Similarities and Divergences between Music Production and TikTok in the Memes Era

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Abstract: In the digitally interconnected world, there seems to be a recurrent theme that simultaneously connects and divides modern music production and social media: "memes." On the one hand, they are the modular and structural element towards which today's music production seems to be moving; indeed, the musical meme causes the listener to lose interest in the integrity of the song and concentrate on a portion of it. On the other hand, they are increasingly acquiring the status of a foundational and constituent element of multimedia production conceived for social networks. Memes somehow become a template to be individually edited and shared. They tickle the agency of users, inviting them to appropriate given content through the affordances contained in the meme itself. Therefore, the idea of the meme links social media—mostly TikTok—to music production. The user is impressed by a template and recognizes conformity in it, despite the apparent diversity. Template recognition and familiarity are fundamental elements that users grasp and exploit, often unconsciously. This element of familiarity, intended as an element that is like itself but almost never the same, is molded with a precise task until it becomes an entity with its own personality and function. This investment of attention will lead users to share the meme, to promote its diffusion, and to increase its potential communicative extent. At the same time, through variations in their specific connotations from user to user, memes can be read and perceived as something new and different. To further explore these similarities and differences between music production and social media content-making, I analyze in this article the different ways a song is endorsed, advertised, and shared on different types of platforms. My aim is to understand how users approach these modalities and how they can be analyzed by platforms and researchers.

Keywords: memes; TikTok; Spotify; music production; memetic theory; social media; popular music

Introduction

In the digitally interconnected world, what Srnicek[1] refers to as platform capitalism is a reality, and the whole culture seems to be increasingly connected through media convergence.[2] It is feasible to assume that "several forces ... have begun breaking down the walls separating these different media,"[3] and it is increasingly clear that the same content is circulating among different media. Due to the convergence of different media, specifically social media, along with the desire of corporations to be an active part of consumers' everyday lives, modern capitalism is "centered upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data,"[4] understood as "information that something happened."[5] This "happening information" seems so tied to media that it is possible to say, with Jenkins, that on social platforms, the "lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires" of consumers and creators "also flow across media channels."[6] In this convergence context, there seems to be a common element that simultaneously connects our cultural production, our everyday lives, and media: memes. In my view, memes are becoming an element that must be increasingly studied and interpreted in two main fields: modern music production and social media. Indeed, memes seem to be elements that recur in both of these specific sectors, thus creating affinities and divergences that also need to be investigated with regard to the transmedia flow that facilitates the development of creativity and networked practice.[7]

In terms of music production, this phenomenon seems to be the modular and structural element modern music production is moving towards: the musical meme causes the listener to lose interest in the integrity of the song and concentrate on a portion of it.[8] Regarding content production in social media, memes are increasingly acquiring the status of a foundational and constitutive element of multimedia production, as they are conceived for social networks, particularly TikTok—a platform I will focus on in this contribution. I will test and explore different definitions of memes through the production practices belonging to the two different fields mentioned above.

Beginning with Dawkins's original definition of meme, this article will explore subsequent definitions that have emerged over time to develop a working explanation of the concept. These definitions draw from semiotics and digital culture studies, emphasizing human operations rather than biology. The

article aims to examine the similarities and differences among aural memes found on two major platforms, with a focus on a specific auditory meme. The meme will be approached from a Spotify playlist. Further analysis will examine the use of songs and their memetic exploitation on Italian TikTok. This research aims to better understand how culture is evolving in the era of memetic reproducibility, demonstrating how the meme concept interacts with different cultural artifacts. Specifically, it will explore how aural memes are exploited on the aforementioned platforms.

On Memes: the Original Definition

The original definition of memes was proposed by Dawkins, and it is based on the neo-Darwinian idea of the transmission and dissemination of culture as a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. "Mimeme" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like "gene." I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to "memory," or to the French word meme. ... Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.[9]

This definition stresses the idea that, similarly to the biological world, the specific elements of culture spread as they are learned, memorized, and transmitted, thus propagating from brain to brain via a process of imitation. Such units circulate within the cultural production through imitation and use. In other words, culture functions through discrete, transmissible units. This idea inevitably proposes the reading of meme culture in terms of recurring elements, namely, threads linking different texts together. I assert that it is possible to reread and place memes within the systemic creative process theorized by Csikszentmihályi,[10] namely, discrete parts within the domain selected from the field and elements fine-tuned by the individual to realize their own product. Therefore, these transmission units belong to a complex system composed of different elements working together to produce and

accept novelty. It is within such units that memes are contained. However, nowadays it is impossible to read the word meme without associating it with the internet. It is here that further definitions of meme need to be called into play—as a means of updating this concept and making it more functional for the purposes of my investigation.

New Texts, New Memes, New Definitons

To further explore the concept of internet memes, I will rely on the initial definition proposed by Gabriele Marino in his semiotic study on the subject. According to Marino, "internet memes" are characterized by the following:

> They are texts, (ii) belonging to different expressive substances, and usually syncretic, (iii) deriving from a process of intervention upon pre-existing texts, (iv) according to rules of pertinence and good formation, (v) that are characterized by a collectively assigned and recognized efficacy, (vi) by a playful spirit, (vii) by the anonymity of the creator, and (viii) by modalities of diffusion that are repetitive, adaptive, appropriative, and—in general—participative.[11]

These memes are created through the modification of existing texts without clear authorship. It is worth noting that their modalities of diffusion are repetitive, adaptive, and appropriative, which is a very interesting perspective from the point of view of the discourse I am conducting. This idea exploits and takes up the concept of "trans-texuality" identified by Genette[12] with the intention of identifying different types of relationships between texts. These characteristics are in fact instrumental in defining a new form of memes, which can also be found in the field of popular music and in TikTok, as I will discuss below. These memes belonging to different communicative instances, derive from a preexisting structural model whose authorship and genesis are not certain or clearly derivable. They are all recognizable, and their mode of dissemination is adaptive, repetitive, and generative. The meme, as an element, becomes in some way a template to be individually modified and shared within the field. The success of the recreated meme depends on the recognition it receives from the community, the field as defined by Csíkszentmihályi.[13] Only if the meme gains popularity can it dominate the domain.

To further analyze and define the concept of meme in digital culture, I would like to take a cue from the work of digital media and popular culture

scholar Limor Shifman. According to her studies, the concept of internet meme "encapsulates some of the most fundamental aspects of contemporary digital culture."[14] Shifman also emphasizes a sense of belonging to a common language and a shared sensibility. She defines internet meme as

> a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance [addressers position themselves in relation to the text] that were created with awareness of each other and were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the internet by many users.[15]

It is therefore possible to state that memes are socially constructed and, being shared within a society, also bring different voices and perspectives to a cultural group.[16] The meme thus becomes a projection of the self—or of what we would like others to see and perceive about us—through social sharing. Moreover, the meme phenomenon and its pervasiveness are not limited to the digital world and culture; on the contrary, memes seem to be a new mode of expression that permeates different spheres of everyday life, even offline. In these terms, internet memes can be treated as "post-modern folklore,"[17] in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as TikTok videos or photoshopped Instagram images.

In this definition of memes, it is important to avoid seeking biological equivalents to cultural phenomena. Instead, we must reconceptualize human beings and their relationship with platforms in a more active manner. This approach is necessary if we want to investigate the relationship between memes and music production, as well as the creation of user-generated content on TikTok, especially in light of Abidin and Kaye's claim that "'audio memes' ... have become the next frontier of meme cultures on the internet."[18]

Memes and Music (Re)production

Composing and producing a cultural object ex novo, especially in music, is a challenging task. It is necessary to rely on the ability of producers to base their understanding on what already exists, through derivation, that is, their personal reading of existing objects. One accomplishes this, according to Toynbee, through practices of "translation and intensification,"[19] by appropriating elements typical of other fields and applying, modifying, and expanding them within one's own. The fast exchange possibilities dictated by streaming platforms and the algorithms that control them intensify the

impact of music's dematerialization.[20] The production and composition of these elements are inevitably linked to the concept of the meme as defined above.

To illustrate this, I analyzed the first ten tracks of the Top 200 playlist of January 21, 2021[21]—compiled on the basis of the two hundred most listened-to tracks by Italian Spotify users. I noticed a repeated recurrence within the tracks listed in the following table. That, in my opinion, can be an example of meme in contemporary music production. In fact, all ten of these pieces of music have a *punctum* in their incipit where the attention is focused. This element helps to define the type of musical meme being theorized. Analytical data can be presented to illustrate this concept.

Position	Track	Artist	Number of streams	Spotify Id Track
1	"LA CANZONE NOSTRA," (con BLANCO & Salmo)	Mace	285411	0aQi1JGO1oKWEmKGfvf8TF
2	"Allenamento #4"	Capoplaza	261075	2CX0oyET6hQ6UfbtCZhTv7
3	"SEVEN 7oo" (feat. Rondodasosa, Sacky, Vale Pain, Neima Ezza, Kilimoney, Keta, Nko)	RM4E	207717	2KYLg9El0wzvX4S13CDoZf
4	"lady"	sangiovanni	205021	2uyQXAGGwHuQVsu04OTVsB
5	"Baby" (with J Balvin)	Sfera Ebbasta	189834	4L5ZhW0VJeQ6je2iqvqZ4X
6	"Superclassico"	Ernia	181541	6Ahg1hncxUdK0ICqU03BCu
7	"SLATT" (feat. Capo Plaza)	Rondodasosa	175380	1YvhcTM8aIRTg03AavA2HJ
8	"drivers license"	Olivia Rodrigo	173411	7lPN2DXiMsVn7XUKtOW1CS
9	"Scooby Doo"	Pinguini Tattici Nucleari	173109	1P6TlFb8EVH2nCX3luVpZW
10	"Ferma a guardare" (feat. Pinguini Tattici Nucleari)	Ernia	172575	1eDC4NiUYgQSKpKDlvXxi4

The aural memetic element present in all these pieces is an accentuated reverberation—typical of a medium-sized room—within which melodic instruments are located and whose sound is able to give a clear rhythmic imprint to the piece. In other words, a melody pulsates in a room that we might call a meme-room. The meme-room experienced here is made up only of the sound and does not contain a recognizable melody or a typical chord progression. I analyzed the element using Spotify's API and visualized it with the SpoTiGem tool.[22] Spotify's analytical data presents a macro-level analysis of the track, including its meter, pitch, mode, BPM, and overall loudness. The analysis proceeds through a dissection of the track into shorter sections[23] based on various parameters. An analysis at the macro level, in which the pieces are examined in their totality and compared with each other, shows that there is no direct derivable evidence at the level of analysis performed by the streaming platform. There is no recurrence in either duration, pitch, or the mode in which the songs are composed; even BPM does not seem to have a significant recurrence within the examples in question. The algorithm performs micro-level analyses on each individual song, showing how Spotify's

analysis algorithm divides the songs into sections defined and differentiates them on the basis of major variations in rhythm or timbre. The algorithm is capable of identifying the meme, despite the lack of clear evidence or trends. But above all, it is important to stress that these sections are separated with great reliability—or as Spotify terms it, confidence.[24] This is a sign that the change in timbre is also perceived very clearly and distinctly by the system, albeit with a gap of only a few fractions of a second between what a person might hear and the algorithm's analysis.

The presented examples are sorted by the degree of modification,[25] from tracks where the meme is most recognizable to the ones with the most modifications.

In "Allenamento #4" by Capo Plaza, it is clearly noticeable that in the first section of the track there is an almost total absence of low frequencies, and it is possible to recognize the presence of the melodic reflections in the reverb. The track then changes texture, thanks to the inclusion of rhythmic beats. New frequencies of percussive instruments then break into the "meme room" and are added to the initial synth together with the voice. The result, together with a modulation probably operated by an LFO, is what actually starts the track. The introduction is then performed by a reverb and a synth, whose task is to create the mood to "launch" the piece.

In "Baby" by Sfera Ebbasta, we have a particular disposition of the different frequencies right from the incipit. In fact, most of them are arranged at the low end. Thanks to the insertion of a filtered voice and its echoes, the room, which previously only contained a synthesized bass, gradually fills with sound reflections. This makes the reverberation more perceptible. The resulting outcome remains perceptible until the entrance of the main voice of the track, when the particular settings of the reverb seem to change.

RM4E's "Seven 7oo" is certainly a peculiar case. The reverberations seem to be modulated. In its opening, the track has a synthesizer processed with a filter that enhances and emphasizes the mid-high frequencies, leaving the underlying frequency range practically empty. The track is characterized by this sonority until it is broken off by the overbearing entry of a sample—probably of a gunshot or similar sound—which kicks off the proper track, moving the meme-room to the center of a street, where the track seems to be set. In this example, after the initial modulation, the reverb remains throughout the initial part of the track, even though several instruments

alternate within it.

The meme is further reinterpreted in the track "drivers license." The song begins with sounds typical of a car: the ignition of an engine and a warning light that starts beeping rhythmically. This cadenced sound is immersed in the room—through reverberation. Later, as its pulsation accelerates, the sound of the warning light is transformed into the sound of a piano, and the engine noise suddenly disappears. It is possible to notice a leap between the low frequencies, typical of the "car" setting, and the entrance of the piano, which, together with the voice, leaves that entire frequency range unattended.

"Superclassico," a track by Ernia, begins with the reverberation of a guitar arpeggio over a low synth. In this case, the specificity of the meme is preserved thanks to the reverberation that brings us back to the idea of a room, within which is placed the arpeggio that opens the first verse of the song.

In "La canzone nostra" by the producer MACE, a synth simultaneously plays with an arpeggio in triplets and moves within the meme-room. The sound occupies the middle frequencies, and reverberation is clearly present: following the initial sound impulse on the spectrogram, it is possible to see how the notes remain within the room, overlapping one another.

"Slatt," a track by Rondodasosa featuring Capo Plaza, has a peculiar beginning. The meme-room seems to propagate from the chord strummed on the guitar and is not already present at the start, in contrast to the other memes. The reverberation on the guitar is maintained from this point on, despite the inclusion of other instruments and sounds, such as voices or the ringing of a telephone.

In "Ferma a guardare," a guitar and the voices of the two singers play inside the meme-room and reverberate in unison. The rhythmic pulse is present and recognizable right from the start, as the guitar accents each first quaver of the beats (marking a metronomic tempo of 162 BPM). Together with the guitar, there are voices present, in this case, as harmonic layers. Only a few words are in fact articulated through the voices, but this allows the listener to perceive the room within which this first section is set even more clearly. What makes the reception of reverberation even more important is surely the fact that the final bar of this section, the fifth, is played only in its first quarter, leaving the decay of the reverberation to be perceived in the remaining three

beats of the bar.

In "Lady," a track by sangiovanni, different elements are present from the very beginning: a synth playing a chord followed by four semiquavers in unison sung by the voice. All this resonates in a room, until the sound eventually deteriorates and starts the song in its entirety. It is interesting to note how the meme is reinterpreted in this case: as the filter that modulates the voices opens, returning to a "pure" sound, we witness the deterioration of the reverb.

The song "Scooby Doo" by Pinguini Tattici Nucleari is an example of how the meme is still reprised, albeit with still different characteristics. We immediately have clear and defined rhythmic pulsations—strongly filtered-sounding snare drumbeats that signal the beginning of the track and are then transformed into a characteristic rhythmic figuration—accompanying a guitar arpeggio and the singer's voice. Although no frequency area remains silent, the reverberation, the room within which the guitar plays, is once again clearly discernible.

This aural meme, which goes beyond melodic, harmonic, and structural similarities, becomes purely sonorous reproduction, with varying degrees of modification linked to the reinterpretation and appropriation activity of the different producers and musicians, a rhythmic pulse beating in a medium reverberated ambience. Although this is perceptible to the listener within this set of tracks, it therefore appears to be non-standardized and endowed with a recognizable imprint—very similar to internet memes in their uniqueness and particularity—as it proceeds precisely from the reinterpretation and declination of the meme itself. It becomes possible to use the categories of trans-textuality and memetics for music as well. They are thus signifiers with a presence and descent within a particular repertoire, the meaning of which, however, is consciously exploited and modified by producers working on the plasticity of the environment they are embedded in.

One could reread these memes as a particular type of "coded voices"[26] shared between music producers and users. The use of re-mediated music and streaming platforms has accelerated the enjoyment of music. Additionally, the logic of social networks on which memes spread appears to have a significant impact on the production and reception of music. This brings the field of cultural production closer to the concept of the internet meme. One peculiarity of the meme is that it can be distorted to the point where its origin is no longer recognizable; what is retained is its clear communicative function.

This could lead to a peculiar reconfiguration of the concept itself, in which the original model technically and aesthetically loses sight of the source from which the meme was generated. Notwithstanding, the musical meme retains its communal uniqueness, allowing listeners to find a template with which they are familiar, albeit behind various reproduction practices.

The Multimedial Memes of TikTok

Aural memes on Spotify extend beyond the melodic qualities of traditional hooks. These elements are of a purely sonorous nature and do not have any recurring melodic qualities, but they can be reinterpreted by different authors. On TikTok, due to the production of user generated content, these memes take on an additional characteristic. Audio memes that include words or lyrics provide TikTokers with an opportunity to engage with or reinterpret the meaning of songs or audio clips.[27]

On TikTok, music indeed plays a central role in the infrastructure of the platform.[28] The variety of music available on the platform attracts young people and becomes an expressive medium of their moods and identity.[29] TikTok has also led to the emergence and spread of new interactive and collaborative methods of producing content with and through music, which also influences the way users define their identity. As Vizcaino-Verdù and Abidin argue, sound on TikTok is a primer of memes.[30] On the platform, it constitutes the foundational and unifying element of memetic and viral content, which is collected and indexed through the unique ID associated with each sound.

We know that TikTok users can passively view content but also create it or interact with others. Therefore, there is a consumption of content, but the focus lies in its creation. TikTok attracts young users whose language is strongly influenced by memes. The possibility of interacting with the technical characteristics (*affordances*) of the platform makes it into an expressive medium for younger users. Through this act of multimedia creation, they can develop their own identity and self-esteem, and the way subjects modify a meme is allegedly linked to their own subjectivity. We could indeed consider that participation in TikTok is motivated by the need to expand one's social network, to seek fame, and to express oneself creatively. Moreover, it seems that in TikTok, "the crux of the interaction is not between users and their social

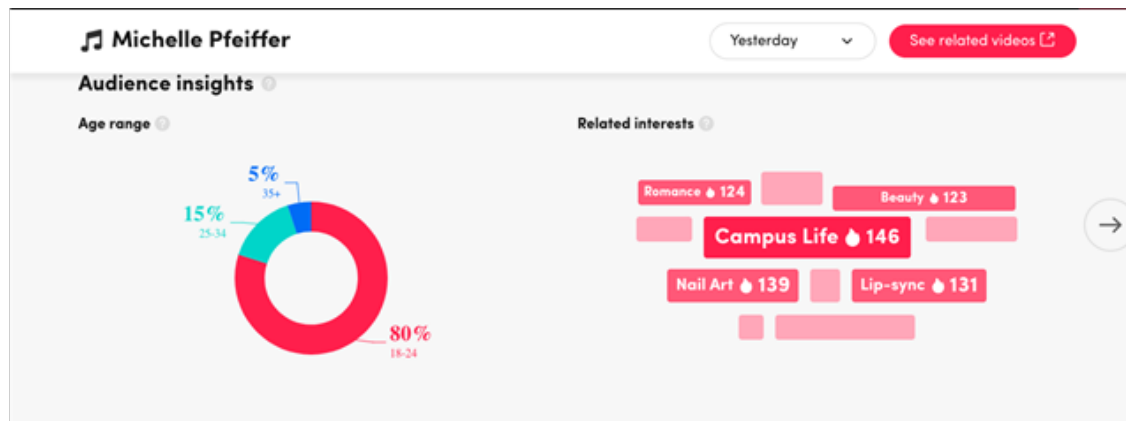network, but between a user and what could be called an 'algorithmic' version of themselves."[31]

Figure 1: Audience insights provided by TikTok on the song "Michelle Pfeiffer" (2022) by Rose Villain via https://ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter/inspiration/popular/music/pc/

It is undoubtedly possible to state that TikTok and its video production are therefore deeply linked to music and the lyrics of the songs.

From what has been observed, it is possible to note that the production of video via TikTok is linked to a real verbocentrism—in opposition to the "vococentrism" defined by Chion.[32] It is not the voice itself that attracts attention, but rather the lyrics of the song declaimed by the voice. The lyrics of the songs are probably the most important element and are made their own and reinterpreted by the users. It seems that creators do not feel the need to use their own voice; in fact, lip-sync practices allow them to speak without actually doing so, totally shifting the focus to the lyrics of the songs and the portion of the original song. The tunes exploited are not actually covered but rather personally appropriated. The paradigm would seem to shift from "the voices exist and then everything else"[33] to "the voice also exists along with everything else, and it is important what it says," thus emphasizing the presence of both the lyrics of the song and the multimediality inherent in the idea of TikTok videos. Additionally, it is possible that, besides the verbocentric phenomenon, production is also associated with a form of captioning, where the user appropriates a meme, text, and textual counter-notes to establish a connection between the content creator and the portion of the piece being utilized. Indeed, they provide a better idea of the creator's identity, the use he or she is making of the video meme context of what is happening, and the context of what is happening.

In this regard, my observations can be exemplified through the analysis of several videos pertaining to the ranking *Browse what's trending now in Italy*[34] available at TikTok: Creative Center[35] and filtered by the "popular" filter, which does not admit any user-generated sound. The first two tracks in this chart are famous Italian songs, "Quel sorriso in volto" from the rock band Modà[36] and "18 anni" by the Italian songwriter Ariete.[37] Furthermore, I chose to analyze the first two video contents suggested to me by the platform for each track. It is interesting to note that, although both songs were released in years before 2022, they were still used and became the musical basis for TikTok video trends in 2022. The songs are clearly linked to different types of listeners. On the one hand, Modà's song is very mainstream[38]—the band has been active since 2002 and has already recorded seven records[39]—and perhaps the track is targeted at a more mature range of listeners. Ariete, on the other hand, has become popular much more recently—she released her first EP in 2019[40] —and she is generally listened to by a younger audience.

The TikTok videos based on "Quel sorriso in volto" only exploit one line of the second verse—from 02:08 to 02:14[41]—where the song recites "Amore mio dove stai andando? La rincorse e l'abbracciò,"[42] in English, "My love where are you going? He ran after her and hugged her." Only a very small portion of the song is used, but not the chorus, although it is very catchy.

The two TikTok videos I will consider exhibit different appropriation practices, despite using the same portion of the song. In the first video—of which we can see two screenshots below—two lovers are shown saying goodbye to each other in the middle of a street. The protagonists of the short video are acting exactly according to the lyrics of Modà's song. In this way, the lyrics of the song become "real."

The second video is based on the idea of greeting one of the players of a football team. It is a collage of videos and images depicting different moments in the creator's life, from the first meeting with the footballer (to whom the song seems to be dedicated) to the last game with his team. In this case, the question in the song's lyrics is particularly rendered in the video: "My love where are you going?" These words seem to be dedicated to the footballer, and the type of love expressed is, of course, football love, very different from the TikTok described above. The soundtrack is the same, but it clearly expresses two different subjectivities. In both cases, the appropriation of the lyrics of the song is the element providing meaning to the TikTok.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the first TikTok video based on "Quel Sorriso in volto"

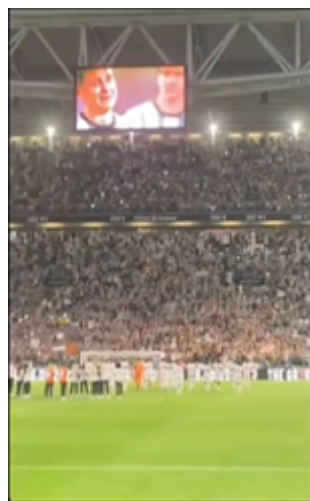Figure 3: : Screenshot of the first TikTok video based on "Quel Sorriso in volto"

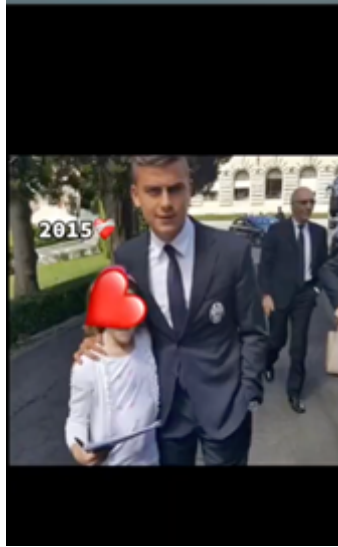Figure 4: : Screenshot of the second TikTok video based on "Quel Sorriso in volto"

Figure 5: : Screenshot of the second TikTok video based on "Quel Sorriso in volto"

The TikTok videos based on Ariete's song, on the other hand, tend to exploit its first refrain—from 01:11 to 01:40—and specifically its first three verses—from 01:11 to 01:22. However, there are also TikToks that exploit the remaining three verses of the refrain, or the second refrain, which varies in lyrics—from 02:09 to 02:39. In this specific context, I will focus on the first variant, linked to the first three verses of the refrain. It begins by reiterating the title of the song: to be eighteen years old. To be eighteen in Italy means to come of age and therefore to have greater freedom: youngsters have the possibility to drink alcohol or buy cigarettes legally, and likewise, they are legally allowed to vote or get a driver's license. The original Italian lyrics are:

> Hai diciott'anni e non sai relazionarti /
>
> Tra feste nei locali ed alcolici coi calmanti /
>
> 'Che ci vogliamo fare?', chiedo agli amici suoi.[43]

In English, they can be translated as: "You're eighteen and you can't relate / Between clubbing and calming booze / 'What are we gonna do about it?' I ask their friends." The excerpt of the lyrics examined is addressed to a hypothetical "you," which allegedly allows the listener to identify closely with the lyrics. Again, I will describe two TikTok videos based on the same song portion and use them as examples. The first video expresses the protagonist's idea of being an eighteen-year-old: she feels the lyrics are her own and appropriates the words of the song, in which she feels directly involved. She appears to say to those who enjoy her content: "I'm here, it's really me, and

this song is exactly about me!" It is no coincidence that, in the lyrics, the singer refers to an external character, as if Ariete had decided to talk directly about the protagonist of the video. It is a very simple video with a filter that produces short glitches; the protagonist of the video lip-syncs the words, while the lyrics remain fixed in overlay until the end of the TikTok video. Here, too, the lyrics dominate the content, and the creator is appropriating it by sharing her own video in relation to the song. It is important to note that a caption—although there is a small typo in the text—expresses even better why the creator has chosen this soundtrack.

Figure 6: : Screenshot of the first TikTok video based on "18 ANNI"

In contrast, the second video expresses what the creator conceives as the freedom of coming of age. The video opens with the following text printed over a black background: "P.O.V. [point of view]: your best friend lives only on cigarettes and finally turns 18." Then we see a boy inserting his ID card into a cigarette vending machine, whose chip reader permits him to legally buy a pack of smokes. The focus in this video shifts, once again, to the idea of being exactly eighteen and thus being of age. The rest of the song hardly seems to interest the user, and it is the first verse of the musical meme that makes the difference and allows us to understand the reason why such a soundtrack was chosen.

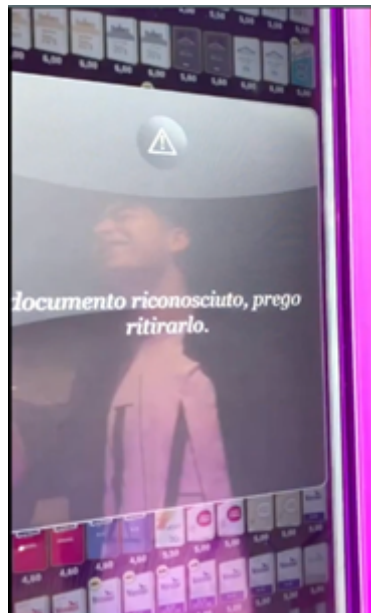Figure 7: : Screenshot of the second TikTok video based on "18 ANNI"

Figure 8: : Screenshot of the second TikTok video based on "18 ANNI"

Affinity, Divergence, and Conclusions

The objective of this analysis was to examine how memes are present in everyday life and on the platforms we use. To achieve this, I investigated Spotify's curated playlists and monitored the top charts on TikTok. Despite the different time frames—focusing initially on the music platform and later on TikTok—similarities can be identified between music production and the creation of user-generated content.

Despite being different in appearance and multimedia, these types of memes activate the above definitions in different ways. Template recognition and familiarity are fundamental elements that users grasp and exploit, often unconsciously. The component of familiarity, whereby an element is alike but almost never the same, is invested with a precise task until it becomes an entity with its own personality and function.

The memes are linked by a gradual propagation in both types of productions, and the basis of both is sharing. The medium through which they spread is the internet, primarily social media. Both are reproduced via copying and imitation, and their dissemination is linked to processes of competition and selection of the meme as defined by Dawkins. They are socially chosen, albeit in different ways. In terms of music production, listening is activated, and we might assume that if a song gets more plays, it will stay on the charts, and the meme contained within can be understood as functional for a song to be successful; hence, the memetic peculiarities of the song may be chosen for reinterpretation by other musicians. On the other hand, regarding the production of content on TikTok, selection and sharing take place through social media. However, more listening and sharing seems to lead to the selection of one meme over another. In addition, the algorithmic curation that powers the "For You" feed on TikTok and the platform's affordances significantly influence how memes are shared and reproduced. This is also true of Spotify and its playlists, where both human and algorithmic curation provide ample opportunities for memes. These positional movements may be useful in understanding how "the memetic logics of participation ... manifest in and derive from an interplay between consumers and affordances."[44]

In addition, there is a noticeable multiplicity of reading, user agency, and modularity. The memes are appropriated by users in very different ways. The

cases discussed here, however, tickle the agency of listeners and creators by helping the user to appropriate them in an ever-new process of semiosis.

TikTok and the music memes exploit particular parts of a song—as aptly described by Stefani—causing the user to interest in the integrity of the song and concentrate on a portion of it.[45] And this is probably the point where the relationship between these two peculiar types of memes and their influence should be further investigated. One need only consider how many songs used in the multimedia production of TikTok are not known except in the portions exploited for memetic production. This investment of attention will lead to the sharing of the meme, its diffusion, and the increase of its potential communicative extent for users. Network individualists—the definition is based on the idea that through social networks certain people can both express their own and personal uniqueness and convey values typical of the given social network, allowing "people to be 'themselves' together"[46]—use memes to simultaneously express uniqueness and their connectivity. So the meme is linked to a specific function, but at the same time—varying from user to user in its specific connotations—it can be read and perceived as something new and different, thus potentially removing the specter of standardization and pseudo-individualization.

On the basis of the writings of Gabriele Marino, it is possible to further expand the idea of these new musical and multimedia memes along with their circulation. According to Marino, a meme becomes such "when users [artists and creators in our case] begin to appropriate it by modifying it and circulating it in this interpolated form as well."[47] Therefore, in the examples analyzed so far, memes pertaining to a wide range of media are chosen and reworked by different creators and producers, thus becoming elements that must necessarily be recognized. In considering the similarities between the different types of memes, it is interesting to observe how "memes present, at a level that we can define as plastic-enunciative, a modular structure, consisting of some fixed elements and other customizable elements, which tickles the agency of users, inviting them to appropriate the given content."[48] This peculiar tickling property is the main characteristic we have been able to observe in both the music memes and the TikTok videos: these elements do possess features that make them similar to each other, but at the same time profoundly different—because they come from different minds—although one can recognize a common substratum, a sort of blueprint. This modular quality is what makes them so present

and, more importantly, modifiable. As Alessandro Bratus states, this idea of modularity—which becomes fundamental in the study and re-reading of memes—also offers the "possibility for cultural products to structure themselves into complex objects from the interaction between precisely defined and connoted individual parts, whether melodic, rhythmic, timbral, motivic, structural or narratological in nature"[49]—as can be heard in the musical excerpts discussed above. This concept becomes fundamental in the study and re-reading of memes. This focus may become useful in rereading the possibility of interaction, recreation, and reproduction of structural elements that, through modularity as structural logic, have both the possibility of a reproduction and a continued existence. Through application of the concept of "generativity" expressed by Jonathan L. Zittrain[50] about the potential inexhaustibility of content creation practices on the internet, it is indeed possible to delineate a more precise foundational characteristic of these new elements of musical and multimedia production: the potential recreation or reinterpretation of a learned datum and its transformation into an element of one's own language. And it is according to this innovative lens that a new form of memetic generativity should be reread. It is necessary to research and work around the delicate balance that opposes innovation and uniformity by studying one's own production and inserting it into the body of previous innovations, making them one's own, keeping track of memes. These elements need to be taken more and more seriously. Also, the investigation of memes could help us to understand the changes these social platforms are creating both in the production of digital and non-digital content in music and in our daily lives.

Notes

1. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism,* Theory Redux (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

2. Henry Jenkins*, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

3. Ibid., 11.

4. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 28.

5. Ibid., 28.

6. Ibid., 18.

7. Juan Bermúdez, "Performing Beyond the Platform: Experiencing Musicking on and through YouTube, TikTok and Instagram," in *Remediating Sound: Repeteable Culture, YouTube and Music,* ed. Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas, and João Francisco Porfírio, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 187–202.

8. Gino Stefani, "Melody: A Popular Prospective," *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (1987): 21–35.

9. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 146.

10. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, "Society, Culture, and Person: A Systems View of Creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 325–29.

11. Gabriele Marino, "Semiotics of Spreadability: A Systematic Approach to Internet Memes and Virality," *Punctum: International Journal of Semiotics* 1, no.1 (2015): 50. This is the first contribution by Marino known to me on the subject, which he subsequently developed in other different articles dealing with memes, including musical ones.

12. Gerard Genette, *Palinsesti: La Letteratura al Secondo Grado*, trans. Raffaella Novità (Torino: Einaudi, 1997).

13. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, "Society, Culture, and Person," in *The Systems Model of Creativity*

   The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Dordrecht:Springer, 2015), 47–61.

14. Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture,* The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 4.

15. Ibid., 41.

16. Ibid., 8.

17. Ibid., 15.

18. Crystal Abidin and Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, "Audio Memes, Earworms, and Templatability: The 'Aural Turn' of Memes on TikTok," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 58.

19. Jason Toynbee, "The Labour That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Musical Creativity, Labour Process and the Materials of Music," in *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music*, ed. Eric F. Clarke, Mark Doffman, Studies in Musical Performance as Creative Practice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44.

20. Paolo Magaudda, "When Materiality 'Bites Back': Digital Music Consumption Practices in the Age of Dematerialization," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 11, no.1 (2011): 15–36, doi: 10.1177/1469540510390499.

21. The playlist in question, dated January 21, 2021, can be retrieved and listened to in its entirety at this link.

22. "SpotiGem,"*SpotiGem*, all links accessed January 25, 2025.

23. "Get Track's Audio Analysis," *Spotify*.

24. Ibid.

25. It is possible to listen to the incipits of the songs presented and analyzed below—and thus the aural memes—at this link.

26. Toynbee, "The Labour That Dare," 46. The concept of "coded voices" is originally expressed in Jason Toynbee, "Music, culture and creativity," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (London: Routledge, 2012), 161–71. These are the original wordings: "I still want to argue that the general principle of dialogism, particularly the notion that cultural production consists of the interanimation of social materials, is so cogent that it must lie at the center of any theory of creativity. How might it be applied to music then? Quite simply, music needs to be understood as an ensemble of coded voices." Ibid., 164.

27. Abidin and Kaye, *Audio Memes, Earworms, and Templatability.*

28. Ibid.

29. Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin, "Cross-Cultural Storytelling Approaches in Tiktok's Music Challenges," in *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2022), https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12260.

30. Shifman, Limor, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 362–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013.

31. Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo, "Tiktok and The 'Algorithmized Self': A New Model Of Online Interaction," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2020).

32. Michel Chion, *La voce nel cinema*, trans. Mario Fontanelli (Parma: Pratiche Editrice, 1991).

33. Ibid., 16.

34. The chart in question was viewed on May 19, 2022, and is linked to that day. Now it no longer seems to be accessible via TikTok for creators. The videos linked to the tracks, however, can still be viewed by searching for the song titles in the app's search bar.

35. "TikTok: Creative Center," *TikTok: Creative Center*.

36. Modà, "Quel Sorriso in volto," Track 2 on *Testa o Croce.* Friends and Partners, 2019, Spotify.

37. Ariete, "18 anni," Single track on *18 anni*. Puro Srl, 2020, Spotify.

38. Is certainly only an indicator and not the clear definition of an artist's fame, but at the moment—March 02, 2024—Modà's song has 34,134,483 plays on Spotify, while Ariete's has 13,413,023 plays on the same platform.

39. For more information about Modà, please consult their official website rockmoda.com or their Wikipedia page Modà - Wikipedia.

40. For more information about Ariete, please consult her official website iosonoariete.it or her Wikipedia page Ariete (cantante) .

41. All timecodes refer to the versions of the tracks available on Spotify.

42. Modà, "Quel sorrsio in volto." The lyrics of both songs are taken from https://genius.com/.

43. Ariete, "18 anni."

44. Jonathan David Schöps, Sara Schwarz, and Veronika Rojkowski, "Memetic Logics of Participation: Fitness Body Culture on Instagram," *Marketing Theory* 24, no. 1 (2023): 70. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931231201779

45. Gino Stefani, "Melody: A Popular Prospective."

46. Limor Shifman*, Memes in Digital Culture*, 34. The definition of networked individualism appears first as used by Barry Wellman, "Living Wired in a Networked World: The Rise of Networked Individualism" (keynote address, Founding Conference, Association of Internet Researchers, Lawrence, KS, Sept. 2000). Here I have preferred to use Shifman's terminology, as it is very direct and effective.

47. Gabriele Marino, "La formula della viralità," *Lexia: Rivista di semiotica* 33–34 (2020): 127, DOI: 10.4399/97888255354267. Original wording: "quando gli utenti cominciano ad appropriarsene modificandola e facendola circolare anche in questa forma interpolata."

48. Ibid., 129. Original wording: "i meme presentano, a un livello che possiamo definire plastico–enunciativo, una struttura modulare, costituita da alcuni elementi fissi e da altri elementi personalizzabili, che solletica l'agency degli utenti, invitandoli ad appropriarsi del dato contenuto."

49. Alessandro Bratus, "Ritorno all'archivio: Un contributo alla ricostruzione delle prassi produttive del cinema popolare italiano attraverso il fondo Kojucharov," *Philomusica on-line* 18, no. 1, (2019): 291–92, http://dx.doi.org/10.13132/1826-9001/18.2023. Original wording: "la possibilità per i prodotti culturali di strutturarsi in oggetti complessi a partire dall'interazione tra parti individuali precisamente definite e connotate, siano esse di natura melodica, ritmica, timbrica, motivica, strutturale o narratologica."

50. Jonathan L. Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet: And How to Stop It*, Oxford Legal Studies Research Paper No. 36/2008 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press & Penguin UK, 2008).