of existing privilege. Performers with greater access to financial resources, time, and professional guidance are better positioned to produce polished digital content and maintain consistent online engagement, thereby enhancing their visibility (Ama, 2024). As a result, instead of reducing inequality, digital platforms may reproduce and even strengthen existing hierarchies within the musical theatre industry.

A fourth theme identified within the literature concerns the increasing significance of online work and self-promotion in shaping creative careers. Social media platforms now require performers to engage in sustained forms of unpaid work, including content production, audience engagement, and personal branding. This reflects a broader shift within the cultural industries, where individuals are positioned as self-employed, managing their own career responsible for their visibility and employability. Although this can be perceived as empowering, allowing performers greater control over their career

trajectories, scholars highlight that it also produces new forms of inequality (Gill and Kanai, 2018). The expectation of constant online engagement advantages those with sufficient time, financial security, and digital skills to maintain a consistent online presence. Consequently, opportunities that are created through digital visibility are unevenly distributed, with some performers able to convert online engagement into professional work while others are constrained by structural limitations, a pattern that is reflected in research showing that platform based creative labour tends to reward those with greater economic and social resources (Bishop, 2021). Moreover, the focus on self-presentation and branding can reinforce perceived ideals related to appearance, identity, and marketability, aligning with dominant cultural standards. This raises critical questions about which identities are promoted and which are marginalized within digital spaces. Within musical theatre, where aesthetic norms are already tightly regulated, social media may intensify pressures to conform rather than supporting greater diversity. Research on social influence shows that people are often affected by what others prefer, with studies indicating that individuals may change their choices to align with group opinion when exposed to peer feedback, particularly in online contexts (Velez, 2020). Overall, while digital platforms expand access and participation, they simultaneously shift responsibility for visibility onto individuals, concealing the structural conditions that shape career success. As such, social media does not simply make cultural work more equal but instead reshapes inequality through new forms of online work.

4.4 Synthesis and Identification of gaps

This literature reviewed the increasing significance of social media in shaping visibility, access to opportunities, and career progression within cultural industries, including musical theatre. Across discussions of algorithmic visibility, structural inequality, and digital labour, there is broad agreement that social media does not operate as a neutral or democratising space. Although platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are frequently framed as offering performers new ways to bypass traditional gatekeepers,

this assumption is increasingly questioned. Scholars argue that visibility on these platforms is governed by algorithmic systems that privilege engagement, popularity, and commercially appealing content. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) notes, platforms actively organise and shape what becomes visible, meaning that access to audiences is uneven and influenced by underlying technological and economic priorities. This perspective aligns with wider research on inequality in cultural industries, which highlights the enduring role of socio-economic background in determining access to creative careers. Studies by Dave O'Brien and Sam Friedman (2017) demonstrate that individuals from more advantaged backgrounds remain overrepresented, indicating that structural inequalities persist despite the expansion of digital platforms. When considered alongside scholarship on digital labour, it becomes clear that the labour involved in sustaining an online presence such as continuous content production, self-promotion, and audience interaction tends to advantage those with greater time, financial resources, and digital literacy. Consequently, the perceived openness of social media may conceal how inequality is reproduced through new forms of participation.

Taken together, these studies suggest that social media may not dismantle existing hierarchies but instead reshape and intensify them in more subtle ways. Nevertheless, important gaps remain within the existing literature. Much of the research focuses on digital media or creative industries in general, with little attention paid to musical theatre as a distinct sector. This is notable given the field's specific systems of training, casting, and professional networking, which may influence how social media is used and experienced. In addition, there is limited research examining the impact of emerging platforms such as TikTok on casting practices and career development. Furthermore, while inequality is widely acknowledged, there is insufficient analysis of how intersecting forms of disadvantage including race, class, gender, and disability operate within digital performance spaces. Addressing these gaps is therefore crucial to developing a more balanced understanding of whether social media challenges or reinforces inequality within musical theatre.

This literature review examined key debates around social media's roles in musical theatre, focusing on digital visibility, algorithmic curation, structural inequality, and digital

work. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that while social media offers performers new opportunities for self-promotion and audience engagement, these platforms do not operate independently of wider social and institutional inequalities. Instead, existing scholarship suggests that digital visibility is often shaped by systems that privilege already advantaged performers. Although social media has the potential to challenge traditional gatekeeping practices, the literature indicates that this potential is limited by algorithmic bias and unequal access to digital resources. This highlights the need for further research into how these dynamics specifically affect musical theatre performers. The present study therefore seeks to contribute to this area by critically examining whether social media functions as a tool of inclusion or whether it reinforces existing inequalities within the industry

5. Chapter 2: Theoretical Exploration & Analytical Development

5.1 Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a sociocultural, and identity-based framework because it allows for an understanding of social background, identity, (McKinley, Mastro and Warber, 2014) and access to cultural capital influence opportunities and visibility within musical theatre on social media (Pierre Bourdieu, 1986). This means that success is therefore not based only on individual talent or effort but is shaped by wider social and cultural factors that influence who is most likely to succeed, as “inequalities are reproduced through social structures” (Giddens, 1984). This perspective is relevant because it avoids treating digital platforms as impartial spaces. This approach recognises that they are shaped by wider social structures, including class, race, and access to resources. A social and cultural framework is particularly effective in evaluating how existing inequalities are not removed from digital environments, but instead they are reproduced and potentially made worse (Stephenson, 2023). While platforms such as TikTok appear to offer direct and accessible routes for involvement within social media, the distribution of visibility and success remains uneven and influenced by structural factors. These include access to training, resources, and cultural capital, all of which significantly shape an individual's ability to produce content and gain recognition. As a result, social media does not function as an equal playing field.

In addition to this, identity theory provides a lens through which to understand how performers construct and present themselves online. Identity theory is a social psychological theory that attempts to understand identities, their sources in interaction and society” (Burke and Stets, 2009) , which is useful for this study as Social media requires individuals to continually work on self-presentation, where identity becomes a form of performance shaped by audience expectations and platform norms. Where performers usually “compare themselves to others who possess qualities, achievements or traits they aspire to have or achieve themselves” (Festinger, 1954), seeing these people celebrated for their perceived ideals it then reinforces that idea of industry norms. This is particularly relevant to musical theatre where performers are already subject to the expectations held by the industry. The need to then be seen and recognized then encourages the desire for desirable identities, which can reinforce dominant norms so rather than disrupt these norms. Social media continues to reinforce them, making certain people more visible and others overlooked.

5.2 Analytical Exploration of Core Topic

5.2.1 Algorithms and Visibility

A central way through which inequality is reproduced on social media is through algorithms. Platforms such as TikTok rely on complex systems that curate and prioritise content based on engagement metrics, including likes, shares, and watch time. While these systems are often presented as neutral or meritocratic. They are shaped by underlying assumptions about what constitutes valuable or engaging content. As Safiya Noble (2018) argues, algorithmic systems frequently reproduce and amplify existing social biases, particularly in relation to race, gender and disability. Content that aligns with dominant aesthetic norms such as conventional attractiveness is more likely to be promoted (Hussain, Aslam and Imran, 2025). This creates a feedback pattern where particular performers are constantly made more visible, while others remain marginalised. Within musical theatre, these dynamics raise important questions about the relationship between visibility and talent. Performers such as JJ Niemann and Hannah Lowther have gained significant attention through TikTok demonstrating the platform's potential to elevate individual performers. However, their success also

highlights the role of marketability in shaping visibility. Factors such as physical appearance, personality, and content styles play a significant role in determining what goes viral. Success on social media increasingly depends upon platform compatibility, where performers must align with engagement-driven systems of visibility alongside demonstrating performance ability. Performers must not only have skills but also be able to apply their skills in a way that aligns with algorithmic preferences.

5.2.2 False Narrative of Democratisation

Social media platforms are frequently praised due to them enabling the ability to democratize access to cultural industries. The rise of viral success stories plays a key role in contributing to the narrative in which performers can bypass traditional gatekeeping structures and achieve recognition through talent alone. Within musical theatre, this narrative is reinforced by examples such as *Bridgerton: The musical*, which originated as a series of user-generated songs on TikTok before gaining widespread popularity and industry recognition including receiving a Grammy award. This case appears to demonstrate how cultural success is achieved. It suggests that social media can provide an alternative route into a pathway towards industry success. Their success reflects upon how digital recognition often remains connected to previous industry exposure and existing cultural capital. While these platforms do allow a much simpler way for individuals to share content, that does not ensure that they will get an equal chance of being seen and discovered. The key issue is that content is not distributed equally but filtered through algorithms that prioritise what is trending and what is desired to be seen by others with the tailoring of content through user behaviour (Baljeet 2025). Success requires the understanding of these algorithms. Cultural capital is useful in the context as the ability to succeed on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often requires the knowledge and the skills that not all individuals equally have access to such as having performance skills that require training. In the case of *Bridgerton: The Musical*, the creators, Abigail Barlow and Emily Bear, demonstrated not only creative talent but also a clear understanding of how to engage with audiences and produce content suited to platform dynamics (Wheatman Hill, 2024). Both individuals had prior experience in performance and had already accessed high-level opportunities, including

recognition through programmes such as YoungArts and professional industry exposure. This can reflect the idea that prior training and cultural capital come into consideration as their access to resources and network can contribute to it. As a result, their progression challenged the idea that social media is an equal space.

Although their success may create the impression that social media provides equal opportunities, this overlooks the role of prior experience, resources, and cultural capital in shaping who is most likely to succeed (Pierre Bourdieu, 1986). In contrast, for individuals from underprivileged backgrounds, the pathway for them to achieve digital success is often unachievable. For example, low-income households often lack a reliable source of internet, formal training and the money required limiting their ability to produce content. It was recorded that “2.8 million people” last year did not have access to the internet (Jackson, Jackson and Jackson, 2025), this figure illustrating how there are a significant number of the population excluded from the the basic resources required for online engagement. This highlights how digital success is not based solely on talent but access to the resources and skills. Therefore, with cases such as *Bridgerton: the Musical* it sees the idealised progression pathway placed at the centre of public attention and creates that illusion that it is equally attainable for anyone.

5.2.3 Identity

Identity is crucial in understanding inequality on social media. Performers are constantly presenting themselves online and adjusting how they appear based on audience response and platform expectations, as digital culture increasingly encourages the maintenance of a visible and marketable online identity (Duffy, 2017). This means that identity is not fixed as “identity-as-performance is seen as part of the flow of social interaction as individuals construct identity performances fitting their milieu” (Pearson, 2009). This creates pressure to conform to certain expectations, as individuals become aware of being constantly observed and judged online, where “the presentation of self is shaped by the imagined audience” (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). As a result, performers are conscious of being observed and acts according to what they believe audiences and algorithms will reward (Vear, 2020). This idea of conforming to fit what will be rewarded

can be reinforced because the industry uses casting to decide is suitable for roles. Consequently, performers who align with beauty standards and social norms are often granted opportunities, while those who do not conform may experience reduced visibility online. This demonstrates how social media and industry structures can reinforce existing inequalities by regarding identities that are perceived as more marketable.

5.3 Argument building

Drawing together the sociocultural and identity-based perspectives outlined in Section 5.1 and the analytical findings presented in Section 5.2, this study argues that social media does not democratize access to musical theatre but instead reproduces, reshapes, and in some cases intensifies existing inequalities. A key issue emerging from this analysis is that digital inequality is often less visible than traditional forms of exclusion. Within conventional musical theatre structures, gatekeeping typically operates through identifiable institutions such as casting directors, producers, and training institutions. In contrast, algorithmic gatekeeping functions through systems of visibility that appear personalised and meritocratic. As a result, exclusion becomes more difficult to recognise and challenge because opportunities appear theoretically accessible to everyone despite remaining unevenly distributed in practice. Although platforms such as TikTok appear to offer open participation, the conditions that determine visibility and success remain deeply structured by broader social and cultural forces. These forces include unequal access to cultural capital that privilege certain forms of content, and the pressures of identity performance within digital environments. The analysis of algorithms in Section 5.2.1 demonstrates that visibility is not distributed evenly but is shaped by platform specific logics that reward marketability, aesthetic conformity, and high engagement behaviours. This challenges the assumption that social media operates as a meritocratic space where talent alone determines success. Instead, performers who already possess advantages such as professional training, digital literacy, or access to high-quality production resources are better positioned to produce content that aligns with algorithmic preferences. These findings reinforce Bourdieu's argument that cultural participation is structured by unequal distributions of capital, and that digital spaces do not escape these dynamics.

Similarly, the examination of the “democratisation” narrative in Section 5.2.2 reveals that viral success stories often obscure the structural inequalities that shape who is most likely to be discovered online. While cases such as *Bridgerton: The Musical* are frequently cited as evidence of social media openness, they in fact highlight how prior training, industry exposure, and resource access significantly influence digital outcomes. The ability to navigate platform cultures, understand audience expectations, and produce content suited to algorithmic circulation is a form of cultural capital. As a result, social media amplifies the visibility of those who already possess these advantages, while individuals from under resourced backgrounds face substantial barriers to participation and recognition. Identity performance, discussed in Section 5.2.3, further strengthens this argument by illustrating how performers must continually curate their online self in ways that align with platform norms and audience expectations. This process reinforces existing industry standards around appearance, personality, and performance style. Performers who embody these norms are more likely to be rewarded with visibility, while those who do not may be overlooked or marginalised. This dynamic reflects broader patterns within musical theatre, where casting practices already privilege certain identities. Social media therefore does not disrupt these hierarchies but instead extends them into digital spaces, making inequality more difficult to challenge.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of this chapter. Social media expands access to participation but does not guarantee equal access to success. The ability to upload content is widely available, but the ability to achieve meaningful visibility remains unevenly distributed. Gatekeeping has not disappeared; it has shifted into a more algorithmically driven form that privileges those who already possess social and cultural advantages. Consequently, social media should not be understood as a democratising force within musical theatre but as a digital environment in which existing inequalities are maintained and, in some cases, intensified. While this study argues that social media does reinforce inequality in musical theatre, it is critical to acknowledge alternative perspectives that agree that social media is an equal space.

5.4 Counterarguments and Alternative perspective

While this study argues that social media does reinforce inequality in musical theatre, it is critical to acknowledge alternative perspectives that agree that social media creates more equal opportunities. A key counterpoint is that social media increases opportunity and accessibility, Platforms such as TikTok have allowed performers to transcend geographical boundaries and gain global visibility leading to many viral success stories. (Turner, 2023). For example social media and West End Performer Hannah Lowther who has “leveraged her social media presence” (Ryan, 2025) leading her roles in “Legally Blonde” and “Heathers” claims herself in an interview that she’s had “all of these amazing experiences because of Tiktok” (Lowther, 2025). From this outlook, social media does appear to be looked at in an optimistic narrative when you see that it works for some people.

This argument can be challenged, as while these examples suggest that social media will create opportunities for individuals, it does not represent the experience of most people. Success stories like Hannah Lowther risk reinforcing a narrative that ignores the inequalities that are still present within the industry. Research by Linhong Zhu and Kristina Lerman (2016) demonstrates that attention on social media is highly unequal, with the top 20 percent of users receiving over 90 percent of engagement, driven by “rich-get-richer” dynamics where already visible users continue to gain more attention. So “attention is non-uniformly distributed with a small number of users dominating the attention received”. (Zhu and Lerman, 2016). Therefore, while social media may create opportunities for a small number of individuals, it ultimately reinforces existing inequalities.

A second counterargument is that social media has improved diversity and representation in musical theatre. Social media is often described as a platform that amplifies marginalized voices and promotes diversity and cultural inclusion. (Gibbous, 2023). In this sense, It’s enabled performers from underrepresented backgrounds to share their work with a wider audience. Nancy Baym (2015) suggests that online

platforms allow individuals to create and share their own content, giving them more opportunities to be seen and allowing more diverse voices to be represented in musical theatre.

Although performers from underrepresented backgrounds may be more visible online, this visibility is often shaped by platform algorithms and audience preferences, which tend to favour content that aligns with dominant norms. Furthermore, social media environments themselves are not equally safe or inclusive for all users. Research by Duggan (2017) found that approximately a quarter of African Americans and one in ten Hispanics have experienced racial or ethnic harassment online, compared to just 3 percent of White users. The study also found that women are nearly twice as likely as men to experience gender-based harassment. These findings suggest that while social media may amplify marginalised voices, it also exposes them to disproportionate levels of hostility and exclusion. As a result, participation is not experienced equally, and the pressure to navigate both visibility and discrimination may limit the extent to which diverse performers can benefit from these platforms. Therefore, rather than fully challenging inequality, social media can reproduce and, in some cases, intensify existing power imbalances within musical theatre. However, whilst this suggests that social media improves diversity and representation, it doesn't necessarily translate into equal opportunity or meaningful industry change.

5.5 Research Sample size

The survey sample comprised of 55 respondents, including participants from a range of age groups with the majority aged over 40, alongside a high percentage of representation from those aged 19-29. Respondents primarily identified as audience members, though a number also reported to being students or having direct involvement in musical theatre. This mix of perspectives is significant, as it captures both industry knowledge and audience understanding on social media's role.

Table 1: Age distribution of survey respondents

Age Range	Respondents
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18 and under	2
19-29	19
30-39	8
40 and over	26

Table 2: Respondents' relationship to musical theatre

Relationship To Musical Theatre	Respondents
Performer	5
Student	5
Audience Member	31
Online Viewer	14
Other	0

5.6 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the established ethical guidelines for social research. Participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of this study, which examined social media's role in reinforcing or challenging inequalities within musical theatre. Participation in this was entirely voluntary. To ensure confidentiality, all respondents were anonymised, and no personally identifiable data was collected. All collected data was securely stored and handled in accordance with the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation.

5.7 Research Findings

The survey was designed to explore several key themes identified in the literature. These include the perceptions of accessibility, the relationship between training and visibility, and the role of identity in shaping online success. I chose a survey as my primary research method because it allowed for a range of responses, giving me a variety of perspectives on the influence of social media. Additionally, surveys are cost-effective and practical for reaching participants who frequently use social media platforms. The questions focused on whether respondents believed social media

platforms such as Instagram provide equal opportunities for performers, or whether they reinforce existing inequalities relating to class, race, and training. The data I have collected will assess whether participants perceive social media as an open and accessible place, or whether they are aware of underlying barriers to visibility.

My findings indicate that while social media is widely perceived to expand access within musical theatre, this access is not experienced equally. Among 55 respondents, 94 per cent agreed that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram increase opportunities for participation and visibility. This suggests that respondents may distinguish between accessibility and equality. While social media is perceived as increasing participation, this does not necessarily mean that visibility or professional success are distributed evenly. However, responses were more divided when considering what drives success: around 50 per cent identified talent as most important, 30 per cent selected social media presence, and a further 30 per cent viewed it as equally significant. In addition, a strong majority agreed that access to training time and resources continued to influence structural advantages. Qualitative response also points out the concerns around disability, with several participants saying that “the same people” tend to reinforce existing patterns. This reflects concerns about visibility, where performers who already have online attention are more likely to remain visible in algorithms. While around 60 per cent of respondents felt that social media has improved representation, others argue that it is still up to individuals to align with the dominant industry. Their findings suggest that social media creates opportunities supporting the argument of disability, and the remains remain and are distributed.

The relationship between talent and social media presence emerged as a significant theme within the survey data. Well, maintaining that talent in central, others emphasise the importance of his ability and digital presence. This is reflected in responses as one participant observed that “talented people work their way up through social media,” but also noted that “the training effort needed to succeed within theatre isn’t seen “. Best to suggest that visibility can get in the way of the process and resources behind success. This response itself supports the argument that success in the musical theatre is

increasingly shaped by both talent and platform compatibility rather than just talent alone. Despite the perceived rise of social media, the survey findings strongly emphasised the continued support of training, time, and resources. Most respondents agreed that they remain essential for achieving success in musical theatre. This is reinforced through insights, as one participant stated that “training and experiences are essential.” In contrast, another stated that social media “shows performances but not the work behind them. “The response indicator recognises that digital visibility does not replace the need for formal skills for Development.

5.8 Research Analysis

This study combines quantitative data with qualitative thematic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media shapes inequality within musical theatre. While statistical data can provide insight into patterns and perceptions, qualitative responses allow for a deeper exploration of how individuals view and experience these patterns and perceptions. The quantitative findings suggest that social media increases access and visibility. However, while many respondents agreed that digital platforms create opportunities, this does not necessarily mean these opportunities are equally distributed. Instead, the data presents that accessibility is under a false narrative and may hide the underlying inequalities. This is further supported through the qualitative responses, which present a much more critical perspective. Themes, including concerns around visibility and repetition of the same performers, were a recurring finding. For example, respondents had noted that “the same people” tend to continuously gain opportunities, suggesting that visibility is not evenly distributed. The finding indicates that participants frequently associated visibility with opportunity, despite simultaneously recognising ongoing structural barriers surrounding training, resources, and representation. Instead, Inequality becomes restructured through platform exposure and audience engagement. This suggests that social media does not remove gatekeeping but instead relocates it to algorithmic systems that are less transparent but are equally influential.

5.9 Limitations

My study provides valuable insight into perceptions of social media and inequality in musical theatre. However, I do acknowledge that the sample size of 55 respondents, whilst sufficient for exploratory analysis, is relatively small. As a result, the findings cannot be considered representative of the entire musical theatre industry. Instead, they reflect a more varied range of perspectives, primarily from audience members and individuals with an interest in the field. Secondly, the conversation of samples presents imitations. A sizable portion of respondents identified as audience members rather than industry professionals. This provides important insight into public perception. It may not fully capture the experiences of performers working in the industry, particularly those directly affected by structural inequalities. Finally, the research is limited in its ability to measure long-term impacts. While respondents can comment on visibility and perception, the extent to which social media visibility translates into sustained professional opportunities cannot be fully determined within the scope of the study. Despite all these limitations, the findings remain valuable in how I think about patterns and perceptions of people. This survey aimed to gain broader knowledge of this subject rather than aiming to provide a definite conclusion.

5.10 Synthesis

Taken together, this analysis demonstrates that social media does not function as a straightforward tool of democratisation within musical theatre. While it expands access to participation and creates new opportunities for visibility, these opportunities are unevenly distributed and shaped by structural inequalities. Algorithms, cultural capital, and identity all play a role in determining who is seen and who succeeds. Rather than dismantling traditional hierarchies, social media reconfigures them, shifting gatekeeping from institutional structures to algorithmic systems. In doing so, it creates new forms of inequality while maintaining existing ones. Consequently, the narrative of social media as an equalising force must be critically reconsidered. Instead, it should be understood as a complex and contested space in which opportunity and inequality co-exist.

6. Chapter 3: Critical Discussion / Findings

6.1 *Summary of Analytical Findings*

This study set out to examine the extent to which social media reinforces existing inequalities within musical theatre, rather than dismantling them. Drawing on socio-cultural theory, particularly the work of Vygotsky (1978), identity theory, and scholarship on algorithmic systems, the analysis demonstrates that while digital platforms expand access to participation, they do not fundamentally equalise opportunity. Instead, they reconfigure existing inequalities in ways that are less visible but equally significant, echoing concerns raised in Noble's (2018) critique of algorithmic bias and Bucher's (2018) claim that algorithms act as "invisible gatekeepers". A key finding is the distinction between access and visibility. While platforms such as TikTok lower barriers to entry by enabling performers to upload and share content freely, visibility within these platforms remains uneven. Algorithmic systems prioritise engagement-driven metrics, meaning that content aligned with dominant trends, aesthetics and the audience expectations is more likely to be amplified, which is consistent with Cotter's (2019) observation that creators must "play the visibility game" by tailoring their output to platform logics. As a result, success is not determined solely by talent but by a performer's ability to align with the platform's logic. The analysis highlights the continued relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Performers with access to training, resources, and industry knowledge are better positioned to produce high-quality content and navigate digital spaces effectively. This suggests that social media does not disrupt existing hierarchies but instead extends them to new environments.

Furthermore, identity performance emerges as a crucial factor in shaping visibility, drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) insights into the performative nature of identity. The study demonstrates that performers engage in continuous self-presentation, curating identities that are both authentic and strategically aligned with audience expectations. However, this process is constrained by dominant norms regarding appearance and marketability, which are reinforced by algorithmic systems.

Consequently, performers whose identities align with these norms are more likely to achieve visibility. The viral rise of *Bridgerton: the musical* demonstrates how platform-specific aesthetics and fan-driven participation can elevate creators, but can also show how success is shaped by industry gatekeeping. Similarly, performer Hannah Lowther's trajectory from workplace to West End exemplifies how creators must continually adapt their persona and content to algorithmic expectations. While these examples demonstrate the potential to elevate performers outside the traditional pathway, they also reveal the conditions that shape success, including marketability and pre-existing forms of capital. Overall, the findings suggest that social media does not function as a straightforward tool for democratisation. Instead, it creates a system in which traditional inequalities persist alongside new forms of digital gatekeeping.

6.2 Implications for Musical Theatre Scholarship

This study contributes to musical theatre scholarship by shifting the focus from traditional performance contexts to digital environments as key sites of visibility, labour, and professional development. While existing research has primarily centred on live performance, training institutions, and historical analysis, this dissertation demonstrates that social media platforms now play a significant role in shaping the industry. One key contribution is the application of digital media theory to musical theatre, particularly regarding algorithmic visibility. Drawing on Tarleton Gillespie's (2018) work, this study highlights how platform infrastructures actively shape what is seen and valued within the industry. This extends existing scholarship by positioning algorithmic systems as contemporary gatekeepers comparable to casting directors or producers in traditional contexts.

In addition, this research builds on and extends existing work on inequality within cultural industries. Studies by scholars such as Dave O'Brien have demonstrated that access to creative careers remains shaped by social and economic backgrounds. The findings of this dissertation reinforce this argument, showing that these inequalities persist within digital spaces, rather than being eliminated by them. However, this study also challenges overly optimistic narratives surrounding social media. While some scholarships emphasise the empowering potential of digital platforms, the analysis

presented here demonstrates that this perspective is limited. By critically examining the relationships among visibility, identity, and algorithmic systems, this research argues that social media should not be understood as inherently inclusive but rather as a complex and contested space in which inequality is both reproduced and transformed.

6.3 Academic Significances of social media as an integral component

The academic significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bridging musical and theatre studies, digital media theory, and sociology. By integrating these perspectives, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how performance industries operate within an increasingly digital world. For research, this study highlights the importance of examining social media as an integral component of cultural production rather than an additional tool. It demonstrates that digital platforms not only shape how performance is shared but also how performances are evaluated, selected, and recognised (Huang, 2025). This has implications for future research across both theatre and media studies, suggesting the need for greater attention to the role of technology in instructing cultural hierarchies.

For educators and practitioners, the findings raise important questions about training and professional development. As the industry increases the value of digital presence, performers may be required to develop skills in self-promotion, content creation, and audience engagement alongside traditional performance training. This shift has implications for how musical theatre is understood, particularly in relation to issues of act and inequality more broadly. This study contributes to ongoing debates about the role of social media in society by showing how digital platforms reinforce existing inequalities through problematic narratives and by emphasising the need to think more critically about the power these platforms hold.

6.4 Limitations

While their study provides valuable insights into the relationship between social media and inequality in musical theatre, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research is primarily theoretical, based on existing literature rather than empirical data. While this allows for in-depth critical analysis, it limits the ability to draw definitive

conclusions about the industry's live experience. Future research incorporating interviews, surveys, orographic methods could provide a more nuanced understanding of how performance navigates through digital space in practice. Secondly, the study primarily focuses on the West End context of commercial musical theatre, particularly Broadway and the West End. As a result, the findings may not be fully applicable to other cultural or geographical contexts, where the role of social media and industry structures may differ significantly. Thirdly, the rapidly evolving nature of social media presents a further limitation. Platforms such as TikTok are constantly changing in terms of algorithms, features, and user behaviours. Consequently, the findings of this study reflect a specific moment in time and may require ongoing assessment as digital environments continue to develop. Finally, while this study engages with those key dimensions of inequality, including class, race, and gender, it does not explore these factors and equality. There is scope for a more detailed analysis of Intersectionality and how multiple forms of disadvantage interact within a digital performance context.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Building on these limitations, key areas for further research can be identified. First, there is a need for empirical studies to examine how musical theatre performers use social media and their experiences. Interviews in case studies could provide valuable insight into how individuals navigate issues of visibility, identity, inequality, and practice. Secondly, future research could explore the role of specific platforms in greater depth, particularly emerging or rapidly evolving spaces such as TikTok. This could include analysis of algorithm changes, content trends, and audience behaviours, as well as the impact on performer visibility. While the study acknowledges the role of class, race, and gender, further work is not needed to examine how these factors intersect and shape experiences within the digital musical theatre spaces. Additionally, comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts provide a broad understanding of how social media operates within global performance industries. This would help show whether the patterns seen in Western contexts are also repeated in other settings, or whether different patterns appear instead. Finally, future research could investigate the long-

term impact of social media and care sustainability within musical theatre. While digital platforms may offer short-term visibility, it remains unclear whether this translates into stable and equitable career opportunities.

The study's findings demonstrate that while social media expands access to participation, it is not equally successful. Central insight is a distinction between access and visibility. Although performers can share content freely, visibility is structured through Algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement, authority, and ability rather than talent alone. The continued relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is particularly significant. Performance of access to training, resources, and industry knowledge about the position to navigate digital platforms effectively, suggesting that pre-existing inequalities exist within an online environment. In addition, identity performance on Erving Goffman emerges as a key factor, as performers continuously create that online presence in ways that align with platforms and invitations.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of algorithms as contemporary gatekeepers, reinforcing patterns of visibility that often privilege dominant aesthetic and social norms. Case studies such as *Bridgerton in the musical* illustrate the potential of digital outcomes, which are shaped by specific conditions rather than representing widespread accessibility. This meditation contributes to musical theatre scholarship by repositioning social media as a central site of performance, visibility, and professional development. While existing research has focused on my performance in institutional structure, the study demonstrates that digital platforms now play a significant role in shaping industry dynamics. By integrating digital media theory with musical theatre analysis, the research offers a more nuanced understanding of how inequality operates within the contemporary performance context. It challenges dominant narratives that frame social media as inherently democratic, instead of presenting it as a space for traditional hierarchy to be configured rather than removed. In doing so, the study provides a critical framework for analysing the relationship between technology, performance, and inequality.

Ultimately. This dissertation argues that social media should not be understood as a simple solution to inequality for musical theatre. While it offers new opportunities for participation and visibility, these opportunities are evenly distributed and shaped by cultural, structural, and technological factors. Instead of breaking existing hierarchies, social media often reinforces them in new and less obvious ways. As culture industries continue to shape society, it is important to examine how they influence both inequality and opportunities critically. The findings of the study highlight that they need to move beyond narratives of accessibility and said they engage with the complexities of digital inequality. In doing so, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how digital platforms continue to shape access and representation within contemporary cultural industries.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Restate Research Aims

This dissertation set out to explore the extent to which social media shapes visibility and opportunity in musical theatre, and whether digital platforms reproduce existing inequalities along class, race, gender, and access to cultural capital. Through a critical review of the literature, supported by survey data and case study examples, the study aimed to determine whether social media functions as a democratising force or reinforces longstanding structural hierarchies embedded within the industry.

7.2 Key Insights

The findings demonstrate that while social media increases the chances of visibility, it does not guarantee equal spread. Algorithms play a role in deciding what content circulates, privileging those who already possess social or economic capital aligning Gillespie's (2018) argument that platforms curate visibility. The literature review shows that inequalities in musical theatre, especially those linked to class, race, and access to training, are still firmly in place. Social media does not remove these barriers it instead, carries them into digital spaces. Performers with greater financial security, stronger digital skills, and sufficient free time to create regular content are more likely to succeed online, echoing the wider patterns of inequality identified by O'Brien and Friedman

(2017). In addition, the rise of digital labour creates new pressures for performers to stay active online, constantly posting and maintaining a personal brand. This expectation of ongoing self-promotion tends to disadvantage those with fewer resources. As a result, social media can deepen existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

7.3 Contribution to the Field

This dissertation adds to current research by showing how debates about algorithmic visibility, digital labour, and cultural inequality apply specifically to musical theatre. This field is rarely discussed in digital media studies. It shows that the industry's own structures, such as expensive training, insider networks, and strict ideas about appearance and performance, shape how performers use and experience social media, often in ways that differ from other creative sectors. The study also offers a clearer understanding of how digital platforms and inequality are connected. It shows that social media does not exist separately from real-world barriers. Instead, it works alongside them and can even make them stronger. This challenges the common belief that social media is automatically open and fair, and instead offers a more realistic, view of how inequality persists online.

7.4 Final Reflection

Overall, this dissertation finds that social media does not make access to musical theatre more equal. Instead, it reshapes old inequalities through new forms of visibility and digital labour. Although some performers achieve success online, these cases do not reflect wider change across the industry. As digital and live performance become more connected, researchers and industry professionals need to understand how algorithms and online expectations influence who becomes visible, valued, or overlooked. Future research should explore how different identities, including race, disability, and gender, shape performers' experiences on social media. It should also examine how new platforms might change casting and visibility in the future. Gaining this understanding is essential to creating fairer, more inclusive practices in both digital spaces and the musical theatre industry. As digital platforms become increasingly

embedded in cultural industries, questions surrounding inequality will become more important. Musical theatre, therefore, provides an important case study for understanding how technology reshapes access and recognition within the current world.

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9. Appendices

Survey -

<https://forms.cloud.microsoft/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?prevorigin=Marketing&origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=-REPTm4EBUWcuNshUjEeIYNCGwuDxoFArJbq90qrSddUNdVHN0ILNkRSMVNMUzY1OTRZQVo0T1QxVy4u&analysis=true>

Survey Results - <https://uowtsd->

my.sharepoint.com/:x:/r/personal/2405076_student_uowtsd_ac_uk/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7BB42AFBF7-6ECE-4A67-8DDE-09A42648B3D8%7D&file=Social%20Medias%20role%20in%20Musical%20Theatre.xlsx&action=edit&mobileredirect=true&wdMsFormsCorrelationId=5bf08279-83ad-487b-a828-bcd130d87c6c&wdtf=%20Microsoft.Office.Excel.FMsFormsMetadataInWorkbookMetadata%3Atrue