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Contents

Introduction: TikTok-Music-Cultures

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Abstract: Today, the field of TikTok research is dynamic and exciting, constantly expanding as we strive to uncover the performative world of TikTok. While significant contributions have been made by initiatives like the TikTok Cultures Research Network and scholars such as Crystal Abidin, Trevor Boffone, Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, Patrik Wikström, and Juan Bermúdez, there is still much to discover. This special issue is a testament to our ongoing quest for a deeper understanding of TikTok as a glocal phenomenon, particularly from a musicological perspective.

TikTok is a smartphone application aimed at creating and sharing short videos. It is one of the fastest-growing social media applications worldwide, offering an interaction space for different music and video practices. Initially conceived as Musical.ly, this application was officially launched in August 2014 as an educational platform (MOOC); it would soon be geared towards music creation,[1] providing an interaction space for different music and video practices. In 2018, after Musical.ly was acquired by the Chinese company ByteDance and transformed into the application we know today as TikTok,[2] its visibility has transcended borders, becoming a phenomenon that has undoubtedly established itself in the global cultural imaginary. After the pandemic, TikTok has become an inseparable part of contemporary popular culture and operates as a portal into everyday life's social, political and cultural spectrums. The platform attracts the attention of teenagers and people of all ages and has gained interest among the academic community.

Today, the field of TikTok research is dynamic and exciting, constantly expanding as we strive to uncover the performative world of TikTok. While significant contributions have been made by initiatives like the TikTok Cultures Research Network and scholars such as Crystal Abidin,[3] Trevor Boffone,[4]

Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, Patrik Wikström,[5] and me,[6] there is still much to discover. This special issue is a testament to our ongoing quest for a deeper understanding of TikTok as a glocal phenomenon, particularly from a musicological perspective.[7]

How TikTokers appropriates the platform for creating musical practices in and through it is vast, diverse, and constantly changing. For that, investigating multimedia musicking, such as TikTok, offers many possibilities and theoretical implications while possessing practical and methodological challenges. To understand 1) how people create and disseminate forms of sonic and visual creativity, 2) how people stage performances and build (artistic) identities and communities, 3) how people engage in the production and circulation of content, and 4) how people experience and perform gender, class and race on and through TikTok, I put together contributions from scholars who are interested in issues about musicking practices on and through TikTok from a variety of analytical perspectives. Generally, this special issue concerns different ways musicking manifests in TikTok in various contexts.

In ***Ethnographing TikTok: Toward an E³thnomusicological Approach to a Multimedia Musicking***, I propose an interdisciplinary musical-ethnographic model, E³thnography, as a practical tool for studying multimedia musicking, like TikTok. This text underscores the pressing need for musicology and ethnomusicology to adapt to digital cultures in terms of values and methods, and it encourages us to recognize musicking as a multimedia practice. This recognition is crucial as it helps us understand how diverse actors contribute to the creation and experience of music, both individually and collectively, in physical and digital contexts.

In ***#tiktokactivism: Music and Sounds in Political Content***, Tessa Balser-Schuhmann and Nicole Kiruka explore the role of music and sounds in activist content on TikTok. Based on two ethnographic studies, Balser-Schuhmann and Kiruka explore the link between musical marks and corporeality in the articulation of political messages and the influence of this dynamic on TikTok's performativity. Adding to this contribution, Emma Schrott discusses in ***Political Performances: TikTok's Sonic Influence on Affective Activist Expression*** the political expression of TikTok in Austria and how the platform encourages civic activism. Through online ethnography and interviews, Schrott's research reveals insights into users' engagement with local politics

and highlights TikTok's role in fostering political mobilization through creative sonic expressions. This study emphasizes TikTok's significance in youth activism and its cultural impact on sound. It advocates for further exploration of TikTok's role in broader social movements.

In ***Rap al caudillo: A Gen Z's Queer Subversion of Spanish National Imagery***, Pau Aguilera analyzes how TikTok has become a space for activism and sharing personal stories of resilience in Spain. Based on the case of Samantha Hudson's single "Por España" and the subsequent TikTok trend "Rap al Caudillo," Aguilera shows us how Spaniard LGBTQ+ community members appropriate and resignificate a deep-rooted national imaginary linked with extreme-right militancy, and dance moves from other TikTok challenges in the mainstream, heterosexual spheres of the app, to enhance the powerful lyrics from Hudson's song to reclaim whit this a space within the platform and in Spanish national culture and imagery.

Continuing this journey into the performative world of TikTok, David Merlin explores the Early Music community on TikTok in ***Old Clichés or a Transforming Community? Early Music Interpreters on TikTok: Identity and Communication Strategies***. In it, Merlin analyses how Early Music performers are musicking and interacting on and through TikTok. David Merlin highlights that the community of Early Music performers on TikTok, although still very small, is very diverse and uses differentiated communicative strategies. This community, as Merlin shows, is rapidly developing and oriented towards a participatory culture, affirming ethical and social values beyond the strictly musical sphere. Following this analysis, in ***"Fly Me to the Moon:" Performing Jazz on TikTok***, Benjamin Burkhart introduces us to the performative world of Jazz in TikTok. Here, Burkhart explores the most popular Jazz styles on the app while analyzing the representativeness of the musicians on the platform. Beyond this, Benjamin Burkhart shows us the influence of the app's affordances and the functioning of TikTok's algorithms on popularising particular styles or certain performers.

As a final point, in ***Similarities and Divergences Between Music Production and TikTok in The Memes Era,*** Mattia Zanotti uncovers a phenomenon that emerges in TikTok musicking, a common thread that both unifies and distinguishes modern music production and social media: the memes. Zanotti asserts that these seemingly innocuous images or videos are not just viral sensations, but are actively shaping the structure of today's

music production.   They have the power to transform the listener's experience, redirecting attention from the song's entirety to a specific segment. Simultaneously, they are evolving into foundational elements in multimedia production tailored for social networks. Zanotti delves into the parallels and disparities between music production and social media content-making. Analyzing how a song is endorsed, advertised, and shared on various platforms can provide valuable insights. Mattia Zanotti invites us to reflect on how users engage with these modalities and how platforms and researchers can effectively analyze them.

Our aim in this special issue is to open the doors to the vast performative world of TikTok. We delve into the existing musicking within this widely-used smartphone application, sparking in readers the potential for musicological research in a world where the physical and digital realms are increasingly intertwined.   This is not just an invitation to reflect, but a call to action, to consider the theoretical possibilities and implications, as well as the practical and methodological challenges, that the exploration of this type of phenomenon can bring.

Notes

1. Biz Carson, "How a Failed Education Startup Turned into Musical.ly, the Most Popular App you've Probably Never Heard of," *Business Insider India*, 28 May, 2016.

2. For a detailed analysis of the transformation of Musical.ly into TikTok see: Bondy Kaye, Xu Chen, and Jing Zeng, "The Co-Evolution of Two Chinese Mobile Short Video Apps: Parallel Platformization of Douyin and Tiktok," *Mobile Media & Communication* 9, no. 2 (2021): 229–253; Milovan Savic, "From Musical.ly to TikTok: Social Construction of 2020's Most Downloaded Short-video App," *International Journal of Communication* 15(2021): 1–21; Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikstrom, *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video* Digital Media and Society Series(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

3. Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 77–103; Crystal Abidin, *TikTok and Youth Cultures* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, forthcoming).

4. Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Trevor Boffone, ed., *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

5. Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom, *TikTok*.

6. Juan Bermúdez, "¿Qué música?   Si nadie toca…   si nadie sabe…: Reflexionando el

etnografiar de un musicking digital," *Boletín Música* 52–53 (2020): 51–60; Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances & Meanings in a Mobile Application. An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikToks Musicking" (Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2022); Juan Bermúdez, "It's All About 'Being There': Rethinking Presence and Co-presence in the Ethnographic Field during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of World Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (2023): 19–35; Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context,* New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

7. For examples of literature in relation to TikTok and music and dance see among others: Crystal Abidin and Bondy Kaye, "Audio Memes, Earworms, and Templatability: The 'Aural Turn' of Memes on TikTok," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, eds. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 58–68; Crystal Abidin and Jin Lee, "K-pop TikTok: TikTok's Expansion into South Korea, TikTok Stage, and Platformed Glocalization," *Media International Austrialia* 188, no. 1 (2023); Bermúdez, "¿Qué música?,"51–60; Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties*)"*; Juan Bermúdez,"Performing Beyond the Platform – Experiencing Musicking On and Through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram," in *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music*, eds. Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas and João Francisco Porfírio, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 187–202; Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok*; Boffone, *Renegades*; Trevor Boffone, *TikTok Broadway: Musical Theatre Fandom in the Digital Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); Bondy Kaye, "Make This Go Viral: Building Musical Careers Through Accidental Virality on Tiktok," *Flow Journal* 27, no. 1 (2020); Bondy Kaye, "Please Duet This: Collaborative Music Making in Lockdown on TikTok," *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 15, no. 1 (2022): 59–77; Bondy Kaye, "#JazzTok: Creativity, Community, and Improvisation on TikTok," *Jazz and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2023); Cande Sánchez-Omos, and Eduardo Viñuela, "The End of the Amateur Music Video Dream (as We Expected It): From YouTube to TikTok," in *Music in the Disruptive Era*, ed. David Hurwitz and Pedro Ordoñez, Music, Science and Technology, vol. 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 3–22; Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin, "Music Challenge Memes on TikTok: Understanding In-Group Storytelling Videos," *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022)*:* 883–908; Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Ignacio Aguaded, "#ThisIsMeChallenge and Music for Empowerment of Marginalized Groups on TikTok," *Media and Communication* 10, no. 1 (2022): 157–172; Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú, Patricia De-Casas-Moreno and Simona Tirocchi, "Online Prosumer Convergence: Listening, Creating and Sharing Music On Youtube And Tiktok," *Communication & Society* 36, no. 1 (2023): 151–166.

Ethnographing TikTok

Toward an E³thnomusicological Approach to a Multimedia Musicking

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Abstract: In this article, drawing on reflections of my ethnographic research on TikToks musicking, I will briefly review the ethnographic model introduced by Alan P. Merriam (1964), in order to introduce to this model the concept of E3 Internet by Christine Hine (2015) looking to understand the internet and its (musical) practices as a daily, highly embedded, and embodied experience. Understanding musicking as a multimedia practice that different actors create and experience in everyday synchronous and asynchronous, physical and digital situations. I will propose a path to an interdisciplinary musical ethnographic model for the study of multimedia and multilocal music practices.

Introduction

It all began on a day like any other. Waking up as usual in the same place as usual. The warm sunlight shines through into an ordinary living room while a little child runs around an old couch. In the middle of this infantile whirl, an old man holding a colorful story book sits down. The child sits next to his grandfather. Together they turn the pages of the book. The child smiles and points to an image, and subsequently tries to zoom it hectically by opening and closing his thumb and index finger. On the other side of the room, his parents are exchanging familiar looks and draw a smile on their faces just

before they burst out laughing. Disconcerted by the reaction, the grandfather asks in a stern tone of voice: "What is there to laugh about?" For a short moment, a slight breather, these words freeze in the air, and a second later the sound of the laughter fills the air. The child keeps on trying; this time he is upset, crying...

This is one of many personal experiences that have made me aware of the role that new technologies and media play in shaping our children's everyday lives. The child interacts with an image in a natural way. The reaction caused by his fingers on the image on the book is different from the one he expects on the basis of his experience with smartphones, showing him a different reality. Meanwhile, his grandfather, who is alien to this digital native behavior, is far from understanding the reaction of the parents. Even though we share a specific lifeworld, we perceive realities differently. In the same way, our children perceive a different reality from the one we perceive as adults, and the realities of our current ethnographical work are different from those experienced in past ethnographical work. My research about musical practices on the smartphone application TikTok, formerly known as Musical.ly, can be seen as an example of this.[1]

In a deterritorialized and digitally interconnected world,[2] a vast number of interrelations between physical and virtual multilocal and multimedia spaces have been developed and established as an inseparable part of our daily lives. This is due mainly to the rise and expansion of the internet, as well as to the development of new devices, new forms of communication, and new platforms. Younger generations, the so-called digital natives, perceive these interrelations as an extension of their own reality. We search for the closest restaurant on Google Maps while chatting with friends who could be in the same place, in Germany, in Mexico, or in any other country. We *like* pictures shared by our family or friends on Instagram, and we show our shopping tour or a concert we are at *live* via Facebook. And in the same way the use of digital media and devices transforms our daily lives, it also influences our musical practices. Musicians use social media among other things to present and market themselves. However, other actors also construct and participate in the discourses of these musical practices. As already seen with the introduction of new technologies in the past,[3] the current appropriation of digital worlds, as well as the development of new digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Spotify) and devices, has not only shaped the interaction between actors but also enabled and reinforced the adaptation and development of

(new) forms of musical practices. My first conscious contact with one of these new multimedia musical practices took place when I discovered the smartphone application Musical.ly, now TikTok.

TikTok is a smartphone application aimed at creating and sharing short videos. It was one of the most downloaded apps in 2023[4] and has a global presence, with approximately a billion users worldwide, offering an interaction space for different music and video practices. One of these practices drew my special attention as I started to get involved with this app and to conduct ethnographic research: the underlying idea of this practice is to film a video with your own cell phone camera in which you lip-sync to a previously chosen track while performing a choreography.[5]

The investigation of a deterritorialized multimedia musicking such as TikTok offers a large number of theoretical implications, while presenting practical and theoretical challenges. In a world where interactions are increasingly taking place beyond physical contact, ethnomusicologists are forced and encouraged to broaden not only their fields of activity but also their approach and techniques for adjusting to these new multimedia realities. In the following pages, I will briefly review the ethnographic model introduced by Alan P. Merriam,[6] as well as the additions made by Timothy Rice[7] and Julio Mendívil.[8] On that basis, I will continue by introducing to this model Christine Hine's concept of E3 Internet[9] in order to understand the internet and its (musical) practices as a daily, highly embedded, and embodied experience. With this, I will engage in critical reflection on the meaning of ethnographical work in the research of digital musical practices. I propose to understand musicking as a multimedia practice that different actors create and experience individually in everyday synchronous and asynchronous, physical and digital situations. I aim to develop alternative paths and points for reflexion and therefore create the foundations for an interdisciplinary musical ethnographic model for investigating multimedia and multilocal music practices.

One Model to Rule Them All …

In his book *The Anthropology of Music*,[10] Alan P. Merriam presented a model that would serve as the basis for ethnomusicological work. This model included the study of three analytic levels: *conceptualization about*

music, *behavior in relation to music*, and *music sound itself*.

> The sound has structure, and it may be a system, but it cannot exist independently of human beings; music sound must be as the product of the behavior that produces it. ... But behavior is itself underlain by a third level, the level of conceptualization about music. In order to act in a music system, the individual must first conceptualize what kind of behavior will produce the requisite sound. ... It is at this level that the values about music are found, and it is precisely these values that filter upward through the system to effect the final product.[11]

Conceptualization about music

Music sound itself ← Behavior in relation to music
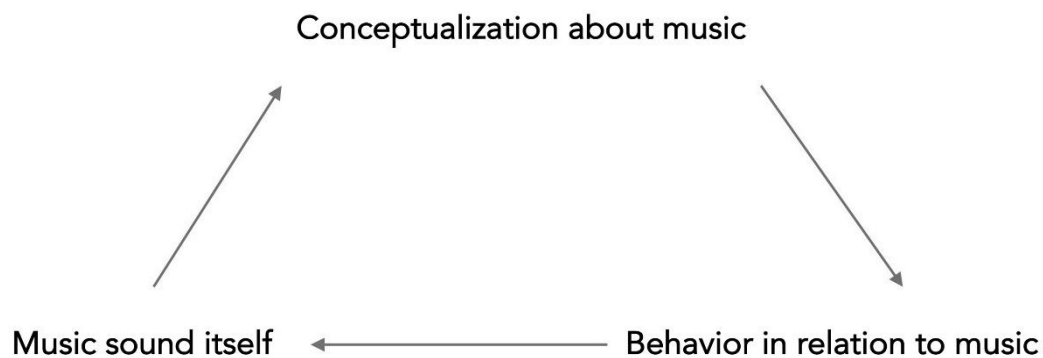
Figure 1: Merriam's model (1964), illustration by author.

In the 1980s this model was expanded by Timothy Rice, influenced by the work of Clifford Geertz.[12] Rice added a focus on individuals and their experiences in the process of making music, as well as a diachronic perspective. When music is historically constructed and its experience is conveyed to the present, its social preservation is a logical fact. Music is constructed historically by people; it is socially maintained and individually created and experienced.[13] Rice argued that

> "symbolic systems ... are historically constructed, socially maintained and individually applied" ([Geertz 1973:]363–364). ... Here was a three-part model, analogous to Merriam's that was easy to remember and that seemed to balance social, historical and individual processes and forces in ways that seemed immediately and intuitively satisfying. ... Simply put, I now believe that ethnomusicologists ... should ask and attempt to answer this deceptively simple question: how do people make music or, in its more elaborate form, how do people historically construct, socially maintain and individually create and experience music?[14]

Rice's expansion of Merriam's model conferred to it an additional dialectical level by considering the role between the creation and the experience of the

actors of different musics even more strongly.[15] This level mainly focuses on the role of musicians and the audience but not on other actors that formed part of the auditive knowledge construction and negotiation. In 2016, Julio Mendívil drew attention to this limitation and proposed the adoption of the *musicking* concept introduced by Christopher Small.[16] He explained that "such an approach allows us to analyze the historical formation of sound's structures, behaviour and concepts as a particular process in a given time and place, which involves all the actors *musicking* (not only playing and hearing, as Rice defines it)."[17]
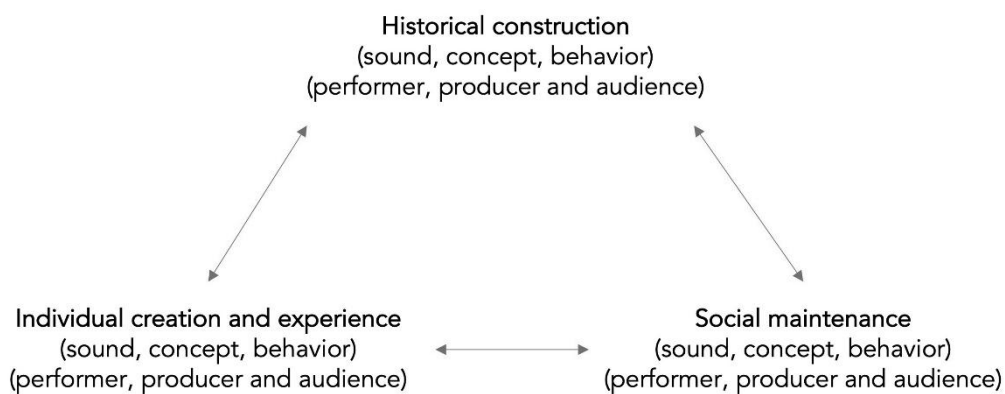
Figure 2: Merriam's model remodeled by Rice (1987) and Mendívil (2016), illustration by author.

With these two extensions, Merriam's model provided an excellent basis for the research of musical practices, especially because with this approach it was possible to avoid "getting caught up in one facet or another of music—sociology without attention to sound, analysis of performance without attention to social processes, the study of music that ignores movement, and so forth."[18] Moreover, this model made it possible to explore the dynamic interrelations between different processes of auditive knowledge and generation of musical practices, as well as the creation and experience of this knowledge through the actors in a specific space and time over a certain period of time.

However, the analysis of multimedia musical practices such as those found in TikTok requires more than a successful ethnomusicological model. Exploring these practices demands methods and approaches that allow an analogue

and virtual conceptualization beyond the dichotomy[19] and that can see digital media as practice.[20] The musicking of TikTok does not only exist digitally in the application. Like other musical traditions, TikTok musicking involves countless physical interactions between actors: schools and parks become meeting places where TikTokers come together to watch, analyze, learn, and practice different choreographies; meetups between TikTokers and their followers are developed in diverse physical contexts; and friendships and partnerships are taken beyond the platform in the physical world or vice versa; among many others. In the musicking of TikTok, the physical and the digital are not only in continuous contact, but they are an inseparable part of the daily lives of the TikTokers. Here, there are no exclusively digital practices or exclusively physical practices but rather practices in a multimedia whole intertwined in the daily lives of the performers.

For this reason, and to overcome the associated challenges, I propose to understand the internet and its (musical) practices, as postulated by Christine Hine, as an embedded, embodied, and everyday experience—the E3 internet. She emphasizes that the internet

> is embedded in various contextualizing frameworks, institutions, and devices, that the experience of using it is embodied and hence highly personal and that it is everyday, often treated as an unremarkable and mundane infrastructure rather than something that people talk about in itself unless something significant goes wrong.[21]

Through this shift to thinking in terms of the meaning of internet in the everyday lives of the actors and their musical practices, as well as the recognition of internet as an embodied experience,[22] is possible to expand Merriam's model to a new level, reflecting the realities of a deterritorialized and multimedia world. In this way, it is possible to take into account concepts, behaviors, and sounds that different actors of specific musicking (musicians/dancers, audiences, producers,[23] and other musicking actors) historically construct, socially maintain, and individually create and experience in everyday synchronous and asynchronous multimedia situations.
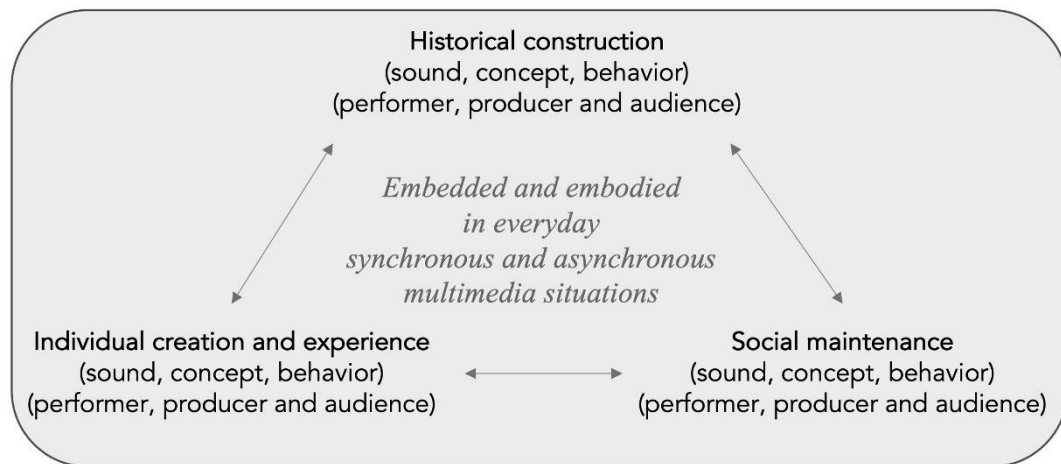
Historical construction
(sound, concept, behavior)
(performer, producer and audience)

*Embedded and embodied
in everyday
synchronous and asynchronous
multimedia situations*

Individual creation and experience
(sound, concept, behavior)
(performer, producer and audience)

Social maintenance
(sound, concept, behavior)
(performer, producer and audience)

Figure 3: E³thnography, illustration by author.

This model, which I call *E³thnography*, enhances the possibility to explore music cultures that are constructed through physical and digital interactions. Below, I will discuss a path that leads to an interdisciplinary musical ethnographic model—E³thnography—for the investigation of multimedia and multilocal music practices.

Always Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday—toward an E³thnography

E³thnography is based on the idea that the field is only constructed and negotiated once the constant multimedia interaction of physical and digital actors has taken place, and that these practices can only gain a tangible and limitable "territory" through (re)production of and immersion in the musicking being studied. This makes it necessary to focus on the knowledge and experience of the actors and our experience as researchers while constructing and acquiring knowledge and studying these practices, instead of focusing on the physical place/space[24] where these practices are possibly happening. By focusing on what actors *do* under different circumstances and contexts *with* and *in* digital media, we can discover and observe the practices taking place in an asynchronous multimedia environment and thus exemplify the interrelations produced by the field and its multimedia locations.

Musicking as Multimedia Practice

To explore mediatized musical practices such as those found in TikTok, it is crucial to understand digital and analogue media as practices that are created, negotiated, and experienced in everyday multimedia situations and contexts in a synchronous or asynchronous way. We need to focus on what people are actively doing *with* and *in* a mediatized environment and thus go beyond a discourse that sees media exclusively as a channel of communication or representation used by physical actors. I discard a discourse that ignores the active participation and discussion of living people who physically interact behind these multimedia interactions, and who also experience the multisensorial virtuality of this apparently passive practice while acting actively.

Although one can be in favor of the idea of multilocality in musical practices, assuming that a prevalent physical interaction exists in these practices can become a "problem" for research of music traditions with multilocal physical and virtual spaces of interaction, such as TikTok. The problem is that we often still tend to think of the ethnographic field in the way that Malinowski experienced and conceived it, namely, as consisting

> mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages. It is very nice to have a base in a white man's compound for stores, and to know there is a refuge there in times of sickness and surfeit of native. But it must be far enough away not to become a permanent milieu in which you live and from which you emerge at fixed hours only to <do the village>. It should not even be near enough to fly to at any moment for recreation. … And by means of this natural intercourse, you learn to know him, and you become familiar with his customs and beliefs far better than when he is a paid, and often bored, informant.[25]

However, many of our contemporary musical practices show us a reality very different from the one that originated this ideal.[26] Clear examples of this phenomenon can be found in the research by Julio Mendívil on German Schlager music, Alejandro L. Madrid on Nor-Tec Collective, Katherine Meizel on *American Idol*, or Noriko Manabe on protest music in Fukushima.[27] The locality of many of these practices either is not clearly physical or only exists as an abstract and imagined construct.[28] Additionally, many of these practices do not need physical contact among actors to retain the mechanisms of production and the experience of its auditive knowledge.[29] In other cases, as

Peter Wicke has noticed, these practices barely experience a specific location in the moment of its reception,[30] processes that have made the synchronous experience of physical performance unnecessary for actors. For example, a TikTok video performed in Austria on a summer day may be watched and commented on by someone in Brazil several months later. Perhaps at the same time, someone may be analyzing this same video and using it for musical learning ("learning to TikTok"[31]) in a park in Spain, while another person may be doing a duet with it and creating a new trend in Italy. This situation shows that the practices that form the musicking of TikTok cannot always be clearly delimited in a concrete physical geography or in a specific temporal space.

On the other hand, just as the synchronous experience of a performance seems to be superfluous in some musical practices, its synchronous sound production may also be superfluous. As in the case of TikTok mentioned above, sound may be created, processed, and experienced autonomously at different times and in different spaces. Practices such as DJing, remixing, mashups, or karaoke process and treat asynchronously prefabricated auditive products during performances.[32] Practices like air guitar or lip-syncing require an additional performance as an existing auditive product that is complemented by a mimic performance. Practices based on joint performances of a rock concert where musicians connected via internet use plastic guitars, as in the case of *Guitar Hero*, show a different understanding of what it means to make music.[33] In this sense, the musicking of TikTok is no exception. While we can find musical performances in a "classic" sense, in TikTok's musicking there are also duets, challenges, and other types of performances that show us different types of networked creativity and that go beyond a traditional vision of what "making music" is, using the technical possibilities of the application to expand and/or create new forms of musical performance.

Although the role of digital media in musical practices is considered to be a widely studied topic, studies that see new musicking practices primarily taking place in digital spaces as music of the same value are rare exceptions in the ethnomusicological discourse.[34] This leads in academic practice to a discourse in which digital media is viewed solely as a channel of communication or representation for physical actors, and the multimedia interactions and resulting auditory knowledge construction and exchange between their cultural cohorts are relegated to a marginal position. This creates the

impression that we perform in physical spaces, whereas we only "pretend" in digital spaces. This implies the need to view the paradigm of digital media "not as a text or production economy, but first and foremost as practice."[35]

Hence, as a result of the preference for a strict dichotomous separation of reality and virtuality, we construct a discourse that does not perceive digital media as part of a knowledge practice but rather more as a passive representational practice. Under this paradigm, we risk reducing the experience of the users in digital media to simply obtaining information from the web. By doing so, we exclude the active creation and interaction processes of the actors that are physically acting behind these multimedia interactions and that experience the virtuality of this apparently passive practice with all senses while discussing actively, a trend that may lead to a new kind of armchair ethnomusicology.

A different approach to the relation between reality and virtuality can be found in scholastic philosophy: "In scholastic philosophy 'actual' and 'virtual' exist in a dialectical relation rather than in one of radical opposition: the virtual is not that which is deprived of existence, but that which possesses the potential, or force of developing into actual existence."[36] On the basis of reflections about the difference between the possible and the virtual by Gilles Deleuze,[37] Pierre Lévy invites us to think the virtual not as something false or illusionary but as "a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation."[38]

> The virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization. ... Actualization thus appears as the solution to a problem, a solution not previously contained in its formulation. ... It implies the production of new qualities, a transformation of ideas, a true becoming that feeds the virtual in turn.[39]

That said, the virtual is not something lacking actual reality but rather a way of being that produces "a change of identity"[40] through a practice of actualization. By understanding real and virtual in this way, we can observe that actual multimedia practices—imagined as a phantasmagorical reality—are experienced through a dialectic process of virtualization and actualization. The abstraction of space-time brought on by modernity[41] transformed "a specific and circumscribed activity into a delocalized, desynchronized, and collectivized functioning"[42] and therefore kept virtualizing our relations between humans and non-humans, turning

them into phantasmagorical relations. The practices and interpersonal relationships in the musicking of TikTok do not take place in a concise physical space and time but are developed in diverse places and times. As seen in the previous example, TikTok practices can be performed synchronously or asynchronously, at a specific physical location or throughout a global network of creativity facilitated by connection infrastructures. Conversely, practices that allow the articulation, negotiation, and configuration of our cultural cohorts, as well as the processes of inhabiting our *social spaces*,[43] are the ones that let us translate this phantasmagorical reality into actual reality. Practices such as meetups, in which TikTokers meet physically, allow them to relocate and embody the phantasmagorical practices of this musicking by turning them into an actual embodied reality, creating these strong bonds of reciprocity and belonging.

If we are indeed living in a world where the virtual and real are interlaced, then that is also the case for the way in which we relate with the world (being-in-the-world), and therefore our way of inhabiting and (re)creating it. "The virtualization of the body is therefore not a form of disembodiment but a re-creation, a reincarnation, a multiplication, vectorization, and heterogenesis of the human."[44] Following this logic, Marie-Laure Ryan accurately illustrates that

> the difference between "being in space," like things, and "inhabiting" or "haunting space," like the embodied consciousness, is a matter of both mobility and virtuality. Whereas inert objects, entirely contained in their material bodies, are bound to a fixed location, consciousness can occupy multiple points and points of view, either through the actual movements of its corporeal support or by projecting itself into virtual bodies. ... When my actual body cannot walk around an object or grab and lift it, it is the knowledge that my virtual body could do so that gives me a sense of the object's shape, volume, and materiality. Whether actual or virtual, objects are thus present to me because my actual or virtual body can interact with them.[45]

By considering our body—either virtual or physical—as an entity that finds itself in constant movement through space and time, rather than as a static entity anchored to a physical location, we can gain a better understanding of the way in which we inhabit our space through the constant multimedia interaction created by different physical and digital actors scattered throughout different spaces on the globe. It is through the practices that our embodied consciousness performs that we give meaning to our world. It is through practice that we shape communities and social

spaces. In the same way that we walk, think, talk, or play an instrument, using digital means is a practice that allows us to make sense of the world in which we live. Although TikTokers are not always physically next to each other when performing their musicking, their embodied consciousness is co-present[46] and interacts with other performers to perform their musical practices together. When TikTokers perform duets with other TikTokers (either synchronously and physically or synchronously and digitally), when they interact by commenting, stitching, or "liking" a TikTok, when they analyze a choreography and practice it in a park with other friends, and so on, what we are observing is not just a simple representational practice but a multimedia relationship and practice between embodied consciousnesses. Musicking in TikTok is not just about representing a physical reality. It is a practice that is experienced through our embodied consciousness together with a phantasmagorical multimedia reality with the purpose of inhabiting and making sense of it, turning it into actual reality as its practices are carried. As Tim Ingold puts it, "we do not have to think the world in order to live in it, but we *do* have to live in the world in order to think it."[47]

In this sense, the performance of locality can be seen as part of this inhabiting process (see Aguilera in this Issue). An example of this can be observed in the performances that TikTokers make out of *Oachkatzlschwoaf*[48] from @martyaustria. In this example, locality is on the one hand thematized directly through the text: "*Oachkatzlschwoaf, jeder Österreicher kennt den Oachkatzlschwoaf*" [squirrel's tail, every Austrian knows the squirrel's tail]. On the other hand, it is thematized through the dialect used in the song: *Oachkatzlschwoaf* refers to "squirrel's tail" in Austrian German. What is particularly interesting here is not the word itself but the use and importance that this word has received in Austria to indicate a particular sense of *true* belonging. According to the generalized discourse, only *true* Austrians can *correctly* say *Oachkatzlschwoaf*, and therefore *Oachkatzlschwoaf* is used as a symbol for *true* Austrian identity.[49] This idea is reinforced by the *Oachkatzlschwoaf* text, which lends a particular sentimental and erotic value to this emic knowledge: "*Jeden tåg und jede nåcht måchst du mi richtig schoaf weil du sågst Oachkatzlschwoaf*" [Every day and every night you turn me on (this could be also understood as "you make me horny") because you say squirrel's tail]. In this example, it is not necessary to use the text fragment in which the TikToker is an *Österreicher* [Austrian] to position oneself as such. Rather, TikTokers can adopt an emic position just by understanding what this

dialect, or specifically, this word, implies: *Österreicher* are the only ones able to correctly say (and thematize) *Oachkatzlschwoaf*. Through these performances, TikTokers create and negotiate a sense of community by positioning their own physical locality through the presentation of a physical place and thematizing this locality. In this way, they make sense of the phantasmagoric reality of TikTok. Thus, the musicking of TikTok becomes a multimedia practice that is not exclusively experienced in a global and digital way but is strongly entwined with the realities and facework commitments of TikTokers.

When the interrelation between real and virtual consists of a dialectical relation rather than a dichotomic contradiction, our musical practices—which take place mainly in digital spaces—also experience a similar interrelation between experienced realities and potential or imagined realities.   The interaction and interrelation between the actors of these musical practices also take place in a dynamic flow between physical and digital worlds. A "non-media-centric approach"—-the focus on what actors do under different circumstances and contexts with and in digital media—is necessary because of "the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other."[50]

Musicking as Individual Experience

Second, an e[3]thnographic approach requires a strong focus on individuals and their experiences as individuals or within the group in the process of making music. Yet the focus should also lie on the performative creation of individual musical personae and on the discussion of cultural behaviors related to them. Following Mark Slobin's idea that "we are all individual music cultures,"[51] I agree with Rice when he speaks about "subject-centered musical ethnography."[52] That said, I propose an e[3]thographic approach in which the individual and the physical and digital personae related to them represent the access and central point of research. As a result of the focus on people who create and experience the auditory knowledge of a musical practice, is it possible to find and observe the dialectical interplays that occur as part of the implementation of musical practices in the interaction spaces beyond the physical world.

Following the logic of Appadurai's idea that "the configuration of cultural forms in today's world [is] fundamentally fractal,"[53] we can then say that the actors of what Kenny would refer to as communities of musical practice[54]

should also be understood as "fractal." While our physical body is difficult to understand and to practice as fractal, our *self* can easily be conceptualized and practiced as such. Following Turino's proposal to understand our self "as comprising a body plus the total sets of habits specific to an individual" and our identity as "the partial selection of habits and attributes used to represent oneself to oneself and to others by oneself and by others," we can then understand cultural practices "as the habits of thought and practice that are shared among individuals."[55]

Considering cultural practices as "habits of thought and practice" that are developed, experienced, negotiated, and shared among people allows us to understand that these cultural practices cannot be reduced to a single homogeneous culture within a particular society. If we consider that "individuals develop habits from their personal experience," a homogeneous culture would mean that all members of a certain society have "similar experiences and [are] in similar social positions and circumstances in relation to the environment,"[56] a situation that could not be sustained in our contemporary world. Moreover, this way of conceptualizing the self and our identity allows us to conceptualize the actors of our musicking as fractal actors. This allows us to understand the physical body not as a unique and inseparable object but rather as a container space and the starting point for an intertwining of multiple virtual identities, thus dissociating it from its intrinsic relationship with physical geography. This in turn allows us not just to think in more dynamic cultural configurations but also to create configurations—musical geographies—in a much more fractal sense, which can overlap or be superimposed by other cohorts through online, offline, and mixed spaces.[57] Additionally, the idea of habit allows us to think of those configurations as "grounded not in ideas, but in *everyday action*, that is, in *practice*: the reality in which we as human beings act and that we articulate by our interaction,"[58] which enables us to focus more easily in the existing dynamic processes of negotiation and articulation in musical practices.[59]

In a non-media-centric approach that perceives the interrelation of different media processes and our everyday lives beyond the real/virtual or digital/analogue dichotomy, interacting actors of these practices and their multimedia interrelations assume a significant role in the generation of ethnomusicological knowledge. The actors do not interact only in physical settings but also in digital or virtual interaction spaces. Just as interactions can take place in spaces beyond the real/virtual dichotomy, interactions are

not tied to a physical body but much more to the varied characteristics of the actors' identities.

For multimedia musical practice research, the focus on a physical and synchronous interaction between actors represents the construction of a unilateral interaction picture that regards digital media as a passive representation practice and does not perceive it as a practice that generates knowledge. Contrary to this, the focus on the "*partial* selection of habits and attributes used to represent oneself to others by oneself and by others"[60] enables a better understanding of multiple existing and potential identities of the performers beyond their physical bodies. The interaction of these multiple identities of the actors encourages the development of specific performative identities, which may lead to the creation of a musical persona.[61] These musical personae make up a recognizable cultural construct beyond the concept of body in the form of an individual. In multimedia musical practices like TikTok, it is possible to observe a similar phenomenon: the performers, so-called TikTokers, try to construct a recognizable musical persona through their performances, so-called TikTok(s).

Similar to musical personae as defined by Auslander,[62] TikTok personae exist in different scenes and (digital) media, and not only in their usual environment or scene. This means that TikTok personae also perform outside TikTok's environment, and they can be experienced in these other environments too.[63] A TikToker, for example, publishes a TikTok and then shares it as a reel on her Instagram account. On this same platform, the TikToker announces a meetup in a shopping mall through a story and writes a post announcing the release of her new video clip on YouTube and inviting her followers to go to her concert. The interesting thing is that multimedia practices like TikTok are not only global and deterritorialized phenomena but are strongly connected with local realities. The actors interact in a dynamic flow between physical and digital worlds woven into one.

I was able to observe an example of this type of multimedia interaction one day on my way home: Four youngsters were sitting around a table on the train; a smartphone was lying on the table. I observed a typical practice of TikTok musicking: just as in my own experience, these youngsters were watching a performance, but unlike me, they were watching it as a group. After a short time, these young people started to analyze the performance, imitate the sequences, and criticize its aesthetic properties. They played the

same musical TikToks repeatedly and correlated them with other versions elsewhere on the platform, as well as on YouTube. Then they started to explore different possibilities of making individual or group versions of the same TikTok, a discussion that would end thanks to a WhatsApp message from "Julia" from school saying that it would be better if they met the next day to do a duet after class. This story shows that the interactions and interrelations of TikTok musicking do not just occur through the TikTok app but also on and among other digital platforms and out in the physical world.

It is interesting to observe that the use and experience of digital social media or of smartphone applications is a very intimate practice, although they may represent a public practice due to their deterritorialized and asynchronous access possibilities. The creation and experience of a TikTok persona in a multimedia environment, like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram, facilitates a co-presence between the TikTok persona and its audience or followers. The interaction of these actors does not require a physical presence to create a sense of closeness. Even though users are separated by thousands of kilometers, they interact with a certain persona as if they were physically present and as if they were not only a digital representation of the real world.

The creation and experience of a TikTok persona within a multimedia environment facilitates an increasing co-presence between the TikTok personae being perceived and their audience. This creates a certain *public intimacy*[64] that suppresses the increasing deterritorialized and multimedia condition of interactions and interrelations of digital practices, a process that enables a performative construction and maintains a musical world, although it is not tangible. However, this co-presence is intensified by the inclusion of local realities in multimedia environments, as well as by a conscious and more physical togetherness. Important in this context are the spontaneous or organized gatherings of TikTokers and their audience, which aim, aside from economic aspects, at constructing a more intensive embodied integration between the actors, which I refer to as *empathic co-presence*.[65] In many cases this connection is protected by public intimacy, which awakens and influences the behavior of the users through physical movements—for example moving the cell phone towards the body or protecting the screen from being viewed by third persons. In other cases, these synchronous or asynchronous encounters are either shared or commented on physically or digitally.

Musical Geographies through Practice

Third, I propose to devise a reconceptualization for our field and a new approach[66] due to the deterritorialization and multimedia reality of these musical practices. Since there is no pre-existing space to step into in these practices, and in our field it is only possible to construct and interact through the continuous multimedia interaction of physical and digital actors or personae, we need to increasingly focus on (1) interactions continuously created and experienced by the actors of this musicking; (2) the interrelations built, discussed, and experienced by the actors of this musicking throughout time; and (3) the processes that enable the creation, discussion, and experience of personal and public multimedia locations.

Although deterritorialized music practices take place through complex distribution processes in completely different spaces scattered over the world, the creation and exchange of certain auditory knowledge, as well as several interactions between actors, occur in virtual and physical "local" situations.[67] Additionally, Christine Hine points out that the internet "is embedded in various contextualizing frameworks, institutions, and devices, that the experience of using it is embodied and hence highly personal and that it is everyday,"[68] for which its practices find themselves influenced by these contexts and infrastructures. For that, it is important to first keep in mind that the articulation, negotiation, and maintenance of musical (and non-musical) practices developed through the internet find themselves embedded not just on devices but also in local contexts and infrastructures.

Although the musical geography of TikTok can be inhabited along multimedia spaces scattered around the world, the practices that are developed by its actors are strongly framed and influenced by at least three aspects[69] that cannot be separated from their physical location: (1) device embodiment; (2) connection infrastructures; and (3) national laws and regulations.

Device embodiment: Just like traditional musical practices, musical practices developed in multimedia environments need physical devices for their realization. In TikTok, these are predominantly smartphones. Although the use of computers, smart TVs, and/or other portable devices is possible, they are used much less frequently. In the same way as with musical instruments, these tools generate a new embodied relation that performers must acquire and maintain to effectively and satisfactorily perform their musicking. This embodied relation directly influences the way in which TikTok musicking is

developed. On the one hand, the embodiment generated by interacting with the device determines the way in which certain practices may or may not be developed. On the other hand, this interaction with the devices allows the creation of embodiment in the relationships between actors, thus helping the creation of an embodied sense of locality and community in this musical practice.

Connection infrastructure: Many of the practices developed in TikTok's musicking, like see, record, share TikToks, and so on, require an internet connection. This might seem trivial, but access to the necessary infrastructure nonetheless has a great influence on the way in which musicking is articulated and negotiated between actors, as well as on how important these practices are. For example, although theoretically anyone can partake in TikTok's musicking, it may make a great difference whether one observes this from an Austrian context or a Cuban one. Such aspects must be further contemplated in relation to what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejías call *data colonialism*.[70]

Another related aspect is the cost of the service itself. Similarly to problems regarding access, service costs have a great influence on our musicking practices. The way we use different digital platforms that are connected to the internet would not be the same if they meant a lower or higher economic cost to us. This situation leads us to give different meanings and importance to these practices. One example would be the difference in use and importance that I have personally observed in the use of WhatsApp in Mexico and Austria. In Mexico, for example, WhatsApp has become a "replacement" for telephony (e.g., many businesses do not have a phone number but a WhatsApp account) due to the high cost of mobile phone service, because the use of WhatsApp is much cheaper than a call or a text message. In Austria, due to the low cost of mobile telephony, WhatsApp is just another application among many others, and it has not "replaced" mobile telephony. This idea of connection can also be extended to the specific needs of each device, for example regarding battery performance and how it gives rise to specific behaviors.

National laws and regulations: A particularly influential aspect that cannot be completely separated from the physical location of the actors is the fact that actors find themselves framed under the conditioning of national laws and regulations. Clear examples of this influence are whether the platforms are permitted or not or whether they have certain features or not, but also how the users are bound (or are not bound) to specific norms, such as the

requirement of tagging a post as "publicity" when explicitly mentioning a brand. In other cases, we can observe direct interventions by authorities in musicking development, such as the potential ban of TikTok in the United States and other countries or the "Kulikitaka-Challenge," in which users frightened cows, leading to its removal from Austrian TikTok on July 7, 2020, after a public call made by Austrian Federal Minister Elisabeth Köstinger.

Understanding that TikTok's musicking is embedded in the previously mentioned embodiments, infrastructures, laws, and regulations allows us to see some of the mechanisms and processes that set up a local frame of action for the practice of phenomena that are considered global. This also helps us to understand the dialectical interplay between macro (global) and micro (local) processes of knowledge construction.[71] On this basis, we can then examine and discuss the different strategies used by the actors of TikTok's musicking to inhabit, transform, and make sense of the musical geography of TikTok, in my case from the Austrian context.

Similarly to usual interpersonal interactions, the interrelation of the actors involved in multimedia music practices is influenced and determined by the forms of interaction between the participants and also by the discourses, times, objectives, and so on. The kind of interaction between the actors depends on circumstances, contexts, and positions of their analogue/digital interrelation. In the case of my exploration of TikTok's musicking, these multimedia observations result in encounters and interactions, as expected, but surprisingly also in other interrelations and interactions that would have been difficult or impossible to observe with a media-centered approach.

Conclusion

I am convinced that ethnographic thinking, especially Merriam's model,[72] forms an excellent basis for the exploration and research of any music culture of the world from a culture-relativistic perspective. This assumption has been shared by many music scholars and researchers and made evident from their observations, ideas, discussions, and reflections in different contexts. The further development of Merriam's model by Timothy Rice[73] and Julio Mendívil[74] has enhanced the way in which the realities of turn-of-the-century musical worlds have been included in the model. My current suggestions intend to bring this model closer to the realities of musical worlds experienced

by a new generation.

With the rise and expansion of the internet and all the resulting developments, new devices, communication forms, and platforms, numerous interrelations between physical and virtual multilocal and multimedia spaces experienced a huge transformation, allowing new generations (digital natives) to perceive many of these multimedia interrelations and spaces as an expansion of their own reality. Many of our contemporary musical practices do not possess a clear physical location or only exist as an abstract imaginary construct, while others create at the same time an understanding for other forms of making music by creating, processing, and experiencing sounds in different times and spaces and independently of each other.

In combination with approaches like Christine Hine's[75] and a research paradigm that does not see digital media as a passive channel of representation or an economic product but rather as a practice, Merriam's model receives the support and opportunities needed to overcome the challenges posed by contemporary music practices. An E^{3}thnography makes it possible to observe and experience how concepts, behaviors, and sounds are historically constructed by the actors of a certain musicking in different contexts, how they are socially maintained, and how they are individually created and experienced in everyday life in synchronous or asynchronous multimedia situations.

Notes

1. Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances & Meanings in a Mobile Application: An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikToks Musicking" (Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2022); Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context*, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025).

2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Public Worlds 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

3. Alfred Smudits, *Mediamorphosen des Kulturschaffens: Kunst und Kommunikationstechnologien im Wandel*, Musik und Gesellschaft 27 (Vienna: Braumüller, 2002).

4. Sensor Tower, https://sensortower.com/; all links accessed January 16, 2025.

5. For further information regarding TikTok: Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Trevor Boffone, ed.,

TikTok Cultures in the United States, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2022); Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikstrom, eds., *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022); Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok.*

6. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

7. Timothy Rice, "Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology," *Ethnomusicology* 31, no. 3 (1987): 469–88; Timothy Rice, "Time, Place, and Metaphor in Musical Experience and Ethnography," *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 2 (2003): 151–79.

8. Julio Mendívil, "The Battle of Evermore: Music as a Never-Ending Struggle for the Construction of Meaning," in *World Music Studies*, ed. Regine Allgayer-Kaufmann (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016), 67–91.

9. Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

10. Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*.

11. Ibid., 32–33.

12. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Harper Torchbooks 5043 (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

13. Rice, "Remodeling of Ethnomusicology," 469–88.

14. Ibid., 473.

15. Alan P. Merriam recognized the dynamism of musical practices, as well as the dialectical play between the creation and experience of the actors in his model. However, this dialectical level does not play a crucial role as in the expanded model by Timothy Rice.

16. Christopher Small defines musicking as "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing." Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998)*,* 9.

17. Mendívil, "Battle of Evermore," 73.

18. Anthony Seeger, "Lost Lineages and Neglected Peers: Ethnomusicologists outside Academia," *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 2 (2006): 229.

19. See, among others, George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117.

20. Nick Couldry, "Theorising Media as Practice," in *Theorising Media and Practice*, ed. Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill, Anthropology of Media 4 (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 35–54.

21. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*, 32.

22. It is important to emphasize that the experience is influenced and determined by forms, discourses, times, objectives, etc., and by the interactions between the human and non-human actors.

23. Here we can also talk about *produsers*. See Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, And Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, Digital formations 45 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

24. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115–30.

25. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1922), 6–7.

26. Sara Cohen, "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music* 2 (1993): 123–38.

27. Julio Mendívil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat: Ethnologische Beobachtungen zum deutschen Schlager*, Studien zur Popularmusik (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2008); Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nort-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music From Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

28. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

29. Mendívil, *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat.*

30. Peter Wicke, *Von Mozart zu Madonna: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Popmusik*, Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch 3293 (Baden: Suhrkamp, 2001), 25.

31. Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties)"; Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok.*

32. See Kevin Brown, *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015); and Rubén López Cano, *Música Dispersa: Apropiación, influencias, robos y remix en la era de la escucha digital* (Barcelona: Musikeon Books, 2018).

33. See Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, Oxford Music/Media Series (New York: Oxford University, 2012).

34. See René Lysloff, "Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (2003): 233–63; Miller, *Playing Along*; Boffone, *Renegades*; and Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok.*

35. Couldry, "Theorising media as practice," 35.

36. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Text," in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 88.

37. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul R. Patton, Bloomsbury Revelations (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

38. Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 16.

39. Ibid., 24–25.

40. Ibid., 44.

41. See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

42. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual,* 44.

43. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

44. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual,* 44.

45. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 54.

46. See Juan Bermúdez, "It's All About 'Being There': Rethinking Presence and Co-presence in the Ethnographic Field during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of World Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (2023): 19-35.

47. Tim Ingold, "Human Worlds are Culturally Constructed: Against the Motion (1)," in *Key Debates in Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 2005), 97.

48. MartyAustria (@martyaustria), "Oachkatzlschwoaf official," TikTok.

49. These statements are based on my own experiences and confrontations with these aspects of *authenticity* and belonging after more than fourteen years living and researching in Austria.

50. David Morley, *Media, Modernity and Technology: The Geography of the New* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 20. See also Shaun Moores, *Digital Orientations: Non-Media-Centric Media Studies and Non-Representational Theories of Practice*, Digital formations 101 (New York: Peter Lang, 2018).

51. Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), ix.

52. Rice, "Time, Place, and Metaphor," 151–79. See also Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137–62.

53. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 46.

54. Ailbhe Kenny, *Communities of Musical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

55. Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 95.

56. Ibid., 110.

57. See Bermúdez, "It's All About," 19-35.

58. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 21.

59. See Juan Bermúdez et al., „Von Klang(-)Wissen und anderen Fischen. Auditive Wissenskulturen von Konzertfach- und Musikologiestudierenden im Vergleich," in *Auditive Wissenskulturen: Das Wissen klanglicher Praxis*, ed. Bernd Brabec de Mori and Martin Winter (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 286–88.

60. Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 95.

61. See Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 102–4.

62. Ibid., 100–119; and Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

63. Juan Bermúdez, "Performing Beyond the Platform: Experiencing Musicking On and Through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram," in *Remediating Sound: Repeatable 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.

64. Sarah Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2016).

65. I understand the concept of "empathic co-presence" as the affective and highly bodily association created after the conscious re-embedding in a physical and synchronous space, a participation and interaction previously experienced as multimedia and asynchronous by the actors in the context of a musicking. Bermúdez, "It's All About," 29.

66. The need for theoretical-methodological thinking that reflects the multimedia realities of the cultural practices in ethnographic work has been long discussed in different academic disciplines. To learn more about these different perspectives, see, e.g., George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117; Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*; Robert Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015); Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography*; Urte Frömming et al., eds., *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*, Media Studies (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017); Anna Pertierra, *Media Anthropology for the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, *Digital Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020).; Juan Bermúdez, "¿Qué música? Si nadie toca… si nadie sabe…: Reflexionando el etnografiar de un musicking digital," *Boletín Música* 52–53 (2020): 51-60; and Liz Przybylski, *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and in Between*, Qualitative Research Methods 58 (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2021).

67. Andreas Hepp, *Deep Mediatization*, Key Ideas in Media and Cultural Studies (London: Routledge, 2020).

68. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*, 32.

69. It should be clear that there are, without a doubt, many other aspects that are influenced by the physical location of the actors; among them various aesthetic-cultural aspects of their

own performances (sign system, aesthetics, etc.) and/or digital intersectionalities of the performers (gender, class, race, digital literacy, etc.). However, these aspects can only be treated in specific performative cases and moments. Therefore, they are not addressed in conjunction with the aspects discussed in this article.

70. Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejías, *The Cost of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*, Culture and Economic Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 83–112.

71. Bermúdez et al., "Von Klang(-)Wissen," 286–88.

72. Merriam, *Anthropology of Music*.

73. Rice, "Remodeling of Ethnomusicology."

74. Mendívil, "Battle of Evermore," 67–91.

75. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*.

#TikTokActivism: Music and Sounds in Political Content

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Abstract: TikTok has seen increasing numbers of users since its rebranding in 2018. Most known for memes, lip-sync, and dance videos, it is also a platform on which political struggles and activist movements are articulated through music and artistic performances. This article analyzes activist TikToks and the use of music and sounds in them. Our findings are based on two ethnographic studies conducted in the summer of 2021, a video analysis of activist TikToks, and our experiences as consumers on the platform. Hence, this essay delves into the question of the role songs and sounds play in activist content. In the data collection, the creators interviewed stated that the axis of their content is the activist or political message they want to convey. In this sense, music is integral to enabling the processes of creation, communication, and further reproduction of the content. For the creators, it assumes a supplementary role rather than being at the core. For this research, we work to integrate the results of these interviews and the findings obtained in the field with concepts such as performativity (Judith Butler and Alejandro Madrid), musical marks (Mark Cobussen), and iterability (Jacques Derrida), in addition to an ethnomusicological and music-sociological understanding (Thomas Turino, Julio Mendívil, and Tia DeNora). In this article we argue for both a "performatic" and a performative approach to the analysis, characterizing sounds and songs as musical marks with an iterable quality. We explore the link of these musical marks to corporeality in the articulation of the political message, the influence of this dynamic on performativity, and the processes that take place in the transmission and the further reproduction of the content. Through this performative approach, we understand music as a means to analyze social and cultural processes and the musical mark as an essential element that has the capacity to navigate different contexts without acquiring a fixed meaning. This mark can be quoted, altered, and recontextualized, and it is because of this iterable character that it stimulates and enables forms of communication and reproduction of the activist message.

Introduction

Black TikTokers went on strike in June 2021 in response to *white* social media stars who repeatedly used their content and trending choreographies without acknowledging their authorship. For example, they refused to create dance choreographies to Megan Thee Stallions's song "Thot Shit"[1] and instead created content to address this matter and express their outrage. @theericklouis's (he/him) video is a case in point. The text superimposed on the image reads "I did a dance to this song!" followed by "sike. This app would be nothing without the blk [black] people [crying emoji]," while he moves his middle fingers rhythmically to the beat.[2] This video illustrates the interplay between music, embodiment, and activist message, thus depicting the key aspects of this article. Therefore, the purpose is to analyze political TikToks that use music or sounds to convey their political message.[3] Focusing, on the one hand, on the use of the creators' bodies, the voices and the specific functions of the app and, on the other hand, on the way their content is perceived by the viewers, we discuss the role of music in activist TikToks. We identified a clear distinction between two main functions of music in the context of activist TikToks: music as a means of conveying political messages and music as representation. The former refers to the strategic use of music as a powerful tool to engage a wider audience and spread the desired message on the platform. The latter delves into the discursive aspects intrinsic to the incorporation of music and sounds, exploring their impact on the articulation of political struggles and the establishment and reinforcement of collective identities within such content (see Aguilera, and Schrott in this Issue).[4]

We combine an ethnographic approach highlighting the motivations of creators using music within their content with an analysis of political TikToks with music. We begin with an overview of theories about political activism taking place on social media and TikTok itself[5] and then delve into ideas

about performativity and iterability[6] to gain an understanding of music and examine its role in activist TikToks. We seek to bridge these theoretical ideas with examples of activist videos from @findusmachtrandale (they/them), @shinanove (no pronouns listed), @notoriouscree (no pronouns listed), and @qhalinchapuriskiri (no pronouns listed). The videos are all assigned to different political topics and their actors on TikTok we observed during our initial research in summer 2021. We selected the videos on the basis of their use of music and sounds as well as their level of popularity in terms of a higher number of views and/or likes in comparison to other activist content.

TikTok and Activism

The academic field is actively engaged in researching activism and social media. The first studies on the topic dealt with the benefits and advantages of social media in offline activism,[7] while more recent studies examine social media as a space where activism itself takes place. They examine, for example, a "playful" approach to political issues[8] or individual political struggles and their specific expressions in activist videos.[9] We draw on these perspectives on the activism-platform interplay and the processes involved in determining the role of music in this interaction.

In his 2012 book *Tweets and the Street: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Paolo Gerbaudo describes the new role of social media platforms in various forms of activism and political movements. Gerbaudo stresses that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube can be used to mobilize street protests and demonstrations.[10] The development of Web 2.0 enabled activists to participate actively and in a self-determined manner on the platforms. In spreading one's own videos, photos, reports, and memes about a particular type of activism, social media is not just an additional space to organize protests but rather influences the appearance of the activism itself.[11] According to Maik Fielitz and Daniel Staemmler, this co-creation affects the manifestations of activisms that occur exclusively on platforms.[12] This means that political content is discussed and dealt with in so-called "digital communication spaces" (digitale Kommunikationsräume).[13] Therefore, activism and social media have an impact on each other that causes social movements to change.[14]

Like every social media platform,[15] TikTok has its specific characteristics,

which fosters diverse manifestations of activism. TikTok is currently one of the most popular social media platforms, and the number of users has been growing steadily since 2018.[16] The app tries to create an image that is "funny" and "normal" with its ease of use and the higher probability for videos to go viral, thus distinguishing itself from other platforms, like Instagram or Facebook.[17] Therefore, its thematic algorithm becomes a central element. Videos are sorted on the basis of their content and suggested to individual users on their For You pages.[18] This results in a higher potential for videos to go viral, even if the creators only have a few followers.[19] Consequently, interaction is another criterion for TikToks to become viral. For this purpose, there are various functions on TikTok, such as duets, stitches, or replies to comments, allowing one's own content to actively circulate on the platform.[20] For example, stitches can be used to comment on a video, or duets can be used by a creator to react to the first video, as interviewees stated. These functions show on a technical level that adaptability, citation, and fluidity are of great importance for TikToks. Distribution, further development of content, and circulation are also part of the characteristic appearance of the fast-paced app.

Laura Cervi and Tom Divon explain that artful play with sound and TikTok trends exemplify the characteristics of TikTok. They describe that "users choose how to shape their self-made videos using various functions" of the application.[21] This new contextualization of visual, sonic, and embodied elements allows activist creators to add their own stories and political demands and create new content.[22] To create new content, users repeat, modify, and adapt previously seen content. Bojana S. Radovanović explains in their article "TikTok and Sound" how sound can be used and edited in different ways, such as in tempo or pitch.[23] Modification and adaptability of sound and TikTok trends are therefore important aspects of the active co-creation by the audience and the circulation of content typical of TikTok.[24] Similarly, Samantha Hautea, Perry Parks, Bruno Takahashi, and Jing Zeng, among others, emphasize this centrality of sound and music in TikToks and the important connection between audible and visible elements of "successful" TikToks.[25]

In summary, it can be said that TikTok is a platform on which activist content takes place. As a central idea, it can be stated that the platform lives on constant citations, adaptability, modification, and circulation of content; it is very fast-moving and depends on high interaction between creators and their

audience.

Performativity and Performance

In his exploration and analysis of language, Jacques Derrida revisits J.L. Austin's speech act theory[26], he understands languages as a means of action and the creation of meaning. Derrida's perspective explores the implications of language as a system of signs and the inherent instability of meaning. He coined the concept of *différance* and explores how language is structured by differences and deferral of meaning. He criticizes the notion of fixed and stable meanings linked to signifiers, arguing that meaning is always diffuse, never fully present, and constantly changing.[27]

Derrida characterizes this continual shifting of meanings as iterability. This iterability transcends semantics and fixed contexts, and its "transmission," according to Derrida, "is traversed by the intermediation of a dissemination irreducible to polysemy."[28] Similarly, Judith Butler's concept of performativity challenges conventional understandings of how language shapes our understanding of ourselves. She proposes a model based on performativity that focuses on the analysis of gender discourses, defining this concept in her 1993 publication *Bodies That Matter* as "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena it regulates and constrains."[29] Butler sees gender as a performance that emerges from social constructs and is constituted over time through a series of repeated actions and rituals.[30]

The notion of performativity is also discussed within the realm of music studies. Scholars such as Christopher Small, Nicholas Cook, and Philip Auslander thematize the composition-performance dichotomy.[31] They criticize the traditional perspective of musicology that subordinates the performance to the musical text and propose placing the performer at the center of the analysis, thus raising questions about individual experience and identity. Music is therefore not only sound or written representation but also interaction and corporeality, in which intersubjective and social issues emerge and develop (see Bermúdez in this Issue).

Furthermore, Alejandro L. Madrid proposes addressing the question of performativity beyond musical performance, thus focusing his analysis on what music does and on what it allows people to do rather than on its meaning within these processes. In this sense, considering music as proposed by

Madrid implies recognizing it as a means of understanding social and cultural practices.[32] This approach encourages participation in broader intellectual dialogues and the questioning of traditional assumptions about the meaning of music.

Performativity and Iterability on TikTok

To further examine the importance of music and sounds in TikToks, we would like to extend the foregoing understanding of the concept of iterability proposed by Derrida and link it to the perspectives of Marcel Cobussen. In addition, this offers us the possibility to gain valuable insights into how interpretation is influenced by the interplay between presence and absence, identity and difference. This concept allows us to identify music and sounds on TikTok as "iterable" musical marks or signs, further deepening our understanding of their role in activist content.[33]

Derrida refers to iterable linguistic signs that can be repeated, altered, or decontextualized and that do not depend on a specific context to function. The author observes that

> every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [ancrage].[34]

Moreover, Cobussen stresses the transformative nature of iterability in the performance experience. In his analysis of John Zorn's music, Cobussen examines how musical marks can be separated from their original context, iterated, and given new meanings through creative and inventive recombination. John Zorn quotes and recontextualizes musical elements from different sources, creating unique and unpredictable compositions. This approach allows him to continually transform and reinterpret musical material, resulting in unique and innovative pieces.[35]

To communicate, the musical mark must be able to be quoted, replicated, re-signified, and altered as it is placed in different contexts. The mark performs a particular function in each new context, determined by the creator's purpose for the content and how sounds and songs are placed in it. In this process, the

iterable mark is still recognizable when navigating through and "being cited" in different types of content, but what makes it recognizable does not strictly define it.

For the analysis of content on TikTok, we depart from the basis of a corporealized performativity through which the message, together with the sounds, is channeled. There is an interdependent correlation between the corporeality and the musical mark that determines how the message is transmitted, how it is perceived by users on the platform, and consequently, how it is reproduced as new content. The objective of our analysis is to trace both how this sound/musical mark is adapted and how the corporeality of this representation is modified or altered during this process.

TikTok is a social media platform on which music articulates both the "performatic" and ritualistic dimensions of the content, as well as the construction of identities and social discourses framed in political activism. The term "performatic," which refers to the *theatrical* and non-discursive aspects of the content, is used in this essay in distinction from the concept of performativity.[36] The relationship between "performatic" elements and performative aspects is worth considering for analysis of the processes involved in the creation and dissemination of content on TikTok. This approach allows a comprehensive overview of the different roles and functions as they relate to music and sounds in activist content, as well as the different dimensions of users' embodied experience on the platform.[37] It serves to focus attention on the materiality, the embodiment, and the "nowness" of the event, namely its corporeality, that is, on the forms of action as such rather than on what is to be said.[38]

Through this approach and in relation to the above, Madrid proposes to rethink musical processes, considering more than the performance or the musicians themselves. Through the adoption of the concepts of performativity and iterability as a theoretical approach in the context of media practices, especially regarding social media, it is possible to examine in greater depth the day-to-day actions and processes of the people who create and consume content on the platform and the power dynamics and interactions between them, without ignoring the "performatic" aspects. Through an intersectional lens, this theoretical approach affords an in-depth understanding of different dimensions, such as race, gender, religion, and social status, which are of particular relevance in the case of political and

activist content, as they can greatly influence the user experience on the platform and the content generated on it. The emphasis on musical marks and their hand-to-hand work with corporeality in the communication of the message allows us to situate songs and sounds and the role they assume in the context of each video and what we have considered each new "version." The performative is corporeal and that corporeality with sound is what allows us to trace how the function and the representation change the musical mark in political content. Therefore, our purpose is to analyze the way in which musical marks navigate these processes of creation, dissemination, and reproduction.

Like, What?

In the section that follows, we analyze a selection of TikToks in relation to the role of music in them and the discussed concepts of performativity, iterability, and musical marks, as well as the "performatic" elements. The first part of our analysis questions the role of music from a more technical angle. We examine how a new contextualization of a sound can be useful in constructing a political statement. In this section we focus on @findusmachtrandale (they/them) and music as a means of conveying political messages. The second part of our analysis deals with musical marks as representation. Songs and their modified versions can be used to represent people or groups subjected to intersecting oppressions and can give visibility to different political struggles or social movements. Two important points in this section are the interdependence of the performative and "performatic" aspects, which means that theatrical and discursive readings are possible simultaneously.

@findusmachtrandale is one of our interviewees and a leftist and (queer-)feminist creator on German-speaking TikTok. They see the advantage of sound trends in the fact that a political statement can be made with the use of a viral sound from TikTok. The aforementioned thematic algorithm ensures that videos with similar content can be successful. The use of trends increases the chances of going viral. Therefore, activist videos can be featured on mainstream TikTok and reach out to a larger audience to disseminate the political message. According to the interviews, generating trending content on TikTok can be understood as a strategic move, since the

content is "simply entertaining" on the surface but has the potential to channel a complex message based on the creators' political convictions. Furthermore, several interviewees stated that the barrier is quite low for this type of video because creators do not have to speak up, do research, give valid background information, or show themselves on camera.

Thus, @findusmachtrandale emphasizes the interaction between image, music, and text in this type of video. Lyrics in sound trends in particular function for @findusmachtrandale as a kind of a "punchline," which, together with the captions and the person's gestures, can create a political statement.[39] Here we can see the elements being assembled. Together they form a video in which elements are detached from their original place of creation. As an example, @findusmachtrandale cites in the interview one of their own videos ("Like, What?"), based on viral TikTok and its sound "chemie by becks" from creator becks with the lyrics: "What's so wrong about me loving a woman instead of a man?" (Was ist so falsch dran, dass ich eine Frau lieb statt 'nen Mann).[40] Most of the videos of this trend use the overlay texts ("POV: …") together with a lip-synced "what" to describe and question various topics, such as body weight, relationships, depression, or even everyday situations (shaving or washing hair). This illustrates how sounds get altered, adapted, or modified by other creators to be used in diverse contexts. The lyrics of the "original" TikTok are reused in quite different contexts through editing, further development, and modification, placing the sounds in a new or different (political) context, as shown by an example from @findusmachtrandale with the following overlay text: "POV: As a law student, you watch videos of a certain ex-police officer who tries to make you believe that anti-racist educational work is incitement of the people 'against white people'" (Du siehst dir als Jurastudi die Videos von einem gewissen Ex-Polizisten an, der versucht dir weiszumachen, dass antirassistische Bildungsarbeit Volksverhetzung 'gegen Weiße' wäre).[41] According to @ findusmachtrandale, the "what" voiced at the end is used as a punchline that critically questions the statement of the ex-police officer.[42] This is supported by the caption "like, what," the crying emoji, and the creator's gestures and facial expressions, which reflect astonishment or dismay.[43] In these types of videos, @findusmachtrandale emphasizes that "the interplay between statement [text on video], filter [and their physical behavior], and music [sound trend] is then a political statement in itself" (das Zusammenspiel von Aussage zu Filter zu Musik ist dann in itself eine politische Aussage).[44] @findusmachtrandale themself describes

how different elements and musical marks come together to create a new contextualized and politicized video. Central to this are sound, corporeality, and captions. In the case of @findusmachtrandale, the use of sound creates a political commentary on a particular situation that is written on the video and supported by @findusmachtrandale's gestures. The example serves as a technical explanation of how a new contextualization, or rather a politicization through the new composition of the individual elements, functions on TikTok. Moreover, this exemplifies that political activism on TikTok can appear in a certain design aesthetic similar to other viral and to some certain extent non-political videos from very different TikTok worlds to disseminate political convictions.

Music as a Means of Conveying Political Messages

The example of @findusmachtrandale's content shows that music can be understood as a means of channeling the political message. The music supports the political output, and creators think of music in this form both as a strategical device and as an entertainment factor for themselves and other users. During the period in which we consumed and observed activist TikToks, we noticed that most of them consist of education and discussion videos. This coincides with the content of our interviewees, who mainly made these types of videos. The political message was most important to the creators we spoke with, and music barely occupied a prominent position in their online activism. In our experience in the field, we determined that a lot of activist videos consist of sound trends that are recontextualized and politicized through the addition of physical gestures or overlay texts. In this rather technical perspective on music in activist TikToks, music and sounds can be understood as musical marks and therefore as a feature on the app, like stitches or duets. They are part of the appearance of TikTok and support its aesthetic. Using music in this way means that music supports the dissemination of the respective political call. This perspective matches with the statement of most of our interviewees that music is not a primary element that they knowingly include in the process of creating a video. Instead, they focus on their activist mission and political statements.

As we have observed above, music is nonetheless a central element of TikToks. However, it is always connected with other elements, and so

this composition functions as a means of conveying the political statement. With a performative approach from Butler and Derrida and Cobussen's understanding of the iterable musical mark, it is possible to assess music as a central factor for the recontextualization and politicization of sounds. This situates music as a relevant influence in activist videos and shows the unfixed and fluid function of music and sounds within TikToks. Moreover, there are a lot of activist videos including music, such as dance videos or lip-sync videos, that also use music to mediate a political statement or message.

When we look closer at the aspect of channeling messages with music, we can understand TikToks as an assembling of audio, visuals, and description at a certain point in time and place. With our music-sociological and ethnomusicological approach, we understand music in its use or rather in the meanings consumers give or transmit to it.[45] Thus, we focus on what music does and not what music is.[46] The video analyzed consists of sound trends from mainstream TikTok that @findusmachtrandale adapted and modified, in which new contexts are established through new descriptions and performances. Therefore, the sound trends gain a different meaning through this new contextualization. According to our research, the role of music as a means of conveying political messages can be explained by Madrid's and Cobussen's iterable and performative understanding of music as an element that is always in flux, repeatable, and changing.

Indigenous TikTok

In the following we analyze a selection of videos, building on the junction between corporealized performativity and the iterability of musical marks. How are these aspects connected and to what extent do they help in disseminating the political and activist message?

The videos presented were created in the context of #IndigenousTikTok[47] and by users currently active on the platform whose focus is political. Moreover, these videos exemplify different ways of presenting content by using the platform's tools within the "same" context and ways of sharing different quotes from a musical mark as a way of representing Indigenous groups and struggles for social justice. Within this process, songs and sounds understood as musical marks function as a sort of machine that can perform and communicate within a given context.[48] These marks participate in the

performative gear by also influencing the corporeality of the content creator and, consequently, the way in which the content is produced and later presented to the receiver. This involves modifying the auditory qualities and sound elements through repetitive patterns, breaks, or accentuations and connecting the performance and the musical marks to channel the message that the creator intends to convey, thus enhancing and illuminating the close interaction between these marks and the corporeality in the content. The link between these two elements and the underlying processes for the transmission of the content and political messages are key points in this analysis.

Transitions and sequences as effects are usually found in trends, allowing creators to generate all sorts of optical illusions in their videos and thus capture the attention of users on the platform. Similarly, sounds and songs on TikTok in their more general use help make these trends recognizable, encouraging the audience to connect and interact with the content as well as to reproduce it and replicate it.

Content creator @notoriouscree (no pronouns listed), in his most viewed video of 2021,[49] presents a trend-based dance video in which he develops a transition from a "westernized appearance" to traditional Cree clothing. It is a full shot with a low angle video with the overlay text "wait for it." In this TikTok, @notoriouscree uses the introduction of the song "The Banjo Beat, Pt. 1" to anticipate and build tension by juggling one of the traditional Cree shoes to the rhythm of the banjo melody. The creator's movements, performance, and delivery adapt in this section of the song to the rhythmic accents on the banjo melody, while supporting the message of respect and appreciation for Cree costumes, dances, and traditional clothing.

As mentioned above, these musical marks have the faculty to act and to adopt certain qualities when placed within a given context. Through multiple possibilities of adapting the musical marks, songs and sounds are commonly found on the platform as quotations in versions either subtly modified or altered almost in their entirety. The song used by @notoriouscree is an adaptation of the track "The Banjo Bear, Pt. 1"[50] by content creator Tia Wood (@tiamiscihk, she/her)[51] In her version, Wood keeps the banjo introduction to four bars, adding a new vocal layer that replaces the original. The modified version of @tiamiscihk is recognized within #nativetiktok and #Indigenoustiktok and had been used by September 2022 in more than

15,000 videos on the platform. The creator first quotes the"original" version and then alters representative sound elements to place the musical mark, the message, and the performance in the context of "Indigenous TikTok." The iterability of the musical marks opens up new possibilities for their use through replication, repetition, and alteration. In this way, these marks fluidly navigate content, and their use and purpose transcend the author of the songs and sounds.[52]

@tiamiscihk creates a duet with an adaptation of the "Banjo Beat" sound. For this video, @tiamiscihk sings what she typifies as an Indigenous song over a part of the introduction to this track. The creator refers to the original version but creates a new context, in which new symbols and meanings are immediately attributed to it. It is worth noting that even within that same context of Indigenous TikTok, the musical mark has the possibility of being altered, thus channeling and conveying a variety of different messages. This version has been used to represent different Indigenous groups, mainly as a way of appreciating their customs, dances, and traditional clothing. Along with the corporeality of each performance, the musical mark enables these processes of representation, as it is quoted and modified to channel the political message. The corporeal representation of @notoriouscree's video is largely different from that of @tiamiscihk, even considering the effects and platform features they use. Tia Wood's version has been adapted to different types of content in various contexts and has generated several different types of interaction with the audience and users, ranging from appreciative comments to duets in which people react to the performances. This emphasizes the notion of co-corporeality with the viewers and their participation—though sometimes not entirely consciously—as collaborators in the transmission of the content, who later reproduce it by creating their own versions.

"Land Back, Please"

In the political and activist content found on the platform, it is common to find videos that use songs that represent political positions in a blunt and concrete manner. Something particular about the example that follows is that it elucidates the way in which musical marks fluidly navigate social movements in different contexts, while remaining identifiable for the users, prompting to a certain extent the citationality of the musical mark, and consequently

affording possibilities for several newer versions and adaptations. This is exemplified in videos from political content creators that use the same song. In the following we analyze three versions of the song "Quechua 101 Land Back Please" by Bobby Sanchez @harawiq (she/they).[53]

The first version is from Shina Nova, a content creator and Inuk throat singer from the Arctic region of North America. In her video,[54] her gaze is fixed on the camera, projecting a certain intensity that accompanies the song's lyrics with a straightforward message of rejection of the colonization of Indigenous groups and its implications to this day. The content creator lip-syncs to the lyrics of the Sanchez's rap:

> "See you genocide us / then you colonized us / see you sterilized us / and now you fetishize us"[55]

As the song progresses and the rhythm of the verse changes, @shinanova develops a transitional sequence with the song's progression by turning her head from left to right to its rhythm, gradually donning different accessories representative of her community, syncing her changes with the changes in the verse and rhythm, reinforced by her lip-sync of Sanchez's chorus.

The creator stays in the same body position throughout the video, exclusively making a slow left-right lateral head movement to prompt changes in accessories, followed by a head shake at the end of the video to indicate disagreement and emphasize and support the message of the song. Although there is no dancing in the video, the creator interacts with the song corporeally, allowing greater fluidity during the transition changes. @shinanova refers here to the decolonial struggle that Indigenous people continue to face today and connects the struggles of different Indigenous groups politically by showing solidarity and support with Bobby Sanchez's song. This video also shows an adaptive form and independence of sounds on TikTok. Here, the music, the images of the video, and the political statement converge seamlessly.

The second version is from Qhalincha Puriskiri (@qhalinchapuriskiri, no pronouns listed). She is a Quechua teacher who generates anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-sexist political content. In our interview, she refers to her work both inside and outside the platform to prevent Quechua from becoming an object of consumption in the West. Puriskiri duets Bobby Sanchez's video featuring the song.[56] The creator starts by lip-syncing fragments of the Quechua verse of the song and part of the English verses

that precede it. The English lyrics refer clearly and directly to colonization and its implications to this day, exposing both the artist's and the creator's defense of the Indigenous groups directly involved.

@notoriouscree also has a duet version using Sanchez's song.[57] The creator features on green screen images that support the message of the rapper's song, setting its content and the music—in this case central to the content—in the context of the struggle of Indigenous groups in Canada.

Bobby Sanchez's song exposes a problem with which different Indigenous groups represented on the platform by various content creators feel identified.   This shows how the musical mark, within the theme #Indigenoustiktok, adapts to the different contexts of Indigenous groups from different regions of the world, channeling a message of indignation and resistance while demanding to "give the land back."

Music as Representation

As highlighted by the case in point, the musical mark takes on the representation of these Indigenous groups and activist struggles, which, while constituted in a similar context, correspond to complex and unique struggles hundreds or thousands of kilometers apart from one another.

Furthermore, we can witness the narrative quality of music showcased in these examples catalyzing processes of representation.[58] In relation to political activism, music can be linked to identity narratives of groups or individuals that highlight categories such as race, class, and gender, giving visibility to social justice struggles and people subjected to intersecting oppressions (see Aguilera in this Issue). Understanding this through the lens of performativity challenges essentialist notions of identity[59] and contributes to a better understanding and appreciation of the dynamic and ever-changing nature of music.

Echoing Derrida's linguistic signs, the role of the musical mark is temporary in each context and can be influenced by a certain scenario and the intention of the content creator by means of the message they want to convey. In the analyzed content, musical marks can either attenuate or amplify a message as well as "viralize" it. This content is created in response to specific events that take place on TikTok and other social media platforms, but also "offline" in

rallies of activist groups and demonstrations, both framed in the struggle for social justice. The volatile, unstable, and fluid character of these events and struggles is also exemplified in the content that is created and in the forms of dissemination and reproduction.[60]

The political and social relevance of music can contribute to the definition and grounding of identities and subjectivities, to a collective notion of body politics, as well as to the creation and constitution of activist movements.[61] These phenomena are manifested in specific events on and off the platform that stimulate the creation and reproduction of content, in which music acts as a binding element that articulates these discourses. Songs are created and existing ones are even "appropriated" to represent these struggles, and the musical mark is set in a new context depending on what is to be represented. As this musical mark is reproduced and quoted, the content is altered and modified not only by the discursive features but also by the "performatic" elements. This is particularly evident in the musical elements of newer versions of songs and sounds, as the structure, tempo, and pitch (among other elements) are altered to create a sort of "remix" that matches and supports the tone and mood that the new content presents.[62]

Moreover, gestures, movements, and facial expressions portray the emotions and feelings of the content creators, as well as their attitude and position about what is being discussed. The content creators embody the music and lyrics of the song, corporeally expressing their thoughts and emotions and ultimately their position on the subject matter in the videos. This exemplifies the interrelation between the corporeality of those creating the content, the musical mark, and the way each of these elements assumes a role and function, working in mutual support to channel the message that is intended to be imparted. For example, although the song "Quechua 101 Land Back Please" is sung partly in Quechua, it is still adapted to represent other Indigenous groups of North America by how the musical mark is used and its combination with the other elements that assemble the audiovisual content. These creators take selected fragments of the songs and work together with corporeality to build a narrative that allows different types of audiences to connect and relate to the content. The videos analyzed in the last section show the role of music as a representational function of social groups and their political struggles. According to our theoretical framework, this representational role is based on the performative function of music within these videos. Furthermore, our interviewees explained that this type of video

gives the groups and their struggles a wider visibility.

Conclusion

Considering the observations presented, the lack of "anchorage" allows the musical marks to navigate different contexts without limiting their functionality or confining them to a particular meaning. This fluidity is consistent not only with the changing character of the content but also with the volatility of the events inside and outside the platform that trigger these struggles for social justice. This is related to the eventual absence of the author and the quality that the musical mark has of positioning itself within the "performatic" as well as the discursive. The @qhalinchapuriskiri duet of Bobby Sanchez's video is one example of how the embodied experience of the creator in this dynamic process, as expressed in the corporeality, establishes a link with the users who consume the content. Their impressions and experience with it generate new bodily possibilities, new forms of mediation, and new contexts entailing the modification, alteration, and de-contextualization of the musical mark. Trending sounds and songs play a fundamental role in the interaction of consumers with political and activist content. These trends promote the active participation of more "passive" users, stimulating the creation of new contexts within the platform where political struggles are articulated and amplified. This is exemplified in the songs and sounds with a more direct and explicit message, which in our analysis we characterize as playing a representational role. This role is established in the need to mediate the political message, and the musical mark is then placed within that framework.

On that account, understanding music to explore social and cultural practices by focusing on actions and processes rather than meaning allows us to analyze the musical mark from its iterable quality. The videos analyzed exemplify how sounds and songs, and even fragments of them, can be adapted and politicized to be placed within the framework of an activist struggle. The musical mark can carry and disseminate a political message by politicizing sounds and musical trends. This more strategic use or functional role of the musical mark has a relationship with the representational role in how they overlap with each other in certain types of content and work together hand in hand.

Notes

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8. Cervi and Divon, "Playful Activism," 4.

9. Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)"; Zeng and Abidin, "OkBoomer."

10. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*, 10–14.

11. Ibid.; Zeng and Abidin, "OkBoomer," 2470.

12. Fielitz and Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest," 426–27; 429.

13. Fielitz and Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest," 437. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

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15. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets*, 2.

16. Hautea et al., "Showing They Care (or Don't)," 3.

17. Ann-Kathrin Allekotte, "'Why didn't her team tell her TikTok is just mean social activist kids': TikTok und Instagram zwischen Tanzvideos und politischer Kommunikation," in *Jugend, Musik und Film*, ed. Kathrin Dreckmann, Carsten Heinze, Dagmar Hoffmann, and Dirk Matejovski, Acoustic Studies Düsseldorf 4 (Düsseldorf University Press, 2022), 321.

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Political Performances: TikTok's Sonic Influence on Affective Activist Expression

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Abstract: This study explores political expression on TikTok among Austria-based creators, revealing how the platform's unique architecture opens up new avenues for civic activism. Employing online ethnography and interviews, it uncovers insights into users' engagement with local politics, highlighting TikTok's aural dimensions of activist expression. The research showcases TikTok's role in fostering political mobilization through creative sonic expressions, like lip-syncs, songs, and skits. It highlights the platform's significance in youth activism, emphasizing its playful and joyful approach in engaging Gen Z with political discussion. Furthermore, the study analyzes TikTok's performative aspects, spotlighting its cultural impact on sound and how sonic creativity serves as a tool for engaging audiences. By examining political performances on TikTok, this research contributes to an understanding of affective political engagement on the platform by expanding national studies and positioning TikTok as a catalyst for a new form of political expression, rooted in creative sonic elements and affective mobilization. It advocates for further exploration of TikTok's role in broader social movements and encourages an investigation of affective dimensions in audiovisual activism across various media landscapes.

Keywords: affect; audiovisual; COVID-19; digital activism; digital ethnography; Gen Z; social media; social creativity; sonic turn; TikTok

Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok has witnessed not only a notable upsurge in its user base but also a change in its reputation, diverging from its initially apolitically perceived stance. Contrary to the popular perception of the platform as associated solely with lip-syncing teens and lighthearted dances, there has been a discernible integration of political discourse within the app's short video format. This emergence of political content, cleverly interwoven with the medium's playful and musical nature,

began to capture public attention around 2020. Instances such as the online advocacy of the Black Lives Matter movement and a protest orchestrated through TikTok influencing a Trump campaign rally marked pivotal moments in acknowledging the platform's political dimension. Although leveraging social media for political ends is not novel, exploring how the influential short video app contributes to civic activism warrants thorough examination. This study illuminates the nuances of political expression on TikTok through a detailed investigation focusing on Austria-based creators, elucidating their engagement with local politics and underscoring the prominence of the auditory sphere within this realm of digital activism.

Due to its relative novelty, the research landscape surrounding TikTok lacks an extensive scholarly backdrop. Initially, only a handful of researchers, such as Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019),[1] Ackermann and Dewitz (2020),[2] and Serrano et al. (2020),[3] explored facets of political discourse within the app. However, the academic discourse on the platform has swiftly expanded, culminating in substantial publications, like a book by Kaye et al. titled *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video* (2022).[4] Notably, this work dedicates a chapter to activism, spotlighting TikTok's global influence on social movements—an assertion echoed in the introduction to the 2023 special issue of *Social Media + Society*, "TikTok and Social Movements," co-edited by Lee and Abidin. This introduction contends that "TikTok's interactive and creative affordances have augmented and altered ways of mobilizing and engaging with publics for various beliefs through the vehicle of social media pop cultures."[5]

Building upon this interconnectedness between protest practices, youth culture, and digital realms, the present study endeavors to augment the current understanding of activist discourse on TikTok. Specifically, it delves into the impact of TikTok's sonic architectural elements on fostering opportunities for affective political mobilization. The technological landscape of TikTok, which notably prioritizes the auditory dimension of content creation, introduces an unprecedented emphasis on sound within contemporary hybrid activism. While video-sharing encompasses various aesthetic forms, TikTok's socio-technological ecosystem amplifies the role of sonic creativity, with participants leveraging sound as a medium for shaping personae and engaging with audiences in playful yet impactful ways. From remixing audio templates to creating original sounds through creative sonic expressions such as lip-syncs, songs, and skits, creators of this study

engage in performances that address local political issues, particularly within the context of Austria. These embodied engagements are construed as generating affective sonic experiences, underscoring the potent influence of sound in eliciting tactile sensations and evoking emotional responses from audiences.

This study adopts an online ethnographic research methodology, integrating data collected through participant observation and nine in-depth interviews with users and creators based in Austria. The semi-structured interviews, conducted from May to July 2021, were all conducted with the participants' explicit consent for recording and had an average duration of 53 minutes each. At the study's inception, the participants' ages ranged between 16 and 27, and seven self-identified as cisgender female, one as a cisgender male, and one as non-binary. Participants may be identified on the basis of their preference, using their first name, platform username, or an asterisk-marked pseudonym assigned to them. All interviews were conducted in German, and original quotes from these interviews are provided in the footnotes. Given the limited prior exposure to TikTok before this research, this work reflects the accumulation of field-specific observations and the thematic analysis of online ethnographic interviews. The qualitative nature of this study offers a partial perspective of TikTok's activist landscape; however, the insights are anticipated to offer profound perspectives into the experiences of individuals, enriching our understanding of the growing significance of auditory elements within (digital) activist endeavors.

Reimaging Activism: TikTok as a Catalyst for Civic Participation

"I don't think one thing can exist without the other nowadays," asserts activist @yourfuturesteppapai, delving into the discourse surrounding online and offline activism.[6] Employment of digital platforms, tools, and applications to advocate for political and social change typically falls under the umbrella term "digital activism." Kaun and Uldam elucidate that digital activism is an ambiguous and broad concept, encompassing specific activist forms as well as all digital endeavors aimed at political ends.[7] It is imperative to transcend the dichotomy between virtual and "real-world" protest to comprehend activism and protest in today's digitalized society, along with its possibilities, dynamics,

and risks—while digital platforms have introduced new collective forms, mobilization conditions, and political engagement avenues, they should not be misconstrued as impartial spaces.[8] The widespread utilization of social media in particular has sparked debates regarding its efficacy in fostering political participation. Nonetheless, studies challenge these reservations by demonstrating the political relevance of even low-effort actions (Freelon et al. 2020),[9] the predictive nature of sharing political content on social media for offline political engagement (Lane et al. 2017),[10] and the convergence of offline and online activism into "hybrid activisms" that complement each other (Milošević-Đorđević and Žeželj 2017).[11] Fabian, an active participant in activism, offers insights into the role of digital activism within existing and evolving protest cultures, highlighting TikTok's burgeoning popularity as a platform for online activist engagement:

> In the past we have witnessed success for social movements on several social media, starting with the Arab Spring, which was mainly organized through Twitter, or in Belarus, which mainly happens via Telegram. In any case, social media contribute a very large part and of course also help social movements because they go beyond these usual well-tried news channels, some of which are under state control in autocratic systems. … The advantage of TikTok is that as soon as there is any fuss or a topic that defines the time, you will be flooded with content on that topic. So, when I look at the Black Lives Matter time, when the big demonstrations took place about a year ago, my "For You" page was full of it.[12]

Fabian, despite being an infrequent user of TikTok, has ventured into video production through his profile "@fhurbi" with the goal of providing young individuals with their first exposure to political content while communicating his messages effectively (Fig. 1). He strives for broad outreach, targeting users who may not have solidified strong political views. His approach involves delivering explanations and educational insights, focusing on daily Austrian political occurrences in a clear and engaging manner within his videos:

> I thought I should mainly politically educate and give background information on what is happening on a daily basis and explain the things that are happening. … Also to shed light on things that are not so present in the basic perception. For example, I have discussed voting behavior in parliament, because a lot of people do not follow that, and sometimes very interesting things happen.[13]

Fabian employs diverse strategies to ensure that his content resonates with users, such as producing content that is "not too clearly recognizable as left-wing content," discussing current issues, and actively engaging with young

Figure 1: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @fhurbi

users on the platform.[14] His emphasis on fostering political education and discussion is evident in his appreciation for a particular affordance: "One of my favorite features is that you can reply to comments with videos."[15] An illustrative instance is showcased in figure 1,[16] where Fabian addresses a reaction he received on a video discussing the ongoing Syrian conflict, emphasizing Austria's responsibility in providing refuge. In response to a comment querying Syria's role in past world wars, Fabian shared a video clarifying the historical context.

Fabian's interactive approach underscores how activists are adapting their methods to leverage new digital platforms for expressing concerns and influencing political spheres. Notably, social media have emerged as a pivotal space for political discourse, evident in movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo originating from Twitter hashtags.[17] Within this realm, Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik advocate for discerning the unique affordances of various social media platforms and recognizing how platform design shapes the dissemination of political information, allowing activists to strategically utilize digital resources aligned with their agendas.[18] Examining political communication on TikTok, Serrano et al. highlight how political discourse on the platform is growing into a "relevant aspect of TikTok's ecosystem."[19] The authors identify TikTok as fostering more interactive

political communication compared to other platforms, attributing this to video reproduction features like replies, duets, and stitches.[20] These functionalities, as creator @vik.talk highlights, "make TikTok a great discussion platform, because you can respond to videos directly,"[21] enabling direct comparisons between viewpoints. @vik.talk's videos, which she categorizes as "political commentary," are inspired by current events, reflecting the platform's capacity to facilitate engaging discussions:

> I get inspired by a political event or something that I've read or something that someone has commented on, and then I just give my opinion on it … I noticed that many people say "thank you for saying that," because they feel that they are heard. So I find it very interesting that there are apparently a lot of people who currently have the feeling that certain topics are not being addressed or are not being discussed in politics. I believe that TikTok is a great platform where you can see that there are others in the population who also think that way; not politicians but citizens.[22]

Figure 2: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @vik.talk

@vik.talk further highlights that TikTok has "created the opportunity for me to reach people with my opinions and my expertise in an uncomplicated way."[23] This sentiment aligns with Zhao and Abidin's conceptualization of TikTok as an alternative activist space, fostering "everyday, nonheroic, and performative forms of online discursive activism."[24] In the video captured

59

in figure 2,[25] @vik.talk contributes to this kind of civic political discourse by addressing a recent domestic policy in Austria, which she characterizes as Islamophobic. Through her continuous monologues in such videos, she adopts a satirical approach to situations, conveying messages that are both earnest and provocative.

TikTok's engaging and interactive dynamics have drawn attention in discussions about political participation behaviors. Teri Del Rosso emphasizes TikTok's "participatory culture," highlighting how engagement with current trends and the use of its distinctive features fosters collaborative interactions unlike those on other social media. [26] Bandy and Diakopoulos delve deeper into collective action within the short video app, underscoring its crucial divergence from other platforms. They note that TikTok's algorithmic proactive approach of continuously delivering a personalized and limitless stream of videos fundamentally shapes the user's experience and content discovery process.[27]

Judith Ackermann's research demonstrates that compared to other social media platforms, TikTok exhibits notably heightened levels of user activity and deeper user engagement in activities that reflect opinion formation, particularly in political realms: liking, sharing, commenting on videos, and creating original content.[28] Interviewed participants unanimously recognize the algorithm's global reach as a significant advantage, acknowledging TikTok's unparalleled speed in propelling video success. Ebru, a TikTok creator and musician known as Schwesta Ebra, emphasizes the emergence of communities on TikTok that foster encouragement and discussion: "it is also a space where you can open up and find like-minded people."[29] She reflects on the impact of positive feedback on one of her videos transforming into her debut single: "The first single, which was actually just a TikTok video at the beginning, got a lot of reactions and was what ultimately motivated me to actually publish it."[30] Further underscoring the platform's influence on her creative process, in her second single Ebru addresses the issue of so-called dickpics and the issue often associated with it of women facing unsolicited nude photos and sexual harassment. Engaging the TikTok community, she actively sought input from individuals, inviting them to share their experiences before releasing this impactful single:

> So I reached out to a few people and asked if they wanted to participate by briefly saying how old they were the first time they were involuntarily sent a dickpic. A lot of people also commented their age. They wrote, 11,

12, 14; that's extremely young.[31]

Figure 3: Screenshot of a TikTok video by Ebru, released on her account @2bebis

Ebru integrated parts of this empowering story-sharing into her track and shared a snippet of the music video to promote her new song on the account she co-owns, "@2bebis," shown in figure 3.[32] Interestingly, she refrains from categorizing her civic engagement as activism, expressing the following sentiment: "It's not enough."[33] Similarly, @vik.talk, known for fostering political discussions on TikTok, hesitates to self-identify as an activist, believing her efforts are insufficient, stating: "I probably wouldn't call myself an activist, because I think that would somewhat minimize other people's activism ... I don't do enough for that".[34] This ambivalence reflects a prevalent trend in which digital spaces have become integral to contemporary social movements, while legitimacy still largely rests with activism in physical spaces. Madison and Klang highlight this discrepancy, noting that while a broad spectrum of activities supporting an overarching goal is accepted in offline political and civic engagement, digital activism often faces harsher scrutiny.[35] Chris Bobel observes that the "activist" label is often associated with a "perfect standard" with which many carrying out acts of activism do not identify,[36] mirroring the interviewed creators' sentiments.

Gen Z's Playground: Political Voicing Through Creativity

TikTok has solidified its position as a global frontrunner in social media, maintaining its status as the most downloaded app worldwide for the third consecutive year in 2022.[37] The circumstances of widespread lockdowns due to the coronavirus outbreak appear to have contributed to the app's meteoric rise, with people globally seeking entertainment during periods of enforced isolation. Most individuals interviewed for this study revealed that they began using TikTok specifically during the spring 2020 lockdowns. Mona Khattab highlights that beyond serving as an antidote to lockdown-induced boredom, the app features innovative editing tools that elevate "the individualization and creativity of video sharing to a new level."[38] In the realm of political content dissemination, a discernible pattern emerges wherein messages are conveyed through a distinct emphasis on musical and sonic creativity. This manifests in the creation and reinterpretation of diverse soundbites, executed through techniques such as voiceovers, singing, lip-syncing, or the performance of skits. While TikTok's creative potential plays a pivotal role in disseminating and appropriating political information, Kaye et al. propose the concept of "circumscribed creativity," suggesting that the platform's design subtly influences TikTokers toward specific creative expressions.[39] For example, Lee and Abidin observe that memes have become the predominant vehicle for circulating political messages, asserting that meme culture within TikTok's framework has fundamentally "reconfigured our ways to engage in, lead, and even disrupt social movements."[40]

Activists harness a spectrum of creative potentials within TikTok's humor-infused environment, leveraging memes, parody, and ironic exaggeration as distinct stylistic tools in the artistic expression of political messaging. The profound influence of TikTok's entertaining landscape on political engagement has recently captured the attention of scholars like Cervi and Divon, who introduced the term "playful activism," opening avenues for making "democratic participation more relatable, tangible, and accessible."[41] Contrasting the nature of political content on TikTok with other platforms, @yourfuturesteppapai notes that "some activists on Instagram have gotten into the habit of writing very high-handedly and thus exercising a form of epistemic violence … Because of its humoristic environment, it [TikTok] offers a nice 'low-threshold' approach to politics."[42] Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik
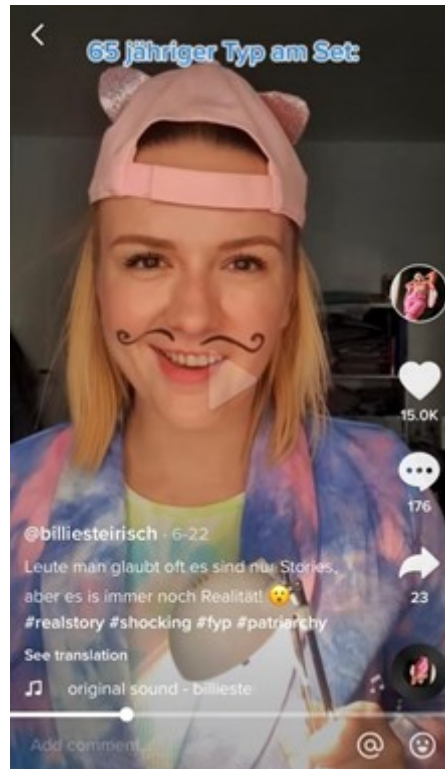
Figure 4: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @billiesteirisch

underscore the relevance of these novel forms within activism paradigms, emphasizing how TikTok's playful culture challenges traditional norms of political expression.[43] Furthermore, Vijay and Gekker's case study on TikTok accentuates how satirical videos attract audiences that are typically harder to engage.[44] Singer and actress @billiesteirisch also echoes the sentiment that through TikTok's performative and playful elements, "political content is made more easily accessible to the masses; it's easier to digest that way."[45] As illustrated in figure 4,[46] she narrates an incident of workplace sexual harassment, employing varied voice tones, facial expressions, and gestures to enact the role of the harasser. This storytelling approach aims at raising awareness for everyday sexism women face in (working) life. @billiesteirisch likes to adopt a comedic approach to shed light on serious topics, often incorporating her original music or utilizing compatible background sounds. Through her alter ego, she regularly shares concise comedic skits, intending to spark critical reflections on societal issues:

> I want there to be a discourse between people who are still stuck in patriarchy with their heads and people who are simply more open and educated in that regard—in terms of feminism. I notice that the fronts are totally hardened, and that's why I try to break it up a bit in a playful way ... Instead of just talking about it, I want to portray issues as an actor

63

in a scene.[47]

The playful nature that defines TikTok's content has transformed the platform from light entertainment into a platform for self-expression and information dissemination, becoming a hub conducive to political expression and dialogue. Because @zoffnix perceives the video sharing platform as an invaluable information repository for political discourse, she has established an account dedicated to discussing political candidates, parties, and their agendas in Austria. Through the creation of short skits, the creator shares engaging political content, frequently adopting a dialogue simulation format to convey information:

> I try to make a mixture of funny videos that at the same time very often have a serious message behind them. ... With serious content but somehow packaged in trends or other funny things, you definitely can reach people and convey certain messages.[48]

Figure 5: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @zoffnix

The auditory dimension consistently defines @zoffnix's videos, comprising predominantly musical or memetic sounds. She frequently sources sounds from her "For You" page, adeptly combining trending audio elements with the thematic content she intends to address. In the video depicted in figure 5,[49] @zoffnix tackles the critical issue of deteriorating mental health among young

individuals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing its neglect within political discourse. Segments from the song "Seguimento Tin" by Mosta Man accompany her performance, creating a sarcastic undertone when taken out of context and adapted to suit the desired effect. The inclusion of text overlays serves to disentangle the intricate interplay between sound, video, and textual elements within @zoffnix's creations. With a professional involvement in political youth education, the creator advocates for adapting to emerging media landscapes, viewing TikTok as an increasingly influential platform for engaging with youth.[50] Echoing this sentiment, @vik.talk observes a trend of young people actively engaging with and expressing their political views on TikTok, highlighting a critically engaged youth: "It must be said that that Gen Z is very political anyway … and TikTok is the platform that Gen Z uses the most."[51] The 16-year-old student Elisabeth* offers further insight:

> Most of my friends have TikTok; I could only name two people who don't. … Through TikTok I generally often find out that something has happened if a lot of people address it. … I wasn't concerned with the word "femicide" before learning about it through TikTok and social media.[52]

With over 75 percent of TikTok's users worldwide under 25 years old and nearly 50 percent falling within the 18 to 24 age group in 2022,[53] Kaye et al. argue that this youthful majority defines the platform's tone, evident in its political content: "TikTok activism largely manifests the generational spirit of youth, and especially that of Gen Z members."[54] Pioneering TikTok researchers Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik point to TikTok's significance as a pivotal space for civic discourse and political awareness among the zoomers in their recent reflection (see Aguilera in this Issue):

> TikTok is a valuable space for youth activism, enabling young people to experiment with their political voice in richly creative ways. … We see the political expression happening on TikTok as a harbinger of the changing nature of this phenomenon, and a necessary impetus to broaden our understandings of activism.[55]

The present study also underscores how TikTok's playful approach fosters the political engagement of Generation Z. For instance, 16-year-old Anna* attributes her increased involvement in political matters to TikTok,[56] while Elisabeth* expresses a desire to learn more about Austrian politics through the platform.[57] The creators interviewed for this study all contribute to this wish by generating German-language content that references local politics, thereby catering to a specific audience. Their diverse examples encompass a broad spectrum of creative approaches to political expression on TikTok,

encompassing commentary, educational endeavors, critical viewpoints, and personal narratives, all centered around various political issues in Austria. Presenting the first comprehensive study of TikTok within an Austrian context, ethnomusicologist Juan Bermúdez investigates notions of locality on TikTok and introduces the framework of a "glocal" perspective.[58] Focusing on content pertaining to local politics has emerged as a promising strategy, given the platform's apparent emphasis on amplifying local content through enhanced visibility in the main feed. While TikTok has not officially addressed this, data analyses indicate a propensity for the frequent circulation of locally relevant content to users.[59] Fabian observes instances of socio-political engagements spurred by TikTok visible in Austria:

> As far as the overall socio-political discussion is concerned, we have movements like Black Lives Matter, or if I think back to the Kurdish/Turkish protests last year even in Favoriten [district in Vienna], TikTok has very strongly influenced these protests on a global level as well on a small-scale level in Austria.[60]

The discussion thus far underscores TikTok's capacity to mobilize political engagement, rooted in the creation of creatively crafted playful content that celebrates youth culture and incorporates pop-cultural references. This concept gains further depth when one considers activists' use of cynicism, humor, and exaggeration as emotive expressions, ranging from the communication of emotions to the establishment of collective emotional connections. Olivia Sadler's study on protest music's functions on TikTok highlights the emergence of new safe spaces on the platform, fostering agency and enabling "a new form of resistance through joy."[61] Amid the consideration of the time-intensive nature of producing politically charged videos, @zoffnix expresses a distinct sentiment: "I think the difference is that it [TikTok] is fun. Honestly, I've rarely enjoyed creating a Facebook post, but making TikToks videos is fun to do."[62] This perception refines the understanding of TikTok activism not solely as playful but also as joyful, thereby expanding the potential for mobilization through emotive labor, often grounded in personal experiences. Scholarly analysis exploring joyful forms of resistance has utilized concepts of emotion and affect to elucidate how communal joy can inform political action. Bergman and Montgomery's edited collection *Joyful Militancy* notably demonstrates the coexistence of tenderness and vulnerability within militant dedication,"[63] resonating with Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik's findings that"studying youth political expression on TikTok, we see resilience alongside vulnerability, in line with the ethos of Gen Z

itself."[64]

Performing Politics: Affective Mobilization via Sonic Pathways

The mobilization potentials rooted in emotion, affect, and intensified bodily experience find a prominent space on TikTok, as they can be conveyed through a creator's digital persona. Anna* thinks that compared to Instagram, "on TikTok people are much more personal and talk about their opinions in a much more personal way."[65] @yourfuturesteppapai shares this view on personalities being mediated on TikTok, "because of course the content is always connected to the person who creates it."[66] Expanding on this from her perspective as a creator, @billiesteirisch expresses her preference for utilizing personalized narratives: "I try to reach people on a personal level … This only works for me if I actually use my face and my voice to do something that I came up with myself, or if I sing."[67] Examining these performative strategies within the platform's framework, Serrano et al. contend that TikTok has given rise to a novel form of political communication, where "users do not just merely circulate content and comment it; they become the content. … Every TikTok user is a performer who externalizes personal political opinion via an audiovisual act."[68] This performative aspect is echoed by political TikToker @zoffnix:

> With TikTok a completely new dimension comes along, because with these videos you reveal yourself. No matter in what form, whether you talk or dance; it's a whole new dimension, because you argue not just with words, not just with writing, but you actually include your whole personality.[69]

Expanding upon Philip Auslander's concept of a musical persona, Bermúdez delves into the process of TikTok creators shaping a performer identity: "A person is not a TikToker just by using the application, but it is necessary to actively create, negotiate, and perform this identity as a TikTok persona."[70] Leveraging the app's video-centric format, TikTok creators navigate their TikTok personae to mobilize audiences at a heightened emotional and affective level. The platform's video format enables creators to convey playful

yet impactful content seamlessly, a sentiment echoed by Ebru, who perceives TikTok's video-dominant interface as advantageous: "Well, because TikTok is a pure video platform, you won't be bombarded with texts."[71]

Scholarship on video activism has explored videos in Web 2.0 spaces as pivotal means in today's protests to present information and spur action, fostering new forms that actively involve audiences through social media.[72] Building on Tina Askanius's theorizations of video activism across various platforms within the media landscape, such as politically charged mash-up videos on YouTube,[73] Kathrin Fahlenbrach's recent study on different strategies of audio-visual mobilization online briefly touches upon TikTok in its conclusion.[74] The author contends that within the spectrum of video activism practices, "expressive" activist videos designed for mobilization purposes stand out as particularly prevalent.[75] These videos, characterized by their affective dynamics, combine persuasive audio-visual staging with popular network culture practices. This fusion not only amplifies the mobilizing effect of a message but also facilitates widespread dissemination and the compelling persuasion of audiences. This "expressive" video approach resonates with the nature of numerous political videos observed on TikTok, which can be further categorized as "performative" videos, underscoring TikTok's potential as a platform suited for mobilization activism. While this perspective enriches our understanding of the affective potential of audiovisual activism within the TikTok sphere, Fahlenbrach describes video activism as dependent on other forms of activism and gravitates towards visual imagery, relegating the focus on sonic elements solely to the example of activist music videos.[76]

TikTok has illuminated the profound reliance of video activism on the auditory realm, emphasizing the critical role of "audio" within its emerging political audiovisual expression. The short-form video platform has amplified the significance of sound within the attention-driven dynamics of social media, rendering the creation and consumption of its content devoid of sound nearly inconceivable. Given the platform's inclination toward various musical expressions as prevalent performance practices, TikTok has moreover ascended to become a significant influencer in the music industry, shaping the trajectory of trending popular music while often birthing collective earworms among users immersed in the digital vernacular culture. TikToker @zoffnix underscores this cultural impact: "If you are somewhere and a song that you already know from TikTok is played, then this is the song from TikTok. ... It's

almost like a culture that came about with TikTok."[77] In light of what has been referred to as the "sonic turn" in cultural studies-related discourses, Abidin and Kaye advocate that TikTok serves as an example emblematic of the pivotal role sound plays in cultural production: "The centrality of the 'audio' on TikTok encapsulates exactly this. Trends do not just go viral, they become solidified as culture, whether 'TikTok culture,' 'Gen Z culture,' or 'social media culture.'"[78] The authors expound on digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin's notion of TikTok's promotion of sound as the "organizing principle" for content creation on TikTok,[79] articulating an "aural turn" within meme culture. Exemplified by the ascendancy of audio memes on TikTok, the sonic texture assumes an intimate character, demanding nuanced navigation to contextualize and decode its meaning.[80] In scrutinizing intergenerational discursive activism on TikTok through the lens of audio aesthetics, Zeng and Abidin introduce the concept of "lip-sync activism," highlighting how individuals creatively employ existing sound templates to advocate personal narratives and showcasing a playful approach to political engagement.[81]

While TikTok's video-sharing adopts a multimodal format, encompassing various aesthetic forms of video, sound, and textual expressions, the platform's socio-technological environment fosters a notable emphasis on sonic creativity. This research reveals that participants harness sonic creativity as a mobilization tool, employing it to shape personae and engage audiences in a playful manner, constituting a significant component of their political performances. Their use of sound spans diverse techniques, including selecting sounds as a backdrop, remixing audio templates, utilizing the musical qualities of a song to construct narratives, and creating original sounds. Some users, exemplified by @vik.talk and Fabian, employ solely oral speech, with the latter focusing on employing his own voice within his political expression:

> As known from YouTube, I just speak directly into the camera, sometimes as energetically as possible, so that people stay and keep watching—that might be a bit performative, but I don't play a role or try to reach people through sketches, and it still works fine.[82]

Utilizing the performative capabilities inherent in the platform, various TikTok creators exemplify diverse approaches to conveying messages and engaging in activism. For instance, @billiesteirisch infuses bodily expressions and movements alongside voice in her comedic skits to communicate effectively. On the other hand, @zoffnix engages in playful activism by repurposing

existing audio templates, weaving them into new contexts to craft storylines. Meanwhile, Ebru participates in music creation through interactive story exchanges within the TikTok community. In their examination of dramatized audiovisual performances using personal narratives to raise awareness about social issues through tactics of virality and visibility, Zhao and Abidin coin the term "gesticular activism." [83] Arguing for a heterogenous understanding of video activism in their anti-racism case study, they consider TikTok as a platform on which sonic elements cultivate an affective environment conducive to novel modes of expression.[84] Highlighting TikTok's affective power, Hautea et al. emphasize how the platform enables creators "to construct and propagate multi-layered, affect-laden messages with varying degrees of earnestness, humor, and ambiguity" that produce affective publics, especially through the platform's memetic dimensions.[85] Furthermore, Brown et al. build upon studies of affect on social media and interpret TikTok's "affective design" as an avenue for a distinctive form of political engagement, observing how users harness this potential by employing memetic qualities such as humor to shape and amplify affects.[86]

The centrality of sound on TikTok significantly amplifies the platform's affective dimensions, fostering enhanced opportunities for mobilization through creative performance, particularly owing to the affective qualities embedded in sound and music. Delving into musical and sonic affects, ethnomusicological scholarship has extensively studied the intricate connections between embodiment, emotions, and the ability of (organized) sound to evoke affective responses within the body's tactile senses.[87] Sonic affective experiences, comprising a fusion of sensory and embodied sentiments that can extend to emotions, wield a potent influence, intertwining the realms of cognition, physicality, and materiality while stimulating tactile sensations. Recent scholarly discussions, exemplified by the special issue "The Soundwork of Media Activism" in *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture*, acknowledge the significance of probing sound and listening dynamics to augment our comprehension of political activism, suggesting that we should trace "the affective, embodied, sometimes playful, sometimes violent experiences of aurality in activist and otherwise transformative media" for political analysis.[88] Correspondingly, in their 2023 edited volume focusing on sonic engagement, Woodland and Vachon scrutinize how sonic protest aesthetics serve as catalysts for political mobilization, highlighting the burgeoning role of sound as a tool in activism and protest, facilitated by

advancing technologies that democratize sound and audio creation.[89] TikTok stands as a prime illustration of a new technological landscape empowering individuals to engage in creative sonic expression, paving the way within the ever-evolving realms of (digital) activism with a specific focus on the auditory domain.

Conclusion

This study has delved into the growing impact of political performances on TikTok, contributing to the dynamic field of research focused on diverse forms of activism on the short video platform. Drawing on a blend of digital ethnography and insightful interviews with TikTokers, this research offers fresh insights into the platform's role as a space for political expression. Specifically, it underscores the pivotal role of sonic elements in shaping activism on TikTok, while also expanding the scope of national research by using political practices in Austria as a case study. Rather than leveraging the platform solely for advocating specific political agendas, creators predominantly use it as a space to critically engage with and stimulate discourse on local political concerns. Their primary goal is to elevate awareness, particularly among Gen Z, regarding ongoing societal issues. Notably, these creators tend to perceive physical protests as more legitimizing forms of activism, prompting a reconsideration of TikTok activism as hybrid political engagement that could shed the "digital" prefix to work "towards destigmatizing contemporary activism in both theory and practice," as Suay Ozkula proposes for forms of "digital activism."[90]

Moreover, this study offers a novel perspective on how TikTok's affordances create new pathways for shaping public discourse by delving into the performative architecture of the app and unveiling how its design expands the scope of possibilities for mobilization. The analysis of creatively crafted videos reveals the platform's ability to mediate emotions and affects through the personae adopted by activist performances. Affective mobilization hinges prominently on sonic elements, leveraging playful activism to capture attention and engage new audiences effectively. This discovery enriches existing scholarly comprehension by positing TikTok as a catalyst for a new paradigm of political expression, advocating for its status as an emblematic illustration of the aural turn in activism. Consequently, TikTok's video activism

stands out as a novel form of (digital) political engagement, accentuating the unprecedented centrality of sound in this dynamic landscape.

This study was not designed to be representative of the entirety of potential political expressions on TikTok but rather serves as a valuable contribution to the burgeoning academic inquiry into the performative nature of politics within the platform. Its aim is to offer insights that can benefit forthcoming research endeavors on the broader significance of TikTok within social movements. Such investigations could delve deeper into the affective dimensions of various audiovisual forms of activism across diverse media landscapes. As hybrid forms of activism rapidly evolve and continue to undergo transformation, it becomes intriguing to contemplate whether TikTok has established a trend through its distinctive blend of audiovisual, performative, sonic, and affective strategies. Observing the trajectory of the platform's influence in shaping these realms holds substantial interest.

Notes

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5. Jina Lee and Crystal Abidin, "Introduction to the Special Issue 'TikTok and Social Movements,'" *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (February 2023): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157452.

6. @yourfuturesteppapai, interview by Emma Schrott, May 31, 2021. ("Ich glaub in der heutigen Zeit kann das eine nicht ohne dem anderen existieren.")

7. Anne Kaun and Julie Uldam, "Digital Activism: After the Hype," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 2100, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731924.

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11. Jasna S. Milošević-Đorđević and Iris L. Žeželj, "Civic Activism Online: Making Young People Dormant or More Active in Real Life?," *Computers in Human Behavior* 70 (May 2017): 114, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.12.070.

12. Fabian Schweiger, interview by Emma Schrott, June 11, 2021. ("Also wir haben da in der Vergangenheit schon auf mehreren sozialen Medien irgendwie Erfolge für soziale Bewegungen gesehen. Also es fangt ja bei dem Arabischen Frühling an, der sich vor allem durch Twitter organisiert hat oder in Weißrussland, das hauptsächlich über Telegram passiert. Soziale Medien tragen da auf jeden Fall einen sehr großen Teil bei und helfen natürlich auch sozialen Bewegungen, weil sie über diese üblichen altbewährten Nachrichtenkanäle hinaus gehen, die teilweise unter staatlicher Kontrolle in autokratischen Systemen stehen. ... Der Vorteil dadurch ist auf TikTok, dass sobald es irgendwie eine Aufregung gibt oder ein Thema das gerade die Zeit bestimmt, wirst du mit Inhalten zu diesem Thema überflutet. Also wenn ich mir die Black Lives Matter Zeit anschau und zu der Zeit wo die großen Demos vor ca. einem Jahr stattgefunden haben, da war meine 'For You' Page voll damit.")

13. Fabian, interview. ("Ich hab mir vor allem gedacht ich sollt politisch bilden und Hintergründe zu dem geben, was gerade tagespolitisch passiert und die Sachen die passieren erklären. ... Auch Dinge zu beleuchten, die in der grundsätzlichen Wahrnehmung nicht so präsent waren, also ich hab zum Beispiel Abstimmungsverhalten im Parlament thematisiert, weil das einfach viele Leute nicht mitverfolgen und da sind teilweise sehr interessante Sachen passiert.")

14. Ibid. ("nicht zu klar als stark linke Inhalte erkennbar")

15. Ibid. ("Eine meiner Lieblingsfunktionen ist, dass man Kommentare mit Videos beantworten kann.")

16. Figure 1. @fhurbi, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBRmk8/.

17. Maik Fielitz and Daniel Staemmler, "Hashtags, Tweets, Protest? Varianten des digitalen Aktivismus," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 33, no. 2 (September 2020): 426, https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2020-0037.

18. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, "Youth Collective Political Expression," 2003.

19. Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich, "Dancing to the Partisan Beat," 258.

20. Ibid., 257.

21. @vik.talk, interview by Emma Schrott, July 18, 2021. ("Was TikTok natürlich zu einer super Diskussionsplattform macht ist die Stitch-Funktion, das heißt du kannst direkt auf Videos antworten.")

22. Ibid. ("Ich werd halt inspiriert von einem politischen Ereignis oder von irgendwas das ich gelesen hab oder was wer kommentiert hat und dann sag ich einfach meine Meinung dazu. … Was mir aufgefallen ist: es sagen mir dann viele Leute 'danke, dass du das sagst, danke, dass du da aussprichst' und dass sich die Leute gehört fühlen. Also das find ich ganz interessant, dass es anscheinend viele Leute gibt, die momentan in der Politik das Gefühl haben, dass die Themen nicht angesprochen werden oder dass die Sachen nicht ausgesprochen werden und da glaub ich, dass TikTok eine super Plattform ist, wo man auch dann sieht es gibt noch andere in der Bevölkerung, die auch so denken, nämlich nicht Politiker*innen, sondern wirklich auch Bürger*innen.")

23. Ibid.

24. Andy Zhao and Crystal Abidin, "The 'Fox Eye' Challenge Trend: Anti-Racism Work, Platform Affordances, and the Vernacular of Gesticular Activism on TikTok," *Social Media + Society* 9, no.1 (February 2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157590.

25. Figure 2. @vik.talk, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBFHx9/.

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28. Judith Ackermann, "Präsentieren, liken, teilen, kommentieren—Politik auf TikTok," *Journal für politische Bildung* 11, no. 2 (May 2021): 29, https://doi.org/10.46499/1670.1953.

29. Ebru Sokolova, interview by Emma Schrott, July 11, 2021. ("Also irgendwie ist das auch ein Raum, wo man sich öffnen kann und Gleichgesinnte finden kann.")

30. Ibid. ("Die erste Single, das war ja eigentlich auch am Anfang nur ein TikTok Video, das hat auch viele Reaktionen bekommen, das hat mich auch schlussendlich motiviert, dass ich das auch wirklich veröffentliche.")

31. Ibid. ("Da hab ich ein paar Leute angeschrieben und gefragt ob sie da mitmachen wollen, dass sie einfach nur kurz sagen, wie alt sei waren, als sie das erste Mal unfreiwillig ein Dickpick bekommen haben, weil man da ja schon recht jung ist und da haben dann auch voll viele Leute ihr Alter kommentiert, sie haben geschrieben, 11, 12, 14; also extrem jung.")

32. Figure 3. @2bebis, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 26, 2022, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTRu5KBcj/.

33. Ebru, interview. ("Dafür dass man das Aktivismus nennen kann, ist das glaub ich schon zu wenig.")

34. @vik.talk, interview. ("Ich würd mich jetzt selber wahrscheinlich nicht als Aktivistin bezeichnen, weil ich find das würd den Aktivismus anderer Menschen bisschen minimieren … für das tu ich zu wenig dafür.")

35. Nora Madison and Mathias Klang, "The Case for Digital Activism," *Journal of Digital Social Research* 2, no. 2 (September 2020): 29, https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i2.25.

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39. Kaye, Wikstrom, and Zeng, *TikTok*, 126.

40. Lee and Abidin, "Introduction," 3.

41. Laura Cervi and Tom Divon, "Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance in TikTok #Challenges," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (March 2023): 10. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607.

42. @yourfuturesteppapai, interview. ("Aktivisten und Aktivistinnen auf Instagram haben halt teilweise die Angewohnheit bekommen, dass sie halt einfach sehr hochgestochen schreiben und dann halt wiederrum eine Form von epistemischer Gewalt ausüben … Durch das humoristische und das sehr alltägliche ist es ein sehr schöner 'niederschwelliger' Zugang zu Politik.")

43. Ioana Literat and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "TikTok as a Key Platform for Youth Political Expression: Reflecting on the Opportunities and Stakes Involved," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (February 2023): 2. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157595.

44. Darsana Vijay and Alex Gekker, "Playing Politics: How Sabarimala Played out on TikTok," *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 5 (January 2021): 714. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764221989769.

45. @yourfuturesteppapai, interview. ("Der politische Content wird leichter für die Masse zugänglich gemacht glaub ich, der wird leichter verdaulich gemacht.")

46. Figure 4. @billiesteirisch, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBFf2g/.

47. @billiesteirisch, interview by Emma Schrott, June 16, 2021. ("Ich wünsche mir, dass es einen Diskurs gibt zwischen Leute, die absolut noch im Patriachat feststecken mit ihrem Kopf und Leuten, die einfach schon offener sind und gebildeter in der Hinsicht—in der Hinsicht auf Feminismus, weil ich seh, dass die Fronten total verhärtet sind. Deswegen versuch ich das auch so ein bisschen auf spielerische Art aufzubrechen … in dem man's in einer Szene schauspielerisch darstellt, anstatt da immer nur drüber zu reden.")

48. @zoffnix, interview by Emma Schrott, June 15, 2021. ("Ich versuch eine Mischung zu machen aus lustigen Videos, die gleichzeitig sehr oft auch eine ernste Message dahinter haben … Mit doch seriösem Content bzw. ernsterem Content aber irgendwie verpackt durch Trends oder irgendwelche lustigen Sachen, dass man dadurch auf jeden Fall Menschen erreichen kann und gewisse Messages rüberbringen kann.")

49. Figure 5. @zoffnix, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBkdu8/.

50. @zoffnix, interview.

51. @vik.talk, interview. ("Also man muss sagen Gen Z ist sowieso sehr politisch … und es ist TikTok halt eben die Plattform, die von Gen Z eben am meisten genutzt wird.")

52. Elisabeth*, interview by Emma Schrott, May 30, 2021. ("Also die meisten meiner Freunde haben TikTok, direkt könnt ich nur so 2 Personen nennen, die ich kenn, die kein TikTok haben. … Über TikTok erfahr ich oft einfach so grundsätzlich, dass etwas passiert ist, also wenn irgendwie viele Leute sagen was drüber. … Ich hätte mich nicht mit dem Wort 'Femizid' befasst, bevor ich das nicht durch TikTok und generell Social Media gelernt hab.")

53. Laura Ceci, "Distribution of Global TikTok Creators 2022, by Age Group," *Statista*, December 21, 2023. https:// www.statista.com/statistics/1257721/tiktok-creators-by-age- worldwide/.

54. Kaye, Wikstrom, and Zeng, *TikTok*, 131.

55. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, "TikTok," 1.

56. Anna*, interview by Emma Schrott, May 23, 2021.

57. Elisabeth*, interview 2021.

58. Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context*, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

59. Adil Sbai, "TikTok—Der neue Stern Am Social-Media-Himmel," in *Influencer Marketing*, ed. Marlis Jahnke (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2021), 108.

60. Fabian, interview. ("Ja, was die gesellschaftspolitische gesamte Diskussion angeht haben wir ja gerade so Bewegungen wie Black Lives Matter oder auch wenn ich an die Kurd*innen / Türk*innen Proteste letztes Jahr in Favoriten zurückdenk, hat die TikTok diese Proteste so org auf globaler Ebene als auch im kleinen sogar in Österreich sehr stark beeinflusst. … Also das hat wirklich großes Potenzial um realpolitisch auch Veränderung zu bringen und beeinflusst die sozialen Bewegungen enorm.")

61. Olivia Sadler, "Defiant Amplification or Decontextualized Commercialization? Protest Music, TikTok, and Social Movements," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 2 (April 2022): 8. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221094769.

62. @zoffnix, interview. ("Ich find der Unterschied ist, dass es Spaß macht. Also mir hat selten ein Facebook Beitrag Spaß gemacht ehrlicherweise, aber TikToks Videos zu machen ist für einen selber auch witzig.")

63. Nick Montgomery and Carla Bergman, *Joyful Militancy: Building Resistance in Toxic Times*. (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

64. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, "TikTok," 3.

65. Anna*, interview. ("Ja weil auf TikTok sind halt eben Leute viel persönlicher und reden viel persönlicher über ihre Meinungen.")

66. @yourfuturesteppapai, interview. ("Weil ich halt immer auch natürlich mit der Person verbunden werde, die halt den Content macht.")

67. @billiesteirisch, interview. ("Ich versuch's auf einer persönlichen Ebene ... Bei mir funktioniert das nur wenn ich mit meinem Gesicht und meiner Stimme wirklich was mache, was mir eingefallen ist oder wo ich singe.")

68. Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich, "Dancing to the Partisan Beat," 264.

69. @zoffnix, interview. ("Aber das ist auf TikTok natürlich eine komplett neue Dimension mit diesen Videos, wo du dich ja selber auch so preisgibst, egal in was für einer Form, ob du redest ob du tanzt; das ist ja eine ganz neue andere Dimension wo du quasi nicht nur durch Wörter nicht nur durch Schrift argumentierst, sondern tatsächlich halt eine komplette...deine ganze Persönlichkeit mitreinimmst.")

70. Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances, & Meanings in a Mobile Application; An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikTok's Musicking" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2022), 74.

71. Ebru, interview. ("Na ja dadurch, dass TikTok eine reine Videoplattform ist, wird man nicht mit Texten zu bombardiert.")

72. Chris Tedjasukmana and Jens Eder, "Video Activism on the Social Web," in *Contemporary Radical Film Culture: Networks, Organisations and Activists*, ed. Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, and Jack Newsinger (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

73. Tina Askanius, "Videos for Change," in *The Handbook of Development Communication and Social Change*, ed. Karin Wilkins, Raffael Obregon, and Thomas Tufte (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 453–70.

74. Kathrin Fahlenbrach, "Video-Aktivismus: Formen und Strategien der audiovisuellen Mobilisierung im Netz," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 33, no. 2 (September 2020): 471, https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2020-0039.

75. Ibid., 468–69.

76. Ibid., 458–59.

77. @zoffnix, interview. ("Wenn man irgendwo ist und dann spielt's ein Lied, das man schon von TikTok kennt, dann ist das das Lied von TikTok. ... Fast so eine Kultur eigentlich, die da mit TikTok entstanden ist.")

78. Crystal Abidin and D. 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), 62.

79. Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (January 2021): 80, https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140.

80. Abidin and Kaye, "Audio memes," 58.

81. Jing Zeng and Crystal Abidin, "'#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers': Studying the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok," *Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (August 2021): 2470, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1961007.

82. Fabian, interview. ("Also ich hab wie man's aus YouTube kennt einfach direkt in die Kamera gesprochen, teilweise möglichst energisch, damit die Leute auch dableiben und zuschauen, das war vielleicht etwas performativ, aber grundsätzlich hab ich keine Rolle in dem Sinn gespielt und durch Sketches versucht Leute zu erreichen und es hat trotzdem gut funktioniert.")

83. Xinyu Zhao and Crystal Abidin, "The 'Fox Eye' Challenge Trend: Anti-Racism Work, Platform Affordances, and the Vernacular of Gesticular Activism on TikTok," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (February 2023): 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157590.

84. Ibid., 12.

85. Samantha Hautea, Perry Parks, Bruno Takahashi, and Jing Zeng, "Showing They Care (Or Don't): Affective Publics and Ambivalent Climate Activism on TikTok," *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 2 (April 2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121101234.

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Rap al Caudillo Trend: TikTok's Queer Subversion of Spanish National Imagery

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Abstract: After its peak in popularity, TikTok has become one of the preferred platforms for users of all ages and cultural backgrounds. Due to its extremely accurate and personalized algorithm, the application has generated a phenomenon that allows us to explore new horizons in the formation of online communities. With the implementation of sounds, users can find profiles of other users with whom they share more than a single interest. By using someone else's voice in a lip-sync or an acting scenario, users can connect on the basis of broader life experiences, shared feelings, or other references. Consequently, certain sounds are more likely to be used by similar users, creating various subgroups based on repeated topics, such as experiences of queerness. In Spain, queer TikTok has become a space for activism and for sharing personal stories of resilience. Currently, the main representative of non-binary identities in national media is Samantha Hudson, a multidisciplinary artist and performer known for their controversial lyrics and out-of-context social media content. One of Samantha's singles, "Por España," released on the National Day of Spain, or Día de la Hispanidad, in 2021, uses deep-rooted national imaginary to depict a rise in extreme-right militancy linked with an increase in homophobic and transphobic aggression in Spain. Part of this song, in which the artist refers to Spanish dictator Francisco Franco with subversive lyrics that pay homage to people killed in the Spanish Civil War, became one of the most popular TikTok trends among the national LGBTQ+ community. The videos under the sound Rap al Caudillo feature normative moves from other dance challenges in the mainstream heterosexual spheres of the app to enhance the powerful lyrics as a way of reclaiming space not only on the platform but also in Spanish national culture and imagery. Moreover, this article aims to show how the trend epitomizes Generation Z humor. In sum, this article proposes an analysis of the impact of Hudson's "Por España" and the subsequent TikTok trend that evidences the impact of internet culture in Gen Z's humor and empowerment.

Keywords: TikTok; Queertok; Samantha Hudson; "Por España,"; Rap al Caudillo; folklore; hispanicity; online communities

Objectives and Methodology

As a general user of TikTok and consumer of queer content on the app, I have been able to experience the generally safe space that the online community offers to relate to other users on the basis of deeply personal experiences of gender and sexuality. The knowledge shared there by the creators and users who interact in the comments section became key in my own process of self-exploration. Having lived this firsthand, I find it important to share my online experience and to give more insight on the construction of communities on TikTok involving music by dissident artists. In this light, the main purpose of this article is to understand the impact of Samantha Hudson's song "Por España" on the younger generations and how the trend created around it became a space for the queer community to use key assets of the platform in order to perform activism.

The methodology used for this study is mainly qualitative, as I will focus on the cultural context of the song and trend, as well as the reception among the general public. For this purpose, I draw from the methods of Juan Bermúdez's proposed "E³thnography."[1] In his work, Bermúdez reinforces Christine Hine's idea of an "Embedded, Embodied and Everyday experience [of] the E3 internet"[2] to propose a new conception of ethnography that considers the experience of music in the digital space as more than just interaction with a screen. Instead, as he suggests, there are far more elements that have agency in the process of creating, sharing, consuming, and interpreting the piece (see Bermúdez in this Issue). Therefore, my analysis departs from the idea that physical and virtual spaces are not separate but contribute together to the process of *musicking.*[3]

Accordingly, this study proposes, first, an approach to the original song and its complexity as a piece of activism in a context of rising extreme-right beliefs in Spanish society. Once I have carefully considered the background information, I will delve into an examination of the trend through my perspective as consumer, before drawing final conclusions. For the last

section, I have selected four videos from the Rap Al Caudillo trend on TikTok on the basis of the popularity of the profiles, their following, and the overall impact of their video. During this process, it was also important to find TikTokers who portrayed the trend in diverse ways, whether through their acting or the setting of the video, so as to present a wider perspective on the different interpretations and reactions to Hudson's song.

An Introduction to TikTok and Online Communities

Social media features encourage unique ways of relating to other users online, as is the case with Instagram stories or hashtags on Twitter. Although most of these are shared across platforms, TikTok has introduced a new system for building communities with the "Sounds" option. Sounds work similarly to hashtags, as viewers can click on the name of the sound at the bottom of the video to be taken to a new page, where all clips using the same sound will appear. This means that new dynamics have emerged in the phenomenon of becoming viral, as well as new opportunities to connect with like-minded people through shared experiences. According to TikTok, "Sound is the universal language of TikTok that sparks global trends, inspires endless creativity, and unifies communities around the world."[4] Further, Serrano et al. add that "for many videos, the music serves as part of a dance routine, a lip-syncing battle, or as the backdrop for a comedy skit. However, sound can also function as a story builder and can be used to deliver a precise message."[5] As we can see, sounds also carry a meaning and construct a shared narrative, usually established through a *trend*. On TikTok, a trend is the association of a sound with particular video content, whether it be choreography, certain gestures while lip-syncing, or the portrayal of a given scenario to share personal stories on a specific topic.

Unlike hashtags, which are usually specific to only one interest depending on the broadness of the terms used, sounds may appeal to very distinct communities and even be shared across groups, each of which will give it a nuanced meaning by adapting the narrative and video performance to their mutual experiences. Once these have reached a certain level of success on the app, typically measured by user engagement through comments, likes, and shares, the trend is considered to be established. Thanks to the algorithm, trends are key to establishing online communities that are

not based solely on an artist or a product, as is more likely to happen on Instagram. Instead, TikTok subgroups are built around distinct references that allow users to create a shared culture. For this, the app's algorithm works with another essential feature of TikTok, the "For You" page, which has become a key component of the platform's experience. As Herrman observes, "The most obvious clue is right there when you open the app: the first thing you see isn't a feed of your friends, but a page called 'For You.' It's an algorithmic feed based on videos you've interacted with, or even just watched."[6] Furthermore, analyzing the relation between this page and communities on the app, Messner claims that

> this algorithmic curation centers the purpose and function of TikTok around the individual user's consumption of content. This contributes to a broader phenomenon on the For You page: the formation of online communities, or "sides," of TikTok. There are many different types of communities on TikTok, each centered around a topic, and each encompassing a wide variety of characteristics that are particular to themselves. These communities produce and share content that is unique to their own experiences. This content includes the medium of sound.[7]

Moreover, Dunja Nešović shares in an article her experience on TikTok as a queer woman. Regarding the finding of a lesbian community on the platform, she says:

> The re-using of the sounds encourages lip-synching, which affirms the norm of performance on the platform. Moreover, it also allows for the proliferation of memetic content, which in turn affirms the cultural and social context of the content creators and consumers. As the sounds can be re-used by a multitude of users, they become a social, or a vernacular affordance, since in some cases certain sounds reflect specific ideas or identity communities on TikTok that appropriate those sounds for individual and cultural expression.[8]

As she mentions, there are multiple communities on the platform based on the content they share. These communities may be more or less stable depending on what they have in common (see Merlin, and Burkart in this Issue). For instance, a group of users that connected by following the latest details on the missing submarine that attempted to visit the remains of the Titanic formed a community that lasted the few days until the case lost mediatic impact. However, we could consider that the core community that was already united by their interest in the Titanic was a more stable unit that existed before the incident and remained together after the impact of the

submarine accident. This space is known as TitanicTok, a word created by adding the suffix "-tok"—in reference to the app—to the name of the subject that unites the users, a common process for naming core communities on the app, as evidenced by BookTok or QueerTok. It is evident that the rapidly changing nature of online spaces is reflected in the app, making these communities vastly variable in content but also more likely to be volatile. However, it is important to note that these are not exclusive to TikTok but are shared across platforms.[9] Most creators on TikTok also generate content for other platforms, such as Instagram or YouTube, in personal profiles that are usually linked to their TikTok accounts, which makes it more likely for communities to stabilize. What is particularly interesting here, however, is the way narratives are constructed in an app that favors short audiovisual content and thrives on novelty. As artist Bo Burnham describes in his song "Welcome to the Internet" (2021), "Could I interest you in everything? All of the time / A little bit of everything / All of the time / Apathy's a tragedy / And boredom is a crime / Anything and everything / All of the time."[10]

In order to answer this question, I will focus on Spanish QueerTok, a greatly diverse community in which activism is particularly prominent, mostly due to the exponential growth of anti-trans content seen among other groups, from trans-exclusionary feminists who deliberately target trans creators to streamers who make repeated homophobic remarks in front of millions of viewers. One of the main figures of queer activism in national pop culture is Samantha Hudson,[11] a multidisciplinary artist and performer known on social media for their out-of-context content. She has also appeared on different spaces of mainstream TV, from chat shows to reality shows like MasterChef Celebrity, becoming one of the only representations of non-binary identities in Spanish media. It is for this reason, together with her usual comedic yet powerful tone, that many of her statements have gone viral in national queer spheres, making her one of the main voices of national QueerTok trends. One track received outstanding praise among LGBTQ+[12] communities inside and outside TikTok following its release and the release of its music video. The song "Por España" will be the focal point of this study, as its impact online was unprecedented.

"Por España," the New Queer National Anthem and Its Cultural Background[13]

Written by Papa Topo as the soundtrack to the film *¡Corten!* and first published on October 12, 2021, National Day of Spain, the single "Por España" (In the name of Spain) quickly became celebrated in queer spaces, given its critical and vindicative tone and its use of deep-rooted national imagery. Proof of this is the fact that various drag performers used the song in their shows on the day of the release. In Candy Darling, a queer bar in Barcelona, I had the opportunity to see drag artist Jourdan Mcdaniel performing a lip-sync to the song with the message "paguen la deuda colonial" (pay the colonial debt) on a prop. Other examples of the song's popularity are some of comments on the music video uploaded to the artist's YouTube page on the day of the release. User @angelasegura1099 says, "This is not a song, it is a manifesto. How lucky are we to have such a brilliant brain. You are wonderful"[14] (posted in 2022).

As for its release, it is not by chance that the artist chose this date, seeing as the National Day of Spain is heavily associated with the values of the Francoist regime (1939–1975), still upheld today by nostalgic nationalist parties and National Catholic groups. Día de la Hispanidad is a bank holiday in which the country commemorates the arrival of Columbus in America. The festivity has long been used by right-wing parties and extreme Catholic groups to publicly uphold fascist and Francoist symbols under the premise of celebrating Spanish national culture. David Marcilhacy explains that it "had an exceptional assimilating ability, which allowed [the regime] to agglutinate and articulate disparate values that constituted the ideological foundations of the Francoist regime: all through the dictatorship, it was the best support of a nationalist cult that celebrated precisely the homeland, the nation, the pure race, the empire and Catholicism, ingredients of National Catholicism."[15] This has created a rather tense atmosphere in which many anti-racist groups and activists use their platforms and organize demonstrations every year to shed light on the reality of colonialism, its past devastation, and the present abusive links that Spain still has with the colonies. Esther Mayoko Ortega writes in an article for *Pikara Magazine* that Spain "can only be understood [as white] through a narration that has denied and ignored the operation of homogenization and 'racial hygiene' executed from 1492 on in the [Iberian] peninsula."[16] Furthermore, she states that "the black or Afro-descendant population received the systematic obliteration of our bodies' presence,

which also revealed the implication of the Spanish Kingdom in the trade of African people, by kidnapping and enslaving them since the beginning of the sixteenth century."[17]

The concept of Hispanicity or Spanishness, related to the idea of a national belonging and a national identity, is the focus of the song's criticism, as it is still currently used by conservatives to create social hierarchies of Spanish-ness according to one's adherence to traditional, conservative values of the regime. Through satirical and extremely complex lyrics packed with references to Spanish history, the artist claims back traditional symbols appropriated by fascist and Catholic nationalist groups, like folklore music. Moreover, Hudson also reclaims the Spanish identity that has been denied her and others for being queer in the song. In this regard, Ion Goikoetxea mentions in his study of Hudson's music video the artist's intention to criticize extreme-right notions of Spanish patriotism by summarizing her own words in an interview prior to the release of the song.

> [Samantha Hudson] focused on identity politics, namely the political strategies related to the Spanish identity carried out by extreme-right and neofascist parties who call for a patriotic sentiment, the sentiment that everyone belongs to the same territory but that, at the same time, fixes certain items to determine who is excluded from being a true patriot or a true Spaniard: feminists, the LGBTQ+ community, right-wing voters, etc. Therefore, she denounces the exclusionary nature of these Spanish identities, since they ignore many Spanish citizens who do not abide by [their] established canon of normativity.[18]

This criticism is present throughout the music video, from which we can extract key frames that perfectly depict the reality of conservative values in Spain through irony. The first image is shown on figure 1, in which we can see Samantha surrounded by a group of four other drag performers. All of them are well-known drag artists in Spain—from left to right, Gad Yola, Hornella Góngora, Sergio Satanassa, and Venedita Von Däsh—who present different and diverse images of queerness. The artist that I want place emphasis on, nonetheless, is Gad Yola, dressed in a dotted yellow dress (arguably reminiscent of traditional *sevillana* dresses) over a shirt with the word *castiza*. This term was used in colonial times to refer to the child of a Spanish colonizer with a "mestizo/a", a person of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. With time, the word started to be used as a symbol of purity and belonging to the idea of a Spanish race.[19] Therefore, it is clear that her presence is a claim for her belonging as a Spanish citizen despite the racist threats that she must

endure on a daily basis.

Figure 1: Samantha Hudson surrounded by a group of four other drag performers in the music video "Por España" (screenshot)

After the presented scene, Samantha and her group enter a recreation of the bar Don Pepe, known for its decoration with fascist symbols, like pre-constitutional Spanish flags or pictures of dictator Francisco Franco (1892–1975). Once their presence has been acknowledged, a fight erupts between Samantha's crew and the men who were on the premises. This is, once again, extremely meaningful, as the fact that dissident people—more specifically, migrant drag artists—are the ones receiving pain in this scenario clearly alludes to their vindication at belonging to Spanish society despite being marginalized and continuously targeted. As this scene plays, the lyrics of the song call in a brilliant play of irony for violence to be exerted: "Oh for Spain / Make me suffer in the name of Spain / Cause me pain in the name of Spain / Get rowdy with me for Spain / Give me martyrdom with unmeasured pain / To me and the ones of my kind / Give us pain in the name of Spain,"[20] the chorus claims. At this instance, the pain is received "in the name of Spain," evoking the idea of the transmutation of pain. Those who can bear the pain and move forward can claim Spanish-ness. It is clear, then, that Hudson and her fellow drag artists are assuming the position of martyrs in an allusion to the notion of suffering and the worship of pain associated with Catholicism, very present in Spanish culture. What is more, this pain is clearly eroticized in the images shown in the video, as well as in the lyrics and the tone of

the singer, reminiscent of a sexual tension between extreme-right and fascist men and the gay men and trans women whom they feel so outraged by ("I'm the fag you dream of"[21]).

Following up on this idea, sexual tension is drawn particularly towards the image of dictator Franco, as there are many instances in which Hudson appears in intimate situations with him. The image of the dictator in the video represents an ideology that still lives on in Spain through fascist and National Catholic groups, but also in a system that has been deeply impacted by a fascist and imperialist past. An example of this can be found on the next key frame, shown in figure 2, in which Samantha is dressed in a traditional gown and uses bullfighting material with the colors of the Spanish flag as a headdress.

Figure 2: Samantha dressed in a traditional gown (screenshot of "Por España")

This image is particularly impactful, given that the artist evokes a scenario in which she is alone with Franco while she performs a private show in a rather flirty manner. Moreover, the lyrics playing over this scene are an original version of a good-night prayer, edited to say "four corners to my bed / four angels that keep me safe / four bars to my window / and I wait for you on all

fours"[22] over a *copla* sound. As can be seen, Hudson makes a clear statement by using traditional symbols, both with the clothes and musical choice, at a time when she is seducing the dictator as he watches her with a certain expression of desire. However, it is Hudson who symbolically has the power by appearing with a bullfighter cape, insinuating that she can fight him like a bullfighter does the animal.[23] After this intimate moment, the video cuts to a dance interlude that plays *bakalao* music, a type of electronic dance music that originated in Valencia, Spain, in the 1980s and became the sound of a generation that used parties and nightlife as a way of freeing themselves from routines and looking forward to a democratic future after the repressions of the dictatorship, before the music style was appropriated by Nazi groups.[24]

The culmination of this scene returns to the private show scenario. There, the video offers yet another powerful instance of how the artist uses irony to denounce the anti-LGBTQ+ values upheld by the regime and inherited by conservative parties and neofascist groups. As shown in figure 3, Samantha shoots dictator Franco in a sort of poetic justice image immediately after singing "Against the wall, come shoot me / In the name of Spain, daddy / Make me look pretty / Make me look charming / In a ditch."[25]

Figure 3: Samantha Hudson mata a Franco "por España", en su pasodoble contra la lgtbifobia | Europa FM

Samantha shoots dictator Franco (screenshot of "Por España")

During the civil war that preceded Franco's dictatorship in Spain, many executions took place. They were targeted toward those who did not uphold the Francoist values, including queer people, among many others. The bodies of the people killed by Francoist troops were buried in ditches, and no information was given to the families. Still today, many deaths have not been accounted for and families are seeing their efforts wasted, as they receive no answer in their quest to find the remains of loved ones and cannot properly grieve for them. Moreover, the law against "the lazy and the miscreant" (*ley de vagos y maleantes*), passed in 1933 to control—and consequently persecute—homeless citizens and migrants was modified in 1954 by the regime to include queer people, who faced up to five years in medical institutions or even prison. This law was not completely abolished until 1995. Hence, the fact that Samantha, an openly trans non-binary person dressed in a traditional gown, is executing Franco sends a clear message of rejection to a regime that remains alive in the ideology of contemporary political parties, but it also represents the rage of many citizens who are made to feel as though they do not belong in Spanish society, as perfectly summarized in the above quotation by Goikoetxea.[26]

One final image from the video stands out for its critical and moving quality. It is shown in figure 4.

Figure 4: Final image (screenshot of "Por España")

After Hudson shoots dictator Franco, a *sevillana* starts playing as the soundtrack to an impeccable depiction of the current Spanish political

situation. In the background, the parking lot that appeared during the *bakalao* interlude shows a brutal fight between all the characters in the video: the group of trans women, the men from the fascist bar, the group of people from the electronic dance scene, and dictator Franco. Hudson appears wearing nipple covers in the form of the Osborne bull, a symbol associated with fascist-nationalist ideologies, as well as a tight thong and high heels. She is also waving a Spanish Republican flag, a symbol of resistance against the Franco regime and fascism in general, imitating the action of a bullfighter. While maintaining eye contact with the camera, Samantha approaches Franco and tosses the flag over his face, all the while singing "Look at the caliber, Paco / Oh, One, Great and Free,"[27] a phallic reference that maintains the aforementioned sexual tension between the two characters and also paraphrases the Francoist motto used as propaganda for their project of a nation that upheld colonial, conservative, and Catholic values in reminiscence of imperialist times (One, Great and Free). In addition, the outburst she leaves behind is extremely indicative of today's social context. Military forces appear as a threat to the trans group, as do the other men and a new group of cis women holding a poster that reads "Boys have penises, girls have vaginas," a slogan from the extremist Catholic group Hazte Oir, with which some feminists have allied. This link emerges from a trans-exclusionary movement within feminism which has been especially notorious in Spain as a response to the proposal of a new trans law, which will grant fundamental rights to minors and propose new bureaucratic processes to de-medicalize transitions.[28]

In view of this context, Hudson becomes a symbol of resilience as the song ends. The last image we see is of her gazing intensely at the camera before the credits roll in to the sound of her distinct laugh. This choice is, once again, not a coincidence. As mentioned, the tone of the song is satirical, yet the message is quite pungent. It is precisely a trans person performing in drag that is able to release this piece, since the performance seen on a non-normative body is often not regarded as serious. Therefore, a drag queen, a *travesti*, can use a performative license to send a subversive message because it is not understood as anything other than comedy.[29] It is Hudson's position as both martyr and prophet, as well as the reclaiming of space within national imagery, that has made of this song an LGBTQ+ anthem and a cathartic product. The fact that the response of the audience at concerts and queer clubs when the song plays is a collective chant, as I have been

able to experience firsthand, only further proves that the song has become a cornerstone for the community that has allowed listeners to channel fear and anger in view of the increasing homophobic aggression and the rise of the extreme right in a space where they feel safe. This catharsis does not only exist in physical spaces but also online. One of the most popular trends on Spanish QueerTok during the months of October and November 2021 was the Rap al Caudillo trend, created around an extract of "Por España."

Rap al Caudillo Trend: Reclaiming Space on TikTok

> *Paco, Paquillo, sexy Caudillo / You'll be my bishop and I'll be your altar-boy / I'm your slave, I'm your submissive / Leash me up and take me to Mass / I'm not boring, make me a noose / With the necklaces, the necklaces of your wife / I love your eaglet lots and lots like jelly tots / In the name of Spain, Paco / You make me horny / Against the wall, come shoot me / In the name of Spain, daddy / Make me look pretty / Make me look charming / In a ditch*[30]

This is the section that user @begaywithgirardi[31] chose for their sound, which later became part of a major trend on TikTok. Writing "the best part of the national anthem" over the video and with the caption "what a rush #porespaña #[rainbow flag] #samanthahudson #lgbt #nonbinary," this user uploaded the *bakalao* section of "Por España" and registered it as a sound that was then used in 1,998 other videos.[32] Although the reason for this choice could be merely aesthetic, I believe there to be two main reasons for its popularity. On the one hand, we are seeing an increase in the use of electronic dance music in mainstream music, which makes it more likely that young listeners will to relate to it. In Spain, for instance, pop star Aitana Ocaña organized a tour of clubbing sessions in early 2023 to promote her new album, *Alpha*. Moreover, directors Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi released an eight-episode show called *La Ruta* in November 2022, available on Atresplayer Premium, about the culture around *bakalao* music, also showing a growing interest in the scene and its cultural impact. On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the ironic, yet provocative, lyrics have played a major role in the viralization of the segment. In just a few lines, the artist manages to touch on various controversial topics that have affected Spanish society in the last several years.

The lyrics chosen for the trend start by mentioning the relationship between the singer and the dictator (Caudillo), depicted as a bishop. While it is evident

that there was a strong link between the Francoist ideals and the Christian Church, these words are, in fact, a reference to the sexual harassment scandal in Spain. For decades now, many people have come forward to share their personal stories on the abuse they suffered during their time studying at religious institutions, in which adults, all linked somehow to the Church, approached children in predatory ways, even inflicting physical and sexual abuse on them. Following this, the song goes on to provoke the dictator by mentioning a noose made with the necklaces of his wife. Carmen Polo, Francisco Franco's wife, became known as "the necklace woman" (*la collares*), given her love for pearl necklaces, which she mostly took without paying from shops all around the country. This line precedes what seems like a playful scene in which the artist invites Franco to engage in a sexual encounter. However, this playfulness continues with an innuendo about the dictator's body in which his phallus is identified with the eagle that represented Francoism. Then, a seemingly innocent popular expression reminiscent of an innocent love ("I love you lots and lots like jelly tots") is turned into a different love declaration. In the last lines, the singer changes the foolish, playful tone. In a much more ardent manner, the artist asks the dictator to make love to her in a violent way and, most importantly, in the name of Spain, recurring once again to the idea of suffering to claim national belonging. Finally, the verse culminates with Hudson demanding in a highly ironical sentence to be shot and buried in a ditch by her lover. What is more, the powerful image in the music video makes this section stand out even more. As described above, following this interlude, Hudson appears in an intimate moment with the dictator dressed in a traditional dress, wearing bullfighter's weapons as a headpiece and dancing seductively for him. At the end of the scene, when the singer addresses Franco after singing the first part of the section to him, she asks him to kill her while making a reference to the mass killings of people who did not represent his idea of Spanishness, including LGBTQ+ people who were shot and had their bodies carelessly thrown into ditches. Before Hudson has even had time to finish singing, she is shown shooting the dictator in a sort of poetic justice image that is followed only by a moment of silence and the last piece of folkloric music.

After the TikTok sound was created, a few people started uploading their own videos lip-syncing to it, mostly to show that they related to the lyrics, as users @soctontu and @virgleo did.[33] A few days later, creator @odcary2[34] uploaded a video with choreography that displayed dance moves commonly

used in many TikTok dance challenges. It was then that more profiles imitated the dance routine in their own videos, shaping the popular trend and thus creating a community around a sound that users felt close to while having a sense of safety and inclusion. Regarding the choreography, I am particularly interested in the moves chosen by the original creator, who selected dance steps from mainstream TikTok trends, mostly associated with heterosexual spaces. As Laura Cervi exposes, most trending dance routines follow the same aesthetic: "almost entirely choreographed from the hips up, with the dancer staying in one place."[35] She also mentions one of the key aspects of dance, which involves direction. She observes that contrary to other styles of dance, in which diagonals, for instance, are a central part of the routine, dancers on the app must be facing forward toward the camera and thus do not usually change their spatial focus. Furthermore, since most videos do not show the creator's entire body, dances concentrate on arm movement and are heavily reliant on facial expression.[36] Some of the most popular dance moves on the app include the "woah," "when a dancer makes a quick, small circular motion with his/her fists and leans into a freeze position when the beat drops,"[37] or the "dice roll walk," when a user takes a step forward while mimicking a dice roll with one hand by their hip.[38] These had barely appeared on a notorious Spanish QueerTok trend before, most videos consisting of lip-syncing or performances of specific scenarios sharing personal experiences. By including influences from other mainstream spheres, often associated with heterosexual trends that tend to be overly sexual, the choreographer manages to subtly reclaim space in an online culture that is being created and of which queer people are part, just as Hudson reclaims a sense of belonging to national folklore imagery for queer people. Moreover, these overly sexual moves are taken out of their original heterosexual context and inserted into a sound like that of "Por España," including dancing to lines that reference the singer becoming intimate with dictator Franco. This only further highlights the subversive aspect of the song and the catharsis experienced by the audience, who also use TikTok videos to channel their frustrations with a system that has allowed fascist and National Catholic groups to rise and pose a threat to their identity and gender expression, or even because it is simply a fun and easy way to connect with other LGBTQ+ users who have become part of a community by participating in the trend. An example of this can be found in @hugoarcones's video, which shows him doing the dance routine with the words "for those who played the Spanish anthem in class and are fans of

Franco, for you [pink heart emoji]" over the image.[39]

The seemingly light-hearted tone of the dance in combination with the complexity of the lyrics and their subversive undertones led to many complaints alluding to an alleged lack of consciousness of the dictatorship's context. For example, creator @joanrafart, known for his activism on the app, used the sound as background to a video of him answering a comment that read, "what would happen if I made a song against la veneno[40]?? Or any other person of the lgbt [sic] AAAAH okay."[41] Similarly, user @lucirodritt uploaded a video with the comment, "I am sure that if all republicans who died [during the civil war] listened to this, they would switch to the nationalist side." This video was then deleted, after the creator received multiple comments and duets from queer people like @bollokinki, who said in their video, "tell me you didn't understand the music video without telling me you didn't understand the music video."[42]

These complaints were made mostly by conservatives who do not seem to understand the need for reclaiming space within national folklore or current online culture, but also by people who do not fully grasp the pungent nuances of the song. As music journalist Fernando Navarro mentions, "'Por España' is pure provocation ahead of the advance of the Spanish extreme right and amidst a social atmosphere in which hate speech and homophobic aggressions are proliferating."[43] This same idea is brought up by Hudson in the article, who states, "This song would make no sense without its consequences. Provocation is useful for revealing that there is still a long way to go," to which she later adds, "without a shadow of doubt, the goal is to provoke the reaction that highlights that fascism remains alive."[44] To counter this, I propose a brief study of TikTok's use of irony, mostly influenced by Gen Z's humor, a key component to making this debate more complex. Although humor on digital spaces is not new or exclusive to TikTok and Generation Z, as a great part of the irony and satire displayed on the app has notorious links to the meme culture of the 2010s, it is interesting to analyze how younger generations apply these references through their own lens in order to obtain a more complex vision of trends happening in an app used mostly by teenagers.[45] According to Trevor Boffone, "the app is largely synonymous with Generation Z, or so-called Zoomers, given that teenagers and young twenty-somethings were the first community to adopt TikTok en masse. They continue to be the platform's trendsetters, dictating TikTok's larger, mainstream culture."[46] Regarding TikTok's comedy, Chloe Partlow and

Patricia Talarczyk propose absurdism as a form of humor that allows Gen Zers to cope with the uncertainty of their future following the economic crisis they lived through growing up, together with the threat of climate change and other social crises that they are still enduring.[47] Denisova, who understands TikTok humor as an extension of meme culture, makes a particularly fitting remark on the reactions to this trend. She argues that "those who are unfamiliar with the rules of digital discussion and styles of the internet slang, or possess limited awareness of the broader socio-political context, may consider memes meaningless."[48] This is, to my belief, one of the key reasons why people who criticized the content of the trend may have disagreed with the videos. Still, one may wonder what exactly these rules that operate in the app and that lead to such a style of comedic videos are. I believe that Spanish YouTuber Ter's new meaning of the concept of *performance* could be useful in answering this question. In her words, "A performance consists in channeling one single emotion in the most intense way possible in order to make a point, without nuances or disclaimers. It's taking an idea all the way through to the end and being fully committed, while simultaneously feeling detached from the idea."[49] This is exactly what users have done with the selected fragment from Hudson's song. They have taken the irony from the lyrics and applied a coat of Gen Z humor, which they then channel through a seemingly fun and cheerful dance published on their profiles, without the need of adding a disclaimer any nuances in the description of the video.

In addition, the YouTuber follows up on her idea of irony according to Gen Z in another video, in which she specifically mentions the use that younger artists have made of Catholic symbols and how internet culture has helped us find new meanings to traditional imagery. She suggests, "For me, and I think for many people of my generation, [Catholic symbols] have acquired a completely new, but not less profound, meaning. We have turned Catholic iconography into emojis."[50] Taking this new meaning of emojis closer to the study of "Por España" and the Rap al Caudillo trend, it becomes evident that the detachment that allows Ter's idea of performance to surface does not imply disregard for a traumatic past context, like a dictatorship, but rather a different way to connect with it. Users @pabsperez and @lacuchillos[51] appear together in a perfect example of how turning fascist or religious iconography into TikTok characters, like Ter's mention of emojis, is not simply an attitude of mockery. Instead, it is a way for a generation that did not live under those circumstances to connect with the past from their own perspective

as queer people who today live in a reality deeply influenced by a fascist past. Furthermore, the YouTuber also touches on how relating to historical or religious characters is yet another form of relating to and resignifying symbols that are deeply rooted in national culture. In the same video, while talking about Spanish trap artist La Zowi, she says that "with this mentality, the patience of the Virgin Mary is completely equivalent to the patience of La Zowi when her crush doesn't call her."[52] For users, taking on the role of the martyr present in the song therefore becomes an opportunity to momentarily embody the ideas of resilience and resistance in order to symbolically claim their space and feel as though they belong in QueerTok, a community of like-minded others.

Conclusions

Social media and internet culture have shaped new ways of relating to others and, more importantly, of creating communities. With this study, I have aimed to provide a complex account of online communities and how they are forged through TikTok performance. As described, the unique "Sounds" feature plays a key role in the way people relate to each other and establish links with each other. The narrative function of Sounds, which allows users to associate certain ideas and experiences with a fragment of a dialogue or song, is essential to the understanding of trends. These can be understood as the ritualization of a performance[53] in which all users reproduce the same video to share their personal stories, which allows groups of people to connect with each other and, as a result, to form online communities based on their particular interests and even their identities, as happens on QueerTok. In Spain, Papá Topo and Samantha Hudson's song "Por España" became the center of a new trend, named Rap Al Caudillo. As explored throughout the study, the artist's rejection of conservative values associated with traditional Spanish culture and the reclaiming of a sense of belonging to national society and imagery serves as relief for queer people who share experiences of fear and rejection. This was also paralleled on TikTok through the trend, where conservative and trans-exclusionary creators started to share false ideas related to queer people. Furthermore, the trend has received immense

criticism from both users and non-users of the app, who claim that the dance routine is insensitive toward victims of Francoism. In contrast, different ideas of humor have been presented with the aim of explaining how younger generations have modified meme culture together with satire and camp. By using bold analogies and expressing themselves in a seemingly uninterested and provocative manner, young people have found a way to externalize their anxieties through the irony of memes.

While this study was limited to the analysis of one specific trend, I find it would be useful to expand the ideas developed here to other mainstream trends across TikTok subgroups. Similar studies have already been provided by scholars like Trevor Boffone, who has published multiple excellent works on TikTok and its functioning. By further analyzing TikTok content as an extension of meme and internet culture, we would be able to better understand the limits of humor among the younger generation so that we can hear their voices and understand their activism. Although it is true that not all sections of TikTok use humor in favor of social justice, it is important to remember that the world as we know it is becoming less physical and more hybrid every day. This means that online trends—and by extension, online activism—do not always remain on apps and platforms, and they can achieve real impact in other non-online spheres. As Tandon et al. correctly point out, "social media has not only helped in exploring various ways of engaging with the political discourses but also in terms of sensitizing people at a more personalized level through social networks."[54]

Notes

1. Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context*, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025); Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances, & Meanings in a Mobile Application; An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikTok's Musicking" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2022); Juan Bermúdez, "¿Qué música? Si nadie toca... si nadie sabe...: Reflexionando el etnografiar de un musicking digital," *Boletín Música* 52–53 (julio 2019–junio 2020): 51–60.

2. Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (Abingdon and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

3. Juan Bermúdez, "It's All About 'Being There': Rethinking Presence and Co-Presence in the Ethnographic Field during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of World Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (2023): 19–35. https://doi.org/10.1558/jwpm.26375.

4. "Creating Content Just Got Easier with TikTok's Sounds for Business," *TikTok, Newsroom*, August 16, 2019. All links accessed on January, 21, 2025.

5. Medina Serrano, Juan Carlos, Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, and Simon Hegelich. "Dancing to the Partisan Beat: A First Analysis of Political Communication on TikTok," *12th ACM Conference on Web Science*, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1145/3394231.3397916 .

6. John Herrman, "How TikTok Is Rewriting the World," *The New York Times,* March 10, 2019.

7. Ellen Messner, "The Queer Sounds of Tiktok" (MA diss., Bowling Green State University, 2022).

8. Dunja Nešović, "Now You See Me: Visibility of the Lesbian Identity on TikTok," *Institute of Network Cultures* (blog), October 8, 2021.

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

10. "Welcome to the Internet—Bo Burnham (from"Inside"—ALBUM OUT NOW)," YouTube, 2021.

11. She/her pronouns will mainly be used throughout this article to refer to Samantha, as she tends to refer to herself that way on social media and TV appearances. However, they/them will occasionally be used, since they have stated that they feel identified with neutral pronouns as well.

12. Although the author is aware that queer and LGBTQIA+ are not absolute synonyms, both terms will be hereby used similarly for stylistic purposes. However, a nuance must be considered, as activist circles often use queer to refer to those identities that challenge social expectations of gender and sexuality.

13. This section is based on a conversation with Carlo Aguilar during a seminar centered around the ideas of Hispanicity, or Spanishness, and Samantha Hudson's production. For more information on Spanish culture and references to Catholicism and pain, see Carlota Aguilar, "La Voz Rota De Una España Rota: Los Discursos De La Escucha En El Presente Y Futuro Del Flamenco," in *Estamos Vivos De Milagro: 10 Años Después De Morente*, ed. Pedro Ordoñes Eslava (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2022), 277–296.

14. "Esto no es una canción, es un manifiesto. Que suerte tenemos de tener una mente así. Eres maravillosa(LL)."

15. "El concepto de Hispanidad tuvo una excepcional capacidad asimiladora, que le permitió aglutinar y articular valores dispares que constituían todos el fondo ideológico del régimen franquista: a lo largo de la dictadura, fue el mejor soporte de un culto nacionalista que celebraba justamente la Patria, la Nación, la Raza, el Imperio y el Catolicismo, ingredientes todos del nacionalcatolicismo." David Marcilhacy, "La Hispanidad Bajo El Franquismo: El Americanismo al Servicio de Un Proyecto Nacionalista," in *Imaginarios y Representaciones de España Durante El Franquismo*, ed. Stéphane Michonneau and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2014), 73–102: 100.

16. "¿Y el Reino de España? Claramente solo se puede entender así (como blanco) a través de una narración que ha negado e ignorado la operación de homogeneización e"higiene racial"

ejecutada a partir de 1492 en la península." Esther Mayoko Ortega, "Afrofeminismos En El Estado Español: Cartografiar La Blanquitud, Desplazar La Centralidad," *Pikara Magazine*, February 18, 2020.

17. "Para la población negra o afrodescendiente se reservó el borrado sistemático de la presencia de nuestros cuerpos que, además, delataban la implicación del Reino de España en el comercio de personas africanas, en su secuestro y esclavización desde comienzos del siglo XVI." Ibid.

18. "Tomó como eje las políticas de identidad, en concreto las estrategias políticas de identidad españolista llevadas a cabo por partidos de ultraderecha y neofascistas que apelan a un sentimiento patriótico, a un sentimiento de que todo el mundo pertenece a un mismo territorio, pero que al mismo tiempo fijan unos puntos que determinan quién no es un patriota o un español de verdad: las feministas, el colectivo LGTB, los de izquierdas... Por lo tanto, denuncia que estas identidades españolistas son muy excluyentes, ya que dejan de lado muchos españoles al no cumplir con un canon normativo establecido." Ion Goikoetxea, "Performance y Activismo a Través Del Videoclip de 'Por España' (2021) de Samantha Hudson," (BA diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2022), 15.

19. For further context, see definition by the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE), https://dle.rae.es/castizo.

20. "Ay, por España / Hazme sufrir por España / Dame dolor por España / Dame caña por España / Dame martirio / Con un dolor desmedido / A mí, a los de mi calaña / Danos caña por España."

21. "Soy la bujarra con la que sueñas tú."

22. "Cuatro esquinitas hay en mi cama / cuatro angelitos que me la guardan / cuatro barrotes en mi ventana / y yo te espero a cuatro patas."

23. Goikoetxea, "Performance y Activismo," 23.

24. Gianni Ginesi, "¡Baila Toda La Noche!: Fragments If Electronic Dance Music," in *Made in Spain: Studies in Popular Music*, ed. Sílvia Martínez and Héctor Fouce. Routledge Global Popular Music Series (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 135–43.

25. "Contra la pared, ven, fusílame / Por España, papi, déjame bien guapi / Déjame coqueta en una cuneta."

26. Goikoetxea, "Performance y Activismo," 24.

27. "Mira, Paco, qué calibre / Ay, una, grande y libre."

28. For further information, watch "GenPlayz's episode on the Trans Law," *YouTube* where young intellectuals debate and share their experiences on transition and the new proposition of law;

29. Extracted from a conversation with Teresa López Castilla during a private seminar. For more information on her work on queer identity, see Teresa López Castilla, "Por Ciento 'Nido,' Por Cierto 'Ruido': Disidencias de Género En La Música Electrónica de España y Latam," in *REBEL GRRRLS!!! Desigualdad de Género, Discursos, Disidencias y Activismo Feminista En La Música Popular*, ed. Candelaria Sánchez Olmos (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2023), 259–82.

30. "Paco, Paquillo, sexy caudillo / Tú serás mi obispo y yo, tu monaguillo / Soy tu esclava, soy tu sumisa / Ponme correa, llévame contigo a misa / Yo no soy sosa, hazme una soga / Con los collares, los collares de tu esposa / Me gusta mucho tu aguilucho / Como le gusta la trucha al trucho / Por España, Paco, me pones bellaco / Contra la pared, ven, fusílame / Por España, papi, déjame bien guapi / Déjame coqueta en una cuneta." A note on the translation: The lyrics quoted have many references to Spanish culture, from a critique to sexual harassment scandals in the Church to mentions of the dictatorship and its specific imagery, together with popular sayings that add a kitsch element to the song.

31. @begaywithgirardi, *TikTok.* Sound cannot be linked, as user eliminated the sound and made their account private. As a result, other videos mentioned cannot be added, given that many videos containing that sound have also been eliminated.

32. Data collected in June 2023.

33. @soctontu, "Echo de menos a esta cosa con mini piernas @virgleo," *TikTok.*

34. @odcary2, "'por españa paco' (dc: 🧑) @badbixsamantha t'estimo reina 🇪🇸," *TikTok.*

35. Laura Cervi, "Tik Tok and Generation Z," *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 12, no. 2 (2021): 198–204.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. For visual reference, see "TOP 10 TIKTOK DANCE MOVES | DO YOU KNOW THESE?," *YouTube.*

39. @hugoarcones, ".," *TikTok.*

40. Cristina Ortiz, also known as La Veneno, was one of the most influential trans women in Spanish popular culture. She became known in the early 2000s, as she first appeared on the TV show *Esta noche cruzamos el Mississippi* in 1996. Soon after, she became recognized as one of the first trans women to appear on public television and has since been recognized as an idol and symbol of freedom by the LGBTQIA+ community. In October of 2020, directors Javier Ambrossi and Javier Calvo released a show called *Veneno* around her life and legacy for trans women around the country.

41. @joanrafart, *TikTok*. This account is private and, consequently, video can neither be accessed nor linked.

42. @bollokinki, *TikTok*. This account is private and, consequently, video can neither be accessed nor linked.

43. "Por España es pura provocación ante el avance de la ultraderecha española y en mitad de un ambiente social en el que proliferan los mensajes de odio y hay agresiones homófobas." Fernando Navarro, "Samantha Hudson, La 'Bujarra' Que Da Caña al Fascismo Español," *El País*, October 16, 2021.

44. "'Esta canción sin consecuencias no tendría sentido. Precisamente para lo que sirve la provocación es para poner en evidencia todo el camino que queda por recorrer,' cuenta

Samantha Hudson. 'Sin lugar a dudas, el objetivo es provocar la reacción que ponga de manifiesto que el fascismo sigue vivo. O, más bien, sigue viVox,' añade." Ibid.

45. Rebeca Suárez-Álvarez and Antonio García-Jiménez, "Centennials En Tiktok: Tipología de Vídeos. Análisis y Comparativa España-Gran Bretaña Por Género, Edad y Nacionalidad," *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, no. 79 (2021): 1–22.

46. Trevor Boffone, ed. *Tiktok Cultures in the United States*. Routledge Focus in Digital Media and Culture (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022).

47. Chloe Partlow and Patricia Talarczyk, "Absurdism and Generation Z Humor: The Effects of Absurdist Content on Perceived Humor Levels in Generation Z Students," *Journal of Student Research* 10, no. 4 (2021): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i4.2011

48. Anastasia Denisova, "Political Memes as Tools of Dissent and Alternative Digital Activism in the Russian-Language Twitter" (PhD diss., University of Westminster, 2016).

49. "Una performance consiste en canalizar un único sentimiento de la manera más intensa posible para hacer un *point*. Sin matices y sin *disclaimers*. Es llevar una idea hasta el final y estar comprometido con ella a la vez que sientes un cierto desapego por la idea"; Ter, "Un concepto que me ha cambiado la vida: la 'PERFORMANCE,'" *YouTube*, September 29, 2018.

50. "Para mí, y yo creo que para mucha gente de mi generación, [los símbolos del catolicismo] han adquirido un significado completamente nuevo, y no por ello menos profundo, porque realmente hemos convertido la iconografía católica en emojis, en el mejor de los sentidos." Ter, "Por qué se usan cruces en el TRAP," *YouTube,* July 7, 2019.

51. @pabsperez and @lacuchillos, "@lacuchillos #samanthahudson #parati #pabsperez", *TikTok*.

52. "Con esta mentalidad, la paciencia que tiene la Virgen María es completamente equivalente a la paciencia que tiene La Zowi porque su *crush* no la llama." Ter, "Por qué se usan cruces en el TRAP," *YouTube*, July 7, 2019.

53. Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

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Old Clichés or a Transforming Community?
Early Music Interpreters on TikTok: Identity and Communication Strategies

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Abstract: This article investigates how performers of Western early music are musicking and interacting on and through TikTok, with a focus on their communication strategies and how they affirm their identity. This is the first attempt to examine the output on this social media platform of a group of musicians identified on the basis of a musical repertoire from the past. A first part devoted to methodological considerations is followed by the analysis of six case studies that can be considered representativeof the plurality of profile present on TikTok: both individual musician and ensemble, singers as well as instrumentalists have been considered. The last part of the article develops reflections ranging from the TikTokers themselves to their music personae, from the repertoire performed to the specificity of the format of the published videos for the TikTok platform. In addition, TikTokers' interaction with the audience as well as with colleagues specialized in the same field is examined. Far from being exclusively recreational in nature, the videos are often informative or reflect a professional or even commercial intent. In most cases the videos are competently shot, yet the manner of staging oneself remains close to everyday life. The large number of pieces performed by more TikTokers in a deterritorialised and asynchronous fashion reveals that the innovative way of producing music typical of this online musicking platform is also becoming established in the field of cultured music.

This survey highlights that the community of early music performers on TikTok, although still very small, is very diverse within itself and makes use of differentiated communicative strategies. This community is rapidly developing and oriented towards a participatory culture; moreover, it includes the affirmation of ethical and social values that go beyond the strictly musical sphere.

Keywords: multi-media online musicking; historically informed performance; multilocated and asynchronous performances; social media platforms; Western early music; participatory culture; identity; communication strategies; music personae

Introduction

The use of social media apps on (mobile) electronic devices has not only changed our way of communicating: "In the same way the use of digital media and devices transforms our daily lives, these technologies also influences our musical practices" and has "also enabled and reinforced the adaptation and development of (new) forms of musical practices."[1] Clearly, this extensive topic is impossible to explore in its entirety in a single essay. The object of investigation of this study is the multimedia musicking[2] of a group of people clearly identifiable on the basis of the musical repertoire they practice: the performers of early music. Considering that every multimedia or social media platform has its own specificities, the focus is on TikTok, the innovative platform that in the last few years has changed the way people can engage in musicking together, through the possibility of realizing multilocated and asynchronous musical performances independently and free of charge. The results of this survey can constitute an important step toward a deeper understanding of how musicians' mode of making music and their communication strategies are currently developing (see Burkhart in this Issue).

On the one hand, TikTok is nowadays undoubtedly one of the most popular social media platforms and offers an explicit appeal for musicking. On the other hand, the musicians active in historically informed performances are clearly a group that is identified by a specific musical repertoire and consequently represent a distinctly delineated object of investigation. (On the contrary, the repertoire included in the definition of "classical music" is very rich and differentiated and thus would lead to an overly broad basis for investigation.) In addition, it has to be considered that its members can also be regarded as a community (or a subculture) from the point of view of the history of the movement of historically informed performance practice. Nonetheless, bringing the two together in the same sentence raises questions: Do interpreters of early music publish videos on TikTok? If so, how do they communicate on a social media platform that specializes in short-form videos, designed for use on a mobile phone? And according to the nature of TikTok, should we expect videos with young people lip-syncing arias by Francesco Cavalli (1602–1676), or a dance challenge on the *Ballet Royal de la Nuit* by Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687)?

In this article I aim to investigate how early music performers are musicking

on TikTok, how they communicate and interact through the technical features of this audio-visual digital platform for multimedia musicking, and how they affirm their identity in a deterritorialized social space of interaction. The content is structured into three parts: After defining the study field and formulating my research questions, I present six case studies, each representing the typification of a different kind of user and/or posted content. I then present reflections based on an analysis of the case studies as well as other profiles that respond to the characteristics outlined in the first section.

Field of Investigation and Research Questions

As the videos by early music performers uploaded on TikTok are the object of this article, a methodologically indispensable step in establishing a lexical and conceptual basis to define the field of investigation is calling to mind what exactly the term "early music" means as defined by academic musicology. Harry Haskell provides the following definition in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

> A term once applied to music of the Baroque and earlier periods, but now commonly used to denote any music for which a historically appropriate style of performance must be reconstructed on the basis of surviving scores, treatises, instruments and other contemporary evidence.[3]

This definition is related to the concept of "historically informed performance practice," which can nowadays be applied not only to so-called early music but also to Beethoven, Brahms, or even Mahler.

When we search for the term "early music" on TikTok, we are confronted with the fact that this definition encompasses a very broad repertoire for TikTok users.[4] Indeed, videos on early computer music are available on this platform, early gabber, early hardcore, early hip-hop, early rap, early techno, early 2000s, early songs by Aussie rappers, and so on, up to the rather bizarre category "early quarantine songs." The existence of such a wide variety of options—all of them outside the realm of "classical music"—raises the question of the differing perceptions of the meaning of the adjective "early" in the time continuum of music history, a topic that cannot be discussed here. It therefore seems necessary to define the field of investigation more precisely. Given that in recent years the definition of "historically informed performance practice" has been applied to music from epochs closer and closer to our own,

and that therefore the term "early music" potentially overlaps with that of "classical music," in this article I focus on performers who specialize in the kind of music that was originally referred to as European or Western early music, namely music composed up to the middle of the eighteenth century.

In order to find early music performers on TikTok, I searched for numerous keywords and hashtags, representing musical styles or musical instruments of the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque eras, as well as names of famous composers who were active before circa 1750.[5] An initial observation becomes immediately evident: the early music community on TikTok represents a very small—indeed a microscopically tiny—minority of the over 1.5 billion TikTok users all over the world.[6] Despite this, difficulties arise in defining the field of investigation, for two reasons: First, we can find musicians who *also* play early music but who do not specialize in early music or in an instrument of the past such as the recorder or the cornetto. This category is largely comprised of organists, since the musical literature for this instrument also covers the Renaissance and Baroque eras, and guitarists who can play the lute and/or the theorbo as well. Second, the query for the keyword "medieval" or "medieval music" results almost exclusively in videos shot in a pseudo-medieval setting or recorded at costume festivals, which would certainly be an intriguing field for further investigation. However, such musical performances are much closer to cosplay re-enactments than "historically informed performances" in the academic sense. I decided to discard them because they are peculiar in terms of their characteristics and should form a topic for a different body of research.

For the present investigation, I have considered early music interpreters who are professional musicians or musicians on a full-time basis, whether they be singers, instrumentalists, church musicians, music teachers, or music students. Since the distinction between professional musicians and high-level amateur performers can be slippery and is not relevant for this survey, the latter category is not excluded. I have not considered the videos of users who work in the field of early music but exclusively post content about their private lives, nor those posted by people or associations that are active in public musicology but are not musicians.

Through an analysis of the output of early music interpreters (as defined above) on TikTok, I aim to answer questions pertaining to seven different yet interconnected topics. I would like to first observe the social and

geographical provenience of these musicians: Which age group and ethnicity do they belong to? Juan Bermúdez writes that "the performers, so-called TikTokers, try to construct a recognizable musical persona through their performances, so-called TikTok(s)."[7] Drawing on Philip Auslander's concept of "musical personae,"[8] he introduces the definition of "TikTok personae,"[9] which I will examine extensively in the second and third part of the essay. From now on I will use the term "TikToker(s)" for the user and "TikTok(s)" as a synonym for the video. As a second point, I would observe how the early music TikTokers present themselves on this platform: Do they create TikTok personae in a traditional or in an innovative way? How do they assert their identities (or rather the identity of their musical persona)? Third, I will consider the purpose for which early music performers post videos on TikTok: Is it exclusively for entertainment or do they market themselves on and through TikTok? If so, what marketing strategies do they use? As a fourth point, my analysis of the musicking practices of early music performers on TikTok will highlight whether they only upload video with musical content or also content related to other spheres of human life, such as didactics, religion, or politics. The fifth topic shifts the focus from the performers and their videos to the music performed: Which musical repertoires are represented: instrumental, vocal, secular, or sacred music? As a sixth point, we need to investigate the TikToks per se, which means considering whether the videos uploaded by early music performers are conceived and created specifically for this very platform or whether they are short videos that were not originally created as musicking practice on and through TikTok; for example, they could be clips of longer videos, perhaps originally published on other platforms.

According to Cande Sánchez-Olmos and Eduardo Viñuela Suárez, TikTok has contributed to a transformation in the way music is enjoyed. Their analysis reveals

> a new way of consuming music with a high level of consumer engagement. Users listen to music in the knowledge that they can create their own videos with the songs and measure their popularity by sharing them on this social network. Moreover, TikTok has become a new medium for teenagers to discover music.[10]

Last, in this survey I aim to try to understand whether these observations apply in the field of early music and to what extent it is possible to speak of a participatory culture regarding the TikToks posted by early music performers.

Case Studies

I now intend to observe in more detail certain users' profiles that can be considered representative not only of different ways of presenting oneself as a musician but also of divergent conceptions of a profile on TikTok, while offering multiple ways of exploiting the characteristics of this virtual multimedia space for musicking. The six profiles I will present have been chosen for their diversity as case studies for the present investigation.

The first profile I would like to analyze is *Cembalina22*.[11] As the name of the profile suggests, this TikToker is a harpsichordist and, as a TikTok persona, presents herself as a professional musician: the videos show rehearsals, both at home and in the concert hall; some of them may be clips from concerts. An activity as a teacher is referred to in the comments. *Cembalina22* plays harpsichords of different periods and formats. The repertoire is predominantly from the eighteenth century, which includes the spinet and the virginal, and the pieces are from the specific musical repertoire of these keyboard instruments.

Visiting *Cembalina22*'s profile, one gets the distinct impression that her intention is to create an online portfolio to publicize her own professional activity and to establish further business contacts. In some TikToks there are banner references to the existence of the full version of the same video on YouTube or to a concert that will take place in the future. In addition, the YouTube channel of this TikToker is published in the bio. The channel's working intent is confirmed by the environment, which is always neutral and professional (such as a rehearsal room), by banners proclaiming the TikToker's name and surname, and by the lack of personal statements and comments. Furthermore, *Cembalina22* presents herself with very refined, perhaps even sophisticated clothing and style, both in rehearsals and concerts; so even the image she presents of herself conveys a professional and detached impression, because it follows codified performance practice traditions.

Cembalina22 also publishes certain TikToks depicting duets with other harpsichordists. These are not multilocal and asynchronous recordings but rather duets that took place in the same place, playing simultaneously. The videos are formally staged and professionally produced, show exclusively musical content, and always feature banners giving information on the piece

being played; in the majority of these cases, they are excerpts from longer videos (as mentioned above, edited on YouTube). *Cembalina22*'s TikToks also contain references to other social networks. In summary, it is a channel that somewhat resembles a showcase or a portfolio, and while it exploits some of the features of TikTok, it neglects the participatory aspect.

TikTokers posting content related to early music are not exclusively individual musicians. The next profile I would like to analyze is *Thegesualdosix*,[12] a male vocal ensemble consisting of five young members. Their videos mainly show rehearsals in an aesthetic environment or in places designated for concerts, such as churches or concert halls. In one case, they highlight the prosaic necessity of adjusting certain nuances before a concert and the lack of adequate rehearsal space, leading them to use innovative, pragmatic scenery—and so they shoot a TikTok in an underground parking garage. In other cases, they post footage of concerts around the world in which the ensemble has been featured. Even if the repertoire they perform is mainly French-Flemish polyphony, it is not limited to early music because they also feature some re-elaborations of traditional melodies (especially those related to Christmas).

Thegesualdosix's TikToks are definitely originally made for this platform. The videos are very short, with inserted text boxes containing comments on what they are singing, the situation they are experiencing, where they are singing, and so on, which for the great majority are ironic or even self-deprecating. As we observed with *Cembalina22*, *Thegesualdosix* always provide an indication of the piece they are performing. In a few cases they mention the name of the person who shot the video, while all of the others were most likely made by someone accompanying the group (when all the members are singing) or by the group members themselves (when only some of them are involved). The result is not amateurish, and the videos show a cinematic sense of filming and good editing.

This profile can be seen as a kind of portfolio for professional artists, as it contains the work of the ensemble and rarely shows personal comments. At the same time, however, there is a clear desire to share moments of work and life with the public of TikTok while trying to capture its funny aspects. According to the description posted on the profile ("Group of singers sharing stories from the road"), a lot of behind-the-scenes content is shown. The repertoire they sing is usually seen as elitist, and they evidently intend to

make it more approachable, while also showing that it is possible to be both a completely normal person and a professional singer of sixteenth century polyphony. Apart from the classic concert outfit, a black suit and white shirt, *Thegesualdosix* are always dressed in common, everyday clothing. In this way, their TikTok personae come across as laid-back and easygoing. It is worth adding that, despite the young age of the members of *Thegesualdosix,* their interaction with the other TikTokers is largely limited to reactions to the compliments they receive in the comments section: a deeper exchange of information is rarely present.

The profile *Earlymusicseattle*[13] has published a relatively small number of TikToks to date, yet they are all of very high quality. They are certainly professionally made and specifically designed for TikTok. The videos of *Earlymusicseattle* are clearly intended to publicize the ensemble's activities and to advertise concerts. It is therefore a professional profile in which clips of concerts or rehearsals are published with no personal content. Even if the music is in some cases interspersed with talks by the musicians, the comments refer specifically to the music. The ensemble shows its flexibility by not only publishing TikToks of early music, in which they present themselves in concert dress for the evenings or more casually for rehearsals, but also with videos of contemporary music or even remakes of Baroque melodies in a jazz adaptation that are realized in an unusual setting resembling the stage of a small cabaret club. A distinctive element of this collective Tiktoker is the evident multi-ethnicity of the ensemble.

In spite of the name, the profile *Team_recorder*[14] does not belong to an ensemble but is a single musician: a recorder player. This TikToker publishes videos with different content: clips from concerts, home rehearsals, and explanations of many aspects of the work she does and the instruments she owns. This musician makes use of TikTok to show the flexibility of an underestimated and little-known instrument such as the recorder to the general public by demonstrating its potential both for playing virtuoso pieces of different musical styles and ages and for ASMR-type recordings.

Team_recorder does not exclusively publish TikToks with musical content: some are made to share funny experiences, unfortunate situations, or humorous gags that thematize the musical instruments and the repertoire she plays or the life of a concert performer and music teacher. For example, *Team_recorder* is almost always self-deprecating in a funny way, typically

addressing the recurring theme that the recorder is a real musical instrument, used in the past as well as in the present, not just "a torture device for music lessons at primary school." The repertoire is highly eclectic and ranges from Baroque to pop or country songs; in some TikToks, *Team_recorder* plays melodies from famous soundtracks and even the winning song of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2022.

Despite the irony and self-deprecation shown in the videos, *Team_recorder* presents herself as a young and successful professional. The TikToker's real first and last name as well as the reference to her personal channel on YouTube are published in the bio, and she also provides the following piece of information: "Classical musician in Amsterdam." Therefore, although it cannot be exclusively regarded as a work-portfolio channel, as it is too personal and light-hearted, it is clear that *Team_recorder* publishes TikToks not only for fun but also to publicize her own professionality as a musician.

Team_recorder is open to co-participation and interaction with colleagues: this TikToker has published many duets with other musicians playing different instruments, such as the recorder and concert flute, bassoon, or percussion. Moreover, *Team_recorder* utilizes the many potentialities of TikTok, both visual and auditory, and is also present on other social platforms (YouTube and Instagram). However, *Team_recorder* is not very active in chats and does not have videos in which she plays melodies requested by the audience.

The TikToks posted by *Team_recorder* seem very spontaneous and casual, but they are in fact staged and clearly made and designed for TikTok. This TikToker makes great use of captions or comments, which are present in almost all of her videos, the vast majority of which are not music-only TikToks. A relevant aspect is the presence of verbal written communication, which is of paramount importance in conveying the message, since *Team_recorder* does not give any explanations in her videos by speaking. It can rightly be said that without the verbal communication in the boxes, the public would not understand the message—at least not correctly, which means that the ironic aspect would be incomprehensible in many cases.

Verbal communication is of paramount importance for *Violboy*[15] as well, although it is a matter of oral communication in this particular case. *Violboy* is a young musician who initially posted non-music related TikToks and then developed a rich and articulate profile that is very much oriented toward giving explanations about early music as well as sharing the music

they perform on different historical instruments. *Violboy* plays the viola da gamba and the eighteenth-century psaltery and has a real didactic verve for elucidations on the musical instruments and the pieces they play, as well as the technique with which they are performed. *Violboy* also provides explanations on the maintenance of the instruments and plays or sings several voices of a polyphonic piece in certain Tiktoks.

Violboy are highly interactive with their numerous and rather inquisitive followers, answering many questions, predominantly by creating TikToks that explicitly quote a question asked in the chat from a previous post. Apart from this category of TikToks generated as an answer, *Violboy* are also active in written communication: evidently they take great care to respond to the questions sent by their followers. *Violboy* makes frequent use of text boxes in the TikToks, as well as of images from musical sources or other iconographic sources from the past.

The videos are evidently made precisely for TikTok and are characterized by an appearance of immediacy and spontaneity, even when they must clearly have been intended as answers to precise questions, in which *Violboy* sometimes shows images reproducing paintings or illustrations in books, which are chosen specifically to provide an answer to a specific question; in some cases, these pictures are used as a background for the video (and not shown as samples in a book). This shows that *Violboy* even knows how to use the advanced visual features of TikTok.

Violboy seems to post content for the sheer joy of sharing it, just as they seem to play for the absolute pleasure of playing, since this TikToker appears to work mainly as a porcelain artist. This aspect is only shown in a few instances on their TikTok profile, and this also applies to another of this TikToker's passions: jewelry. *Violboy* uses eye-catching and extravagant jewelry in many videos. This is part of a consistent logic with which this user create their TikTok persona and reaffirm their own identity, including their sexual identity, an aspect made even clearer by the use of an explicit nickname: "Early gay."

The last profile I would like to present is *Violadagoomba*.[16] This TikToker is a professional church musician, extremely versatile and a multi-instrumentalist: they sing and play the organ, the harpsichord, various cuts of the viola da gamba, the recorder, and bells; moreover, *Violadagoomba* often records over himself to make polyphony using different instruments with up to five voices. This TikToker has also published numerous multilocal duets,

trios, and quartets with instrumentalists or singers registering at different locations. These multilocated and asynchronous musical performances, made possible by the features of TikTok, are not the only facet of the participatory nature of *Violadagoomba*'s profile. There is much more: they not only give many explanations of music in general but also answers numerous questions from other users and even accepts challenges or plays directly requested pieces.

The musical repertoire offered by *Violadagoomba* is extensive, ranging from Gregorian chants to video game soundtracks played on the harpsichord; the three principal genres are keyboard music, music for the viola da gamba, and religious hymns. The videos are certainly designed for TikTok, and indeed it can be said that *Violadagoomba* really exploits the technical and visual features of the platform. Alongside TikToks that are completely spontaneous and evidently quickly made (which implies, of course, that they are simple and rudimentary), other videos required far more in-depth musical and technical knowledge to produce.

Violadagoomba's TikToks seem to have been created for the genuine pleasure of making music and sharing it with others, as well as providing explanations to those who ask for them. As a TikTok persona, *Violadagoomba* have a very playful and light-hearted attitude that leads them to convey great irony about their work while making inside jokes between musicians. Concerning identity and belonging to a community, *Violadagoomba*'s profile picture is a clear statement: printed over the background of the rainbow flag of the LGBTIQ+ movement are some neumes in square notation, musical signs typical of the late medieval notation of Gregorian chant, clearly recalling (medieval) sacred music. The success of this profile results from its easy-going manner, the space it provides for explanations and questions from the audience, the fact that it covers such diverse musical repertoires, and certainly the intense activity on TikTok as well.

Conclusions

The presence of Western early music on such a popular social media platform as TikTok seems to confirm that this repertoire is gradually outgrowing its status as a niche in concert life and has entered the mainstream. On the other hand, the minuscule number of videos in comparison to other music genres

shows that this is not yet the case for the segment of the population using TikTok. In the following, I would like to reflect on both the early music TikToks and the musicians who created them and answer the questions I formulated in the first part of this article. The comments refer to the six case studies presented above as well as to the rest of the TikToks related to early music. They are grouped by topic.

Individual musicians clearly predominate among the TikTokers who specialize in European early music, while accounts of ensembles or institutions are in the minority. Although information on age is largely unavailable in the profiles and should therefore be derived from the empirical basis of observation, early music TikTokers belong to an age group ranging from average university student age to approximately 40 years. Although it may not be surprising that the majority seem to be younger than 35 years of age, the complete absence of teenagers was rather unexpected. Ethnically and socially, the users are not only from Western countries, although most of them live in Europe or North America.

I would also like to address what we might call "the personality on stage" of the early music TikTokers—in Bermúdez's definition, the "TikTok personae"—and analyze how they display their identity. In general, the early music performers on TikTok explicitly present themselves as professional musicians and seek to underline that while musicking on TikTok may be a playful activity, making music is a serious matter, an art that is learned through practice and dedication. In fact, they convey the message that a musician's work, whether as an interpreter or teacher, is a profession—with its positive and negatives, serious or funny facets—and not a mere pastime.

Many TikTokers work very consciously with authenticity effects. Corinna Herr emphasizes the link between authenticity in the field of musical performance and the authenticity of musical persona, with explicit reference to the performers of early music:

> One may infer that the focus on authenticity also reigns in the world of classical music. The self-presentation of (young) musicians runs between the poles of individual expression as well as virtuosity and staying true to the original music. Authenticity in the last context is per my hypothesis a dominant dogma in music education as can be seen e.g. from the HIPP (historically informed performance practice) movement.[17]

In the following I delve into the aspect of (staged) authenticity.

Only a few TikTok personae are staged traditionally or even conservatively, so to speak, according to the institutionalized model of the public concert of "classical" music. The use of elements of the codified performance practice tradition, like formal dressing, the absence of personal comments, and explanations of the composers' names and the pieces' titles, can be interpreted as a strategy for communicating professionality. But this does not seem to be the dominant tendency. On the contrary, it can be said that the vast majority of TikTokers avoid formality in favor of everyday dress and a more personal style: they present themselves in an innovative way that is suited to the platform, their particular audience, and the short format of the videos. They do not stage themselves as stars or virtuosos and do not accentuate an academic detachment but stage themselves as they might be seen in everyday life, at home, at work, or at a concert, thus creating "TikTok personae" that seem consistent with their own lives. For example, they wear normal, everyday clothes if they are not performing on stage; and when they perform, they usually wear the classic "all black" clothing. These situations do not come across as constructed and artificial but as realistic and authentic, because it could actually be like that in real life. Moreover, the language used in the TikToks can be explicative and didactic, but it is rarely technical or scholarly.

The locations chosen as settings for the TikToks are a key element that contributes to conveying authenticity or artificiality to the situation depicted in the videos and thus to the TikTok personae. The TikToks predominantly show concerts, rehearsals, and recording sessions; to a lesser degree they show daily exercises. This means that the venues chosen represent spaces where musical activity indeed takes place in real life. Preparing this survey, I could not find any videos in which the TikTokers are in an artificially staged and unrealistic situation, as may be seen in numerous YouTube videos. Most of the TikToks are shot in private settings (mainly homes); this is followed by TikToks shot at a conservatory, studio, or rehearsal room, while only a few are set in concert halls or churches. Videos shot outdoors are very rare, most probably for reasons related to technical recording infrastructure (moreover, early music played outdoors is not common in real life and would definitely evoke the effect of an artificial situation). It can therefore be said that the early music performers on TikTok do not attempt to create aestheticized and artificialatmospheres but rather aim to show their musical practice as an everyday activity.

Showing personal preferences, interests, and passions on TikTok is a widespread tendency, which belongs to the (only apparently) immediate communication of this kind of social media. In particular, it should be noted that some TikTokers thematize, or rather reveal, their gender and sexual identities. The strategies adopted for showing personal or even private information include written clues in the text of the profile (not only in the form of personal pronouns) and the use of hashtags in the commentary or within the TikTok, where decorative elements that convey this message, such as rainbow flags, can also be found. One can therefore speak of the presence of an "affirmative culture" of sexual minorities on TikTok. This corroborates Melissa Avdeeff's statement that "some spaces of TikTok have become places of validation, breaking down presumed hegemonic understandings of identity, bodily functions, and relationships."[18] The need felt by some TikTokers to assert a non-heteronormative identity is reminiscent of the formerly subversive pretensions of the early music movement and reveals the intention to show that where the choice of musical repertoire might seem conservative on the surface, it allows scope for existential aspects that are out of the box.

Moreover, this analysis confirms that the shift in communication content from the message to the person of the broadcaster—which has increasingly come to characterize communication on social media—is valid for videos of early music performers as well, as "due to the audio-visual nature of the app and the lack of sharing of pre-existing content … the users inevitably become the content."[19] This is particularly evident in the profiles of TikTokers who share abundant information in their videos on their personal preferences, working lives, and the general and personal difficulties they encounter in their jobs as musicians. In other words, the boundaries between real users and TikTok personae become quite elusive in some cases. However, it can be said that manifestations of political opinions are absent, as are opinions regarding topics such as social or environmental activism.[20] In some cases, the musicians include greetings for Christian religious celebrations, yet it is not possible to speak of a general thematization of religious topics.

Regarding the purpose of posting videos on TikTok, the ludic aspect of musicking on this platform clearly emerges from this survey. A great number of Tiktoks by early music performers are inspired by the explicit intention of creating playful content about music and with music, of having fun with music and making jokes about it in order to amuse the audience and poke fun

at the ungrateful aspects of a performer's work and life—and even of one's own attitude, difficulties, or errors. The ironic comments indeed play a very important role in creating a connection between TikTokers and their public. On the other hand, a didactic intent is evident in many videos, in which the TikTokers give explanations on several topics: organology, musical forms and genres, questions of music theory, medieval or renaissance notation, pitch, and so on. Sometimes they even give practical advice, such as information on how to oil a flute. The TikTokers divulge information using various strategies: verbal explanations, superimposed captions with written information on the video, and portraits of composers or photos of early musical sources.

This survey has revealed that the presence of marketing strategies does not play a relevant role. Certainly, the TikToks have the function in some cases of advertising a concert or a gig, and certain TikTokers explicitly state that they teach or give master classes, or even that they can give online lessons for a fee. However, an explicit commercial offer is definitely not common, and although it can be said that the ensemble profiles are mostly business-oriented, the great majority of the TikToks have no direct or even indirect commercial intent.

The type of repertoire played in TikToks of early music performers merits consideration. In general, it is possible to state that it includes famous pieces yet also many that are little known. There is only a small number of videos of vocal music; rather, instrumental music tends to prevail. The vast majority of the TikToks contain music played by a singular musician or performed by a small ensemble; pieces for orchestra or choir are rare. Both sacred and secular music is performed in the videos, not only from the Baroque period but also from the Renaissance, and even plain chant is represented. On the contrary, TikToks of profane songs from the Middle Ages are very rare.[21]

For the majority of the TikToks of early music performers, it is possible to speak of genuine user-generated content, albeit created at times by TikTokers with obvious technical skills and an affinity for communication on social media. Only in very few cases can the videos be categorized as professionally generated content posted by ensembles or users with a clear aim to show commercial or public relations content. Regarding the live element of the musical performances, it can be said that TikToks documenting rehearsals or practicing at home are clearly marked by their immediacy, although the majority of the videos are specifically staged to show an aspect of the

performer's work, a piece of music, or an instrument.

The question of the specificity of the videos to TikTok as a social medium can be answered in the affirmative: the TikTokers created them in a form best suited for this platform, and they are familiar with its specific characteristics. The TikToks of early music performers are rarely clips of longer videos that may have been made for other social platforms. In general, they represent genuine multimedia musicking, as they were originally created as audiovisual footage of musical performances.

In the community of early music performers, it is very common to share information about the music performed and to accompany the video with explanations. This means that in a great number of TikToks we also find verbal text that can be spoken or presented in written form within text boxes. Therefore, communication takes place at both the visual and auditory levels, while the message is conveyed in both musical and verbal languages.[22] This highlights the competence of users in applying TikTok's functions on the one hand, while underlining the need to contextualize a performance through non-musical content on the other. The presence of verbal comments in music videos is a specificity of the TikTok platform, whereas it is completely absent in other music platforms, such as YouTube. It is comparable to Instagram "stories" and is indispensable for eliciting reactions, in particular those with a humorous element, that the musical performance alone would likely be unable to communicate effectively.

In the context of this research, I could not find parodies of videos either made by other users on TikTok or posted on other platforms or social networks.[23] However, the content of a video sometimes refers to that of previous videos created by the same TikToker or to a question or comment in the chat. It is therefore possible to state that the references are internal to TikTok, and if any references to other platforms are found, they are exclusively to publicize the presence of a longer version of the same video, which, however, rarely occurs. Another aspect I would like to point out is that early music performers' TikToks do not seek to become viral and to generate memes. The complete absence of videos designed to be remade through the addition of choreography or lip-synchronization is noteworthy. This means that for the user group examined in this survey, some of the specific features of TikTok—which have determined its fortune and popularity—are completely negligible. Since this is valid for users who post non-music videos on TikTok as well, which constitutes an

enormous number, it can be said that a surprisingly large proportion of TikTokers do not use certain specific features of this platform.

The question of why both musicians and their followers have not reused videos of other TikTokers in order to create new content on the platform is legitimate and deserves a separate investigation. It would be relevant to ask the users directly why this important aspect of the participatory culture typical of TikTok is completely missing in their videos. The reason is certainly multifaceted. I argue that it can be traced back to at least three elements: traditional reverence for the music composed in the past, which enjoys an aura of superiority; the extensive duration of the original pieces, meaning that there are hardly any TikToks in which a piece of early music is performed in its entirety, a fact that clearly differentiates TikTok from YouTube; and last, respect for real performers who require years of study to perform early and classical music correctly. I would also speculate that the failure to make use of specific features of TikTok is due to a way of enjoying music that is anchored to forms of creating music that take place in the real world. Evidently, what Sánchez-Olmos and Viñuela describe as TikTok's own new way of listening to music does not hold true for performers and listeners of early music: "Users listen to music in the knowledge that they can create their own videos with the songs and measure their popularity by sharing them on this social network."[24] The community revolving around early music uses TikTok with a different approach, either offering their own performance or watching what is published: users either present themselves as performers and thus post TikToks with their performances and explanations of a popularizing nature, or they see themselves as an audience that listens to the performance without any interest in reproducing it in another format. Nevertheless, the early music community is aware of another distinctive aspect of TikTok that distinguishes it from real-life musicking: the direct reaction of the public in the chat, according to the logic of an open and active participatory culture.

While some TikToks are in fact excerpts of longer performances and are traditional both in their presentation in general and in the provision of a passive auditorium,[25] the present investigation reveals the existence of TikTokers who are open to participatory culture and stimulate it by giving answers to questions from the audience, taking into account comments and requests left by other users in the chat, and often creating new posts from this exchange of opinions and requests for explanations. The participatory aspect is evident in the chat and in the reactions of the TikTokers to chat questions.

On the one hand, the users watching the videos do not merely play a passive role as listeners of a concert, as they can write comments and ask questions. On the other hand, many TikTokers publish answers to the questions of their followers in the chat as well as in the form of a new TikTok, explicitly quoting the question or the comment. In this way, a human rapport is created or strengthened, curious listeners are acknowledged, and a participatory culture is stimulated. Frequently, people who ask questions or participate in the chat with comments do not react to one single TikTok but to several videos by the same TikToker. This shows that a community is formed not only through the competitive spirit of a challenge but also through the "simple" dialogue between the performers and their public.[26]

A further form of participation that is a specific feature of TikTok is often used by early music performers, namely the possibility of making music digitally with other musicians. I refer to the duets, trios, and quartets of different musicians recording a piece of music together or new voices or rhythmic elements added to an already existing video by another TikToker. This feature is widely adopted and contributes to the creation of new content on the platform as well as a tighter connection between its users.

Sánchez-Olmos and Viñuela have written that TikTok is "altering the traditional dynamics of production, distribution and consumption [of music] in a context of participatory culture."[27] I think it is possible to extend this statement—at least regarding the first two points, production and distribution—to the TikToks of early music performers as well. Duets and ensemble pieces recorded asynchronously and in a deterritorialized fashion, that is, at different times and in different places, represent a way of musicking that did not previously exist. Early music compositions reach a young audience through TikTok that would otherwise have no contact with this type of repertoire. However, I do not think it is possible to say that the way of musicking on and through TikTok by early music performers is changing the way of listening to music, as their TikToks do not involve listening aimed at "remaking," mimicking, or imitating what is in the video through lip-synching and dance but rather involve the audience listening for enjoyment, to satisfy their curiosity, or even to learn. Early music performers are a community that is evolving and transforming and that is capable of using all the features of TikTok, a community that has changed how music of past eras is produced and distributed but is apparently not transforming the way this type of repertoire is enjoyed.

In conclusion, even if it can be said that a small group of TikToks confirms certain enduring clichés regarding the old-fashioned or even conservative way of presenting one's own work that one might have in mind when imagining musicians who specifically specialize in early music, this survey highlights the fact that early music performers form a community that is transforming and evolving with the times. This is still a tiny community in terms of numbers, and many features of the platform have yet to be explored, but it surely has the potential to expand and grow further, which means that TikTok could become an increasingly important part of the early music ecosystem. For this reason, TikTok should be considered by theatres, producers, and record labels as a possible tool to find new audiences.[28]

Early music TikTokers who have taken the plunge have realized that TikTok is a medium with its own specific characteristics (and not just a narrow version of YouTube). They are creating videos not only to share experiences but also to make their instruments and the repertoire they play known to the public and to publicize or advertise their professional activity. The development of musicking practices of early music performers on and through TikTok is certainly an intriguing field of study. I am confident that we will continue to observe it, as it will undoubtedly continue to evolve.

Notes

1. Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context*, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 15.

2. I refer to the definition of "musicking" as proposed in Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: Univ. Press of New England, 1998), 9.

3. Harry Haskell, art. "early music," in *Grove Music Online.*

4. This also applies to the same term in other languages: "alte Musik," "musica antica," "música antigua."

5. I entered the names of musical periods and musical instruments in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, with and without hashtag.

6. The number refers to the year 2023; see https://de.statista.com/. All links accessed on April 4, 2024.

7. Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok*, 25.

8. Philip Auslander, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 87–128, especially pp. 88, 95, and 127–28.

9. Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok*, 61–98; and Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances, & Meanings in a Mobile Application; An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikTok's Musicking" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2022), 74–75.

10. Cande Sánchez-Olmos and Eduardo Viñuela Suárez, "The End of The Amateur Music Video Dream (As We Expected It): From YouTube to TikTok," in *Music in the Disruptive Era*, ed. David Hurwitz and Pedro Ordóñez Eslava, Music, Science & Technology 4 (Turnhout: Brepols 2022), 3–22: 15.

11. *Cembalina22* had 101 followers, had received 1084 likes, and had published 49 TikToks.

12. *Thegesualdosix* had 22.7K followers, had received 181.5K likes, and had published 98 TikToks.

13. *Earlymusicseattle* had 460 followers, had received 787 likes, and had published 75 TikToks.

14. *Team_recorder* had 23.3K followers, had received 716.8K likes, and had published 260 TikToks.

15. *Violboy* had 45.8K followers, had received 452.1K likes, and had published 235 TikToks.

16. On April 16, 2023, *Violadagoomba* had 188.9K followers, had received 7.8M likes, and had published more than 1,400 TikToks.

17. Corinna Herr, "Classical Musicians on YouTube: Online Performance Practices and the Digital Divide," in *Music in the Disruptive Era*, ed. David Hurwitz and Pedro Ordóñez Eslava, Music, Science & Technology 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 46.

18. Melissa K. Avdeeff, "TikTok, Twitter, and Platform-Specific Technocultural Discourse in Response to Taylor Swift's LGBTQ+ Allyship in 'You Need to Calm Down,'" *Contemporary Music Review* 40, no. 1 (2021): 96, https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1945225.

19. Avdeeff, "TikTok, Twitter, and Discourse," 96.

20. In light of the TikToks I watched during my preparation for the present study, it is clearly an over-generalization to assert the existence of a ubiquitous presence of manifestations of political opinion in TikTok videos, as Avdeeff asserts in the sentence directly following the previous quotation: "The users inevitably become the content. Therefore, every TikTok user is a performer who externalises political opinion via an audiovisual act." Avdeeff, "TikTok, Twitter, and Discourse," 96.

21. An example is the TikToker Mediæval Melodies, who plays profane songs from the Middle Ages on reconstructions of medieval instruments.

22. This gives rise to further topics of debate, such as the extent to which music can communicate without text, or whether these videos are possible without text.

23. On the interconnectivity of different social media, see Juan Bermúdez, "Performing Beyond the Platform: Experiencing Musicking on and through YouTube, TikTok and Instagram," in *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music*, ed. ed. Holly Rogers, Joana

Freitas, and João Francisco Porfírio. New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 187–201.

24. Sánchez-Olmos and Viñuela, "The end of the amateur music video dream," 15.

25. Examples include the videos of the above-mentioned profiles *Cembalina22* and *Earlymusicseattle*.

26. On (dance) challenge on TikTok, see Daniel Klug, "'It Took Me Almost 30 Minutes to Practice This': Performance and Production Practices in Dance Challenge Videos on Tiktok." Preprint, submitted August 26, 2020. https://doi.org/10.33767/osf.io/j8u9v. On their capability of create communities, see pp. 6–7.

27. Sánchez-Olmos and Viñuela, "The end of the amateur music video dream," 3.

28. Experimental trials in this sense were the adaptations made for TikTok by the Opernloft team in Hamburg of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782) into "#FREE_Constanze" in 2021 of and Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) into "Carmen by Carmen" in 2022.

"Fly Me to the Moon": Jazz on TikTok

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Abstract: Jazz is very popular on TikTok. A search for the hashtag #jazz currently leads to a list of videos with a total of 2.7 billion views on the platform, and there are many young jazz musicians taking advantage of the opportunities the platform TikTok offers them to reach large audiences. With this article, I want to show how jazz is presented on the platform. The main questions are the following: Which jazz styles are particularly popular on TikTok and for what reasons? Which groups of musicians are especially visible on the platform? And what might the mechanisms of the TikTok platform, that is, the app's functions and the algorithmic system, have to do with the popularization of certain jazz styles and (groups of) musicians? My research is based on a corpus analysis of one hundred highly popular jazz videos uploaded onto the platform.

Introduction

Jazz on TikTok—the topic of this article might appear surprising at first. On the one hand, we have the short-form video platform TikTok: videos with a typical duration of fifteen to sixty seconds, well known for dance challenges and lip-synching, and often ridiculed due to its alleged focus on silly content by adolescents. On the other hand, we have jazz: celebrated as "art music," where musical complexity is an important aesthetic value, and typically associated with instrumental virtuosity, long and improvised solos, ever increasing expressivity, and sophisticated compositions with complex harmonic progressions. How could these two cultural spheres ever fit together?

Despite these ostensible contradictions, jazz is very popular on TikTok. A

search for the hashtag #jazz currently leads to a list of videos with a total of 2.7 billion views on the platform.[1] Some jazz musicians on TikTok might even be described as "short-video celebrities,"[2] for example the self-declared "queen of jazztok" Stacey Ryan (@staceyryanmusic), who currently has 1.3 million followers and whose videos have been liked 21.1 million times. As a consequence of her success on TikTok, she was signed to Island Records and started touring internationally in 2022. She is by no means an isolated case: the musician Laufey (@laufey), for example, has over half a million followers on TikTok. She has become well known for her jazzy original compositions and versions of jazz standards from the first half of the twentieth century, which she has been uploading to the platform since 2020, and she headlined her first tour of the United States in autumn 2022.

There are numerous other examples of jazz musicians who are popular on TikTok. Interestingly enough, even a cursory glance at the most successful videos with the hashtag #jazz shows that a very specific facet of jazz culture is particularly popular on this platform. One of the most popular jazz videos was uploaded by Rachel Chiu (@rachelchiu1): the description of the video is "My phone was at 1% 🥴" (see fig. 1), and it got 7.2 million views and 2.2 million likes. In this video, Rachel Chiu performs the song "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)," composed by Duke Ellington, with lyrics by Irving Mills, and first released in 1932.[3] It seems to be rather the rule than the exception that jazz musicians are very successful on TikTok with jazz standards from that period. For example, Ebony Loren (@ebonylorenmusic) uploaded a version of the same Ellington composition (see fig. 1), which is also among the most popular jazz videos on the platform (1.4 million views, almost 400,000 likes).[4]

This article examines the most popular jazz videos on the TikTok platform, which are defined as jazz videos due to their use of the hashtag #jazz. These videos, such as Rachel Chui's and Ebony Loren's versions of "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)," exemplify a facet of jazz culture popularized in the first half of the twentieth century in which aspects such as virtuosity and improvisation, which nowadays are widely considered important aesthetic criteria in jazz, are not necessarily in the foreground. Consequently, the musical styles presented on TikTok as jazz do not necessarily align with the conventional definitions of jazz in other contexts. The categorization of these videos as jazz is contingent upon the varying perceptions of what is understood as jazz in different historical and geographical contexts. According to jazz researcher Scott DeVeaux,[5] jazz has always and necessarily

been in a state of permanent change, and musical genres in general are highly flexible systems that are continuously changed by the actors involved.[6] Nowadays, jazz appears to function more than ever as an umbrella term for a wide variety of musical styles.
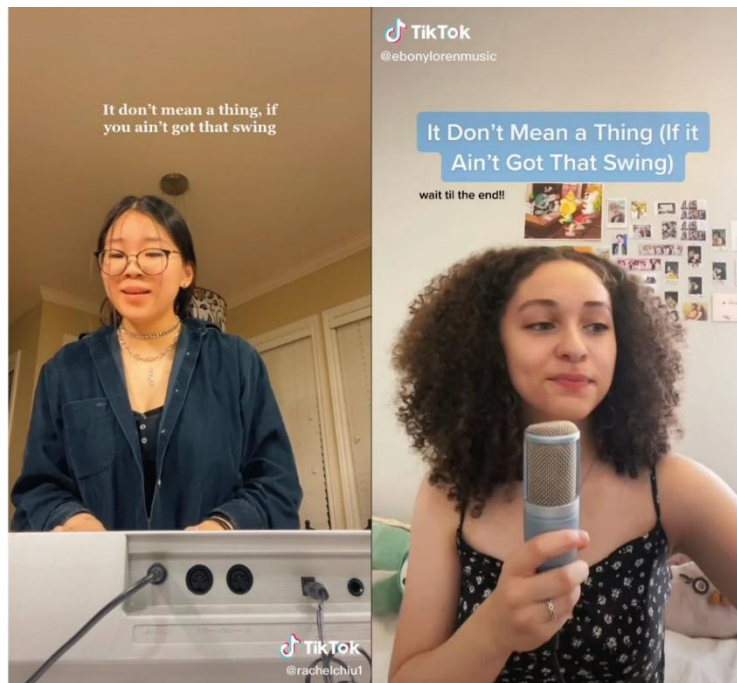

Figure 1 Rachel Chiu and Ebony Loren performing "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)."

The examples mentioned above clearly illustrate that there are many young jazz musicians taking advantage of the opportunities the platform TikTok offers them to reach large audiences. In an article on jazz in the digital age published in 2014, Haftor Medbøe and José Dias argued that jazz "has been slow to embrace the power of social media and seems to consistently arrive late at the table be it in the examples of MySpace, Facebook and Twitter."[7] Almost a decade later, the situation has changed significantly, as current research shows. As Chris J. Cottell demonstrates, jazz musicians have recently developed video-based collaborative aesthetic practices on YouTube and Facebook.[8] And as Bondy Kaye and Jean Burgess[9] and Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikström[10] show, there is a vibrant jazz community on TikTok, especially due to the account @JazzTokOfficial. It is thus apparent that digital media platforms are becoming increasingly important for jazz musicians. However, little is known about the representation of jazz in digital spaces, about jazz musicians' staging practices on digital media platforms, and about how the musicians engage with these new media environments.

With this article, my aim is to open up the field for research on highly popular jazz performances on TikTok and to show how jazz is presented on the platform. The main questions are the following: Which jazz styles are particularly popular on TikTok and for what reasons? Which groups of musicians are especially visible on the platform? And what might TikTok's platform mechanisms, that is, the app's functions and the algorithmic system, have to do with the popularization of certain jazz styles and (groups of) musicians?

That is to say, my focus is not solely on the jazz performances themselves but also on the platform's technical infrastructure and on community practices that might potentially have a crucial influence on the representation of musical cultures on TikTok (see Merlin, and Zanotti in this Issue). In this context, I discuss TikTok's potential role as an agent of musical canonization in the era of digital media platforms. Empirically, my research is based on a corpus analysis of one hundred highly popular jazz videos uploaded to the platform.

Platform Affordances and Musical Canonization in the Era of Digital Platforms

Is the popularization of particular jazz styles more likely on TikTok? In order to answer this question, we must examine TikTok's platform infrastructure and certain community practices that might influence what kind of content will be disseminated on the platform. There are various platform features that appear relevant in this context.[11] TikTok's media format is the short-form video—short meaning that the typical duration is between fifteen and sixty seconds, even though the production of videos with a duration of up to ten minutes is possible. One central feature of TikTok is the "For You" page, a landing page the user is automatically directed to when opening the app on a smartphone. It offers a scroll of videos, curated algorithmically and individualized for every single user. For content creators who strive for visibility on TikTok, it is important to get their videos on the For You page of as many users as possible, as the app's focus on the landing page makes it rather unlikely that users will search for videos independently of the For You algorithm.[12] Creators should thus ideally attract the platform's algorithm in some way with their content if their aim is to reach large audiences.

Furthermore, there are platform features that provoke social interaction, in particular "duet," "stitch," and "use this sound." The duet feature allows for duetting videos by other creators, which means that a new video appears side by side with the original. With the stitch feature, TikTokers can reuse short segments of existing videos, for example video or audio excerpts. This sound feature allows TikTok users to incorporate the original sound of any existing video into their own video creations. While all these features trigger a wealth of interactions on TikTok, there are even more possibilities for interacting with others, such as commenting, liking, replying to comments, calling for participation, and participating in video challenges.

We can assume that the short-video format, the interaction-centered platform features, and the community practices might potentially lead to the production of specific musical content tailored to TikTok's overall platform logics. For example, it could be important for musicians to choose songs, or rather excerpts of songs, that can easily be performed in just a few seconds and that appear appropriate for encouraging user engagement, for example by being particularly catchy or songful, making reproduction by other users more likely. Briefly speaking, we can assume that the platform's design and algorithmic system mean that TikTok makes certain actions by users more likely than others.

We can also say that this is due to the platform's *affordances*. The term affordance was coined by psychologist James J. Gibson[13] and means action possibilities available in the environment, relative to actors' action capabilities and not changing if the actors' goals or needs change.[14] In the decades following the publication of Donald A. Norman's book *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988),[15] the concept of affordance was developed further, particularly in studies on material culture, with the aim of examining which actions humans are more likely to take when engaging with artifacts due to certain features of their design and material conditions. Today affordance is a key concept in disciplines as diverse as, for example, media sociology[16] and archeology.[17] In music-related research, the term has been discussed with regard to the action possibilities communicated by musical sound[18] and the question of how the practices of using technical music devices like record players and iPods,[19] as well as digital audio workstations,[20] are influenced by the characteristics of design and technical functionality.

In research on digital media platforms, the concept of affordance is applied to

the analysis of social media interfaces on the one hand and the investigation of the structural relations between platform-specific technological features and the practices by platform users on the other.[21] Thus, in platform-related research, the term affordance describes the "'multifaceted relational structure' … between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context."[22] Accordingly, the concept of affordance used in this context is a rather broad one, referring, for example, to the technical features, functions, and interface design of digital media platforms and the related user practices. Instead of solely analyzing the affordances of a particular button—such as the "use this sound" button on TikTok—the focus is on the specific communicative practices and actions enabled or constrained by the interface, design, and technical features of digital media platforms.[23] That is to say, platform features and practices such as liking and sharing should also be considered when researching platform affordances. Furthermore, the specificities of the platforms' media formats are highly relevant, as they can—to a certain degree—guide the users' communicative actions. For example, only short-form videos can be uploaded on TikTok, and Twitter (now X) only allows the posting of written texts with a maximum of 280 characters. These restrictions will automatically influence the media products that are created by the users. Instagram, to take another example, affords a focus on photography, which has led to the development of visual aesthetics that are characteristic of the platform.[24]

As a result, certain behavioral norms of users will emerge on individual digital media platforms over time: so-called platform vernaculars or "shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users."[25] Users can acquire specific knowledge of these conventions by observing them and subsequently tailor their content to individual platforms.[26] Furthermore, by constantly engaging with platforms and the respective algorithmic systems, users and creators may develop certain assumptions on how to train algorithms in favor of their individual needs.[27] This is related to what Taina Bucher has described as "algorithmic imaginaries," by which she means "ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function, and what these imaginations, in turn, make possible."[28] The goal of creators who have developed certain "platform practices"[29] on this basis is to increase their visibility in virtual spaces and to train the recommender systems in their favor,

for example in order to make it to the For You page of as many TikTok users as possible.

Technical features and algorithms thus have a significant impact on the usage of platforms. Still, how *exactly* platforms are used is dependent on specific social norms and practices of the users.[30] While digital media platforms can make certain communicative actions more likely, it is up to the users to creatively engage with the platforms' affordances, potentially bringing new aesthetic practices into play.[31] The interplay between platforms and users may even give rise to very specific forms of cultural expression. The task for researchers is to better understand *how* digital media platforms enable or constrain certain practices and actions.

What does all this mean for the specific case of jazz on TikTok? It can be assumed that popular jazz creators (and popular creators in general) aim to understand the platform's logic in order to learn what kind of video content, which songs, or which jazz styles will perform well on TikTok. This, in turn, might have a decisive influence on the popularization of specific repertoires on the platform. In addition, it can be assumed that musicians will learn how to present themselves on TikTok in a way that helps them achieve long-lasting success. Potentially, this could lead to a quite homogeneous representation of music cultures on the platform. On the basis of this sociotechnical interplay of human and non-human actors, I argue, there are new modes of cultural canonization emerging.

Canonization has been a key topic in jazz and popular music studies for several years now. As jazz scholar Tony Whyton argues, canons "enable people to celebrate what is perceived as the best a culture has to offer".[32] In jazz, there are several recordings by musicians such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane that have been regarded as "the best" for decades by journalists, academics, publicists, and fans. At the same time, canons can be very homogenizing, as they "typically foreground the work and values of a particular social group or elite at the expense of others."[33] That is to say that canons, as documented in jazz history books, in music journalism, or in documentaries, usually represent the preferences of those who have the power to speak in the respective media. Since authorities like music journalism and academia have for a long time been (and to a large extent still are) dominated by *white* males from Western Europe and North America, canons in the field of jazz and popular music typically exclude women, non-

binary people, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and musicians from geographical regions outside the United States and Western Europe.[34] Thus, which (groups of) musicians are considered the best and which musical repertoire is regarded as the most valuable is dependent on historical power relations and repeated over and over in specialized discourses. Typically, this causes a homogeneous representation and perception of musical cultures focused on only a few (mainly male) "heroes" and "seminal" recordings, while "the rest" are treated marginally.

With the dawn of the era of digital media platforms, alternative domains of musical canonization have emerged. Digital media platforms are used by billions of people every day, and musicians have to have a presence on these platforms in order to be competitive. Typically, musicians strive for popularity and visibility, trying to get clicks, likes, comments, and subscriptions, which is—to a certain degree—always dependent on the platform's algorithms and the respective recommender systems. In this sense, non-human actors intervene in the competition for popularity and visibility.[35] As recent research has shown, TikTok's visibility regime also perpetuates homogenizing tendencies that are typical of cultural canonization in general, in particular with regard to social categories like gender and *race*. The majority of the most popular TikTok creators are young *white* Americans.[36] Furthermore, extremely popular creators such as Charli D'Amelio, who currently has almost 150 million followers on TikTok, can be described as normatively attractive young women who, as Melanie Kennedy argues, represent the "continuation and intensification of girl culture and the ideals of young female celebrities."[37] Obviously, certain beauty ideals also play a very important role in terms of visibility on TikTok. This could lead to the homogenization of the most popular content on the platform, where young women who conform to certain beauty norms are given the greatest visibility—at the expense of other social groups.

This means that the algorithmic recommender systems of digital media platforms, which play a crucial role for content moderation, are not only important for the visibility of certain musical repertoires. They also perpetuate social stereotypes, and they push creators to tailor their content according to the platform's affordances, which could lead to a very homogeneous representation of musical cultures on the platform. This process can thus be understood as a new mode of *sociotechnical canonization* based on the interplay of human and non-human actors. With regard to the specific case of jazz on TikTok, we can therefore ask: How does the platform's

logic influence the popularity of particular jazz styles? And are certain groups of jazz musicians more likely to be successful on TikTok?

Corpus Analysis

The first step to approaching these questions is an empirical investigation of how jazz is represented on TikTok. One appropriate method for doing so is a corpus analysis of popular jazz videos on the platform. The purpose of such a corpus analysis is to provide an overview of a specific cultural field on TikTok by systematizing the content of a defined number of relevant videos on the basis of a set of descriptive categories. In doing so, we can ask questions like: Which musical repertoire is typical of jazz on TikTok? In which settings do the musicians perform? And are there specific communicative actions afforded by the platform and approached by the musicians? In doing so, it is possible to infer regularities within a delimited repertoire of TikTok videos, which in turn can provide the basis for detailed case studies on individual videos and musicians. Corpus analyses have already been applied in several studies on TikTok, for example in research on expressions of grief,[38] science communication,[39] climate activism,[40] and communicative practices on a general level.[41]

In order to define as representative a corpus of jazz videos as possible, I used a web scraper to search for videos tagged with the hashtag #jazz. At the time this article was written, this was the most popular hashtag directly related to jazz on TikTok. TikTok creators usually use popular hashtags in order to assign their videos to specific topics and to make their content more visible. Using a web scraper is an easy and reliable method for collecting numerical data independently of the researcher's individual engagement on the platform. This is very important, as the individual usage of TikTok very quickly triggers the personalized algorithmic content filter. Referring only to the content recommended by the For You page algorithm would thus lead to a very distorted representation of jazz on TikTok. Searching for the hashtag #jazz, I only collected videos that were labeled as jazz music on the platform, independently of my own assumptions on what might be classified as popular jazz on TikTok. Furthermore, web scraping allows for collecting metadata such as play counts, number of likes, and number of comments. The results can easily be sorted on the basis of this information, and we can see which

videos labeled with the hashtag #jazz are the most popular in terms of likes and views. The disadvantage of this method is that we can only collect videos uploaded by users who actually use the respective hashtag. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of videos on TikTok means that it is necessary to make a targeted selection in any case.

The corpus for this study encompasses one hundred videos tagged with the hashtag #jazz, ranked by the number of views. There were individual videos on the list that displayed no reference to jazz, neither sonically nor visually. These videos were not considered for the analysis, and I collected more appropriate videos to replace them until I had reached one hundred again. In the next step, I watched every video several times in order to systematize its audiovisual content. In doing so, I inductively developed a set of descriptive categories in the course of the analytical process. I worked with the software MAXQDA, which is designed for qualitative research. The software is often used for systematically analyzing text data, but it can also be applied for coding (audio)visual data. All in all, I developed a system of descriptive categories with 1,601 codings in total. The main categories, divided into several sub- and sub-sub-categories defined in the course of the analytical process, were the following: musical repertoire, gender relations, *race*/ethnicity, setting, video form, musical performance, and verbal elements.

Results

Musical Repertoire

There is a clear tendency toward versions of jazz standards played by the content creators: this phenomenon was observed in forty-six out of one hundred videos. Most of these songs belong to the repertoire of the Great American Songbook, a loose canon of popular songs composed and first recorded from the 1930s to the 1950s. A significant number of these compositions have been performed by jazz musicians over the years, and they represent a specific aspect of the jazz canon—these songs are considered jazz standards.[42] In twenty-one videos, we hear original compositions by the content creators, although not necessarily fully fleshed-out songs, but rather short loops or harmonic progressions. Snippets of original songs are only performed by the above-mentioned musicians Stacey Ryan and Laufey. In fifteen videos, the original sound of existing jazz recordings was

adopted. While the adoption of pre-existing sounds may be typical of many TikTok videos, especially in the case of dance challenges and lip-synching, it is obviously not of great importance for jazz musicians on the platform. Improvisation plays a minor role, as we mainly hear musicians improvising in only eleven videos. Most of the time, these improvisations are only very short segments without instrumental accompaniment, whereas only one musician, the trumpeter Kellin Hanas, improvises to jazzy stock instrumentals in a "classical" sense.

Most of the time, we hear versions played by the content creators or original recordings of songs first recorded from the 1930s to the 1950s: ten songs are from the 1950s, and nine songs each are from the 1940s and 1930s. The oldest song in the corpus is from 1928 ("Makin' Whoopee," performed by Laufey). Table 1 provides an overview of the songs that appear in the corpus at least twice.

Tab. 1: Most popular songs in the top 100 of videos tagged with the hashtag #jazz on TikTok.

Title	Songwriters	Year	Occurrences
"Fly Me to The Moon"	Bart Howard	1954	5
"It's Been a Long, Long Time"	Jule Styne/Sammy Cahn	1945	4
"In the Mood"	Wingy Manone/Andy Razaf/Joe Garland	1939	3
"L-O-V-E"	Bert Kaempfert/Milt Gabler	1964	2
"La Vie En Rose"	Édith Piaf/Louis Guglielmi	1947	2
"Sing, Sing, Sing (With a Swing)"	Louis Prima	1936	2
"Sway"	Luis Demetrio/Norman Gimbel	1954	2
"It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)"	Duke Ellington/Irving Mills	1932	2

However, it is not clear whether the musicians are really referring to the first recorded versions of the songs or rather to the most popular recordings. For example, the song "Fly Me to the Moon" was first recorded in 1954 but was popularized by Frank Sinatra's version from 1964—nowadays, it is considered a Sinatra song.

Gender Relations

The gender ratio is relatively balanced, with a slight tendency toward male musicians. Videos were coded as "male" or "female" if the musician who uploaded them can be assigned to this gender category. This is also true of duet videos, where two or more videos from different accounts are displayed simultaneously. In forty-seven videos, there are male musicians performing, and women perform in thirty-seven videos. In ten videos, we see mixed

groups, and in six videos, gender is not discernible, as the musicians are not visible. Categorizations based on social categories such as gender—and also *race*/ethnicity—are of course not entirely reliable and can only be made in a relatively superficial manner in such an analytical procedure. For instance, the classification of musicians as either male or female was based on my own subjective perception, which is influenced by the pervasive social logic of binary gender categorization.[43] It cannot be ruled out that the actual gender identity of the individuals in the videos may differ from these categorizations.

The gender ratio could lead one to assume that the most popular jazz musicians on TikTok are males. If we take a closer look at the musicians who appear in the corpus multiple times and whose musical repertoire is typical with respect to the aforementioned focus on Great American Songbook songs from the first half of the twentieth century, the picture changes a little. The musician featured most frequently in the corpus is Ricky Rosen (@rickyrosen), who appears in seven videos. He performs versions of songs such as "Sway" (originally from 1954) and "It's Been a Long, Long Time" (originally from 1945). Another male musician who performs a comparable repertoire is Erny Nunez (@young_crooner), with two videos in the corpus. Ben Freeman (@ben_makes_names_to_music) has five videos in the top 100: he provides humorous content by, for example, playing songs backward and asking the audience to identify the song they hear—this kind of jazz performance is rather unusual with regard to the analysis of the musical repertoire. The most successful female musicians on the list, on the other hand, clearly represent the focus on Great American Songbook songs. Stacey Ryan, Laufey, Ebony Loren, and Rachel Chiu appear at least twice with versions of songs such as "Fly Me to the Moon" (1954) and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)" (1932). This means that the jazz repertoire that is the most popular on TikTok tends to be represented by female musicians who are highly popular on the platform, each with at least 500,000 followers. Although the musicians' age is not displayed on TikTok, all the musicians mentioned here are clearly in their early twenties or even younger.

Race/**Ethnicity**

The coding regarding the *race*/ethnicity category followed the recommendation of Lucibello et al. and assigned the videos to the categories "Asian," "Black," "Indigenous," "Latinx," "Middle Eastern," "White," and

"OOther."[44] Additionally, the categories "mixed groups" and "not discernible" were defined. The category "mixed groups" was selected when the videos featured multiple musicians who could be assigned to different categories. For instance, if only musicians belonging to the "Black" category were shown, no distinction was made between individuals and groups. "Not discernible" was chosen when the musicians were not recognizable, for example due to costumes. These categorizations, like those of gender, are necessarily superficial. However, in the context of a preliminary analysis, such an approach is unavoidable if one is to first reveal inequalities on a general level and thus lay the foundation for more in-depth analytical steps.

The defined top one hundred is clearly dominated by *white* musicians; this category was applied to a total of sixty-eight videos. The categories "Black" (5), "Latinx" (4), "Asian" (3), and "not discernible" (3) play a clearly subordinate role, while the categories "Indigenous," "Middle Eastern," and "OOther" were not assigned at all. In eleven videos, we see mixed groups; six videos do not show any people. This overview demonstrates that the musicians who can be clearly categorized as *white* are in the majority. It is evident that the field of the most popular jazz videos on TikTok is predominantly a "white space."[45]

Setting

No great variability can be ascertained with regard to the video settings. In the majority of the videos (73), we see the musicians perform in domestic spaces. Only occasionally are they filmed playing on a stage or in a rehearsal room. This is typical of TikTok, as many creators film themselves at home—an aesthetic that is certainly influenced by the coronavirus pandemic, when a large part of the global population was in domestic isolation, continuing what had already been described as "bedroom culture"[46] in social media research before the advent of TikTok.

Video Form

Most of the videos (74) were obviously filmed by the musicians themselves placing their smartphone in front of them. Most musicians (85) are filmed in selfie mode, that is, from a rather close distance, while fifteen musicians are seen from a greater distance, for example performing on a stage. Even though the duet is one of TikTok's key features, only seven videos in the corpus

make use of this feature. The majority of the videos (73) were recorded in one pass, which means that storytelling modes with more than one storyline or perspective do not play a key role for most musicians.

Musical Performance

In eighty-seven videos, we see musicians performing the music themselves, whereas in thirteen videos the music is taken from other sources. There is a clear tendency toward solo performances (62); ensembles are featured in twenty-five videos. This seems logical, as the majority of the videos were produced by musicians at home, not in a concert or rehearsal setting. In thirty-seven videos, we see musicians singing, whether to an instrumental track (16), to their own instrumental accompaniment (12), to a cappella (8), or to the accompaniment of multiple instrumentalists (1). While there is no clear tendency regarding the musical accompaniment, singing to pre-recorded instrumentals might be a feature that is typical of jazz performances on TikTok, but it is rather unusual in jazz beyond the platform. Instrumental music without vocals occurs in thirty-two videos.

Verbal Elements

The majority of the videos make use of the English language, be it in the song lyrics, the text layers, or spoken language. Spanish (4) and French (2) language elements occur occasionally, whereas ten videos contain no verbal elements at all.

On TikTok, creators can add written text to their videos by using the app's features for text layers, for example to explain the topic of the video or display song lyrics. Due to the platform's short-video aesthetic, one reason for doing so might be that there is not enough time for spoken explanations or introductions. Furthermore, adding song lyrics can make it easier for other users to duet, as they can sing along to the original sound. And perhaps the text layers will attract more user attention.

In several videos (22), the text layer serves to explain what the video will be about. Song lyrics are displayed in fifteen videos, and in fourteen videos the creators use the text layer for telling stories that are not related to the topic of the video or the song's lyrics. Song titles are displayed in twelve videos, and some (11) creators reply to users' comments, which are displayed in a

text box on the left of the screen. This feature cannot be regarded as a text layer in the sense of the aforementioned examples, but it does add verbal elements to the videos. These textboxes typically display comments by users and requests for the creators to sing particular songs.

In twenty videos, we can hear spoken announcements by the musicians. For example, they announce the song they are about to sing. In the videos with more humorous connotations, the announcements sometimes serve to prepare the punchline of a joke (12).

Summary of the Corpus Analysis

Of course, there is no specific formula for performing jazz on TikTok. Still, there are some recurring patterns that allow us to define a number of typical features. Versions of jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire first recorded between the 1930s and the 1950s are very popular, most of them sung by relatively young *white* women in their early twenties—although there are more male musicians in the top one hundred. The musicians typically perform in mundane settings and in selfie mode, and singing is more popular than instrumental music. Almost all musicians featured on this list sing songs in English, which is obviously their mother tongue. Text layers are used frequently, while spoken announcements are less typical as long as the musical performance, rather than humorous elements, is in the foreground.

Prototypical Creators and Content

According to the results of the corpus analysis, the following musicians can be regarded as prototypical of jazz on TikTok: Ricky Rosen (@rickyrosen), Stacey Ryan (@staceyryanmusic), Laufey (@laufey), Rachel Chiu (@rachelchiu1), Ebony Loren (@ebonylorenmusic), Sam Ambers (@sam_ambers), Stella Cole (@stellacole), and Erny Nunez (@young_crooner). If we take a closer look at their profile pages, it becomes evident that the focus on singing jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire from the early twentieth century to the 1950s is a defining factor for the style of their performances on TikTok. For example, almost all of them have uploaded their own version (sometimes even several versions) of the two songs that, according to the corpus analysis, are the most popular: "Fly Me to the Moon" (1954; see fig. 2) and "It's Been A

Long, Long Time" (1945). That is to say, the jazz musicians who are the most popular on TikTok also perform the jazz standards that enjoy the greatest popularity on the platform. This is true not only of these two songs but of several others as well, for example "La Vie en Rose" (1947) and "L-O-V-E" (1964). Clearly, popularity with jazz on TikTok is, at least to a certain degree, dependent on choosing a very specific repertoire.
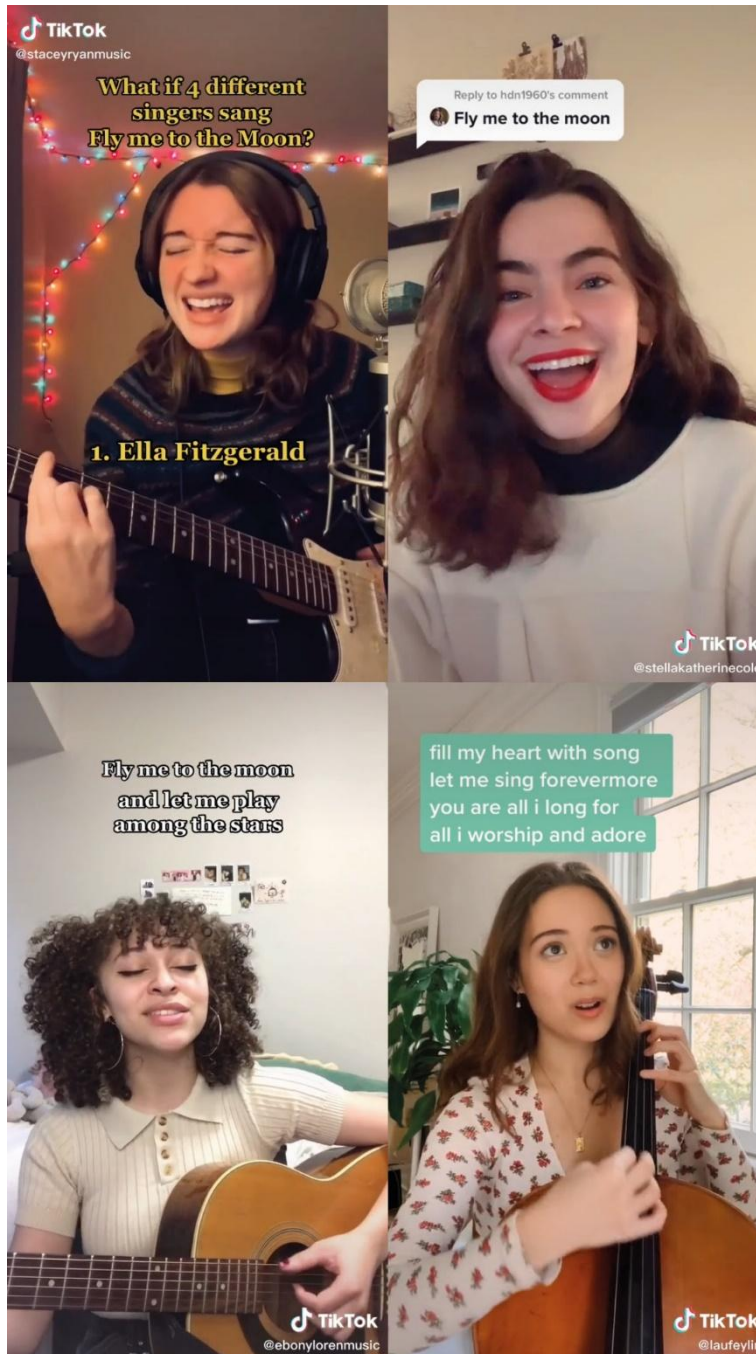

Figure 2 Stacey Ryan, Stella Katherine Cole, Ebony Loren, and Laufey performing "Fly Me to the Moon."

Why exactly this kind of jazz? With regard to "Fly Me to the Moon," it seems that every jazz musician who wants to be successful on TikTok has to upload their own version of this song if they want to reach a large audience.[47] The song is highly popular on the platform in general. A search for the hashtag #flymetothemoon currently leads to a list of videos with more than 290 million views on TikTok. For my ongoing research on jazz on TikTok, I conducted interviews with musicians from the United States, Canada, and the UK whose jazz videos are highly popular on TikTok.[48] Some of them have argued that "Fly Me to the Moon" is one of the most, maybe even *the* most popular jazz recording of all time, at least in North America. This may be a very North America-centered perspective on jazz, as many listeners in other geographical regions might be surprised by this assessment. As recent research demonstrates, TikTok in general is, to a certain extent, North America centered. As Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström show, the majority of the most popular TikTok creators are from the United States—a fact that they attribute to the assumption that TikTok aims at establishing itself in the American market in particular.[49] If this is true, the business model of ByteDance—the company behind TikTok—would therefore have a direct impact on the musical repertoire that is particularly popular on the platform.

Another potential explanation for the popularity of certain jazz standards on TikTok is their prevalence in popular media. Whereas "Fly Me to the Moon" was featured in the South Korean series *Squid Game* and has subsequently gained popularity on TikTok, "It's Been A Long, Long Time" probably owes its success on TikTok to the fact that it appears in a well-known movie: it was used at the end of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). These examples demonstrate that contemporary popular media culture can have a strong impact on the jazz repertoire that is played on TikTok. In addition, users want the musicians to sing songs that they probably know from popular media or from other TikTok creators, as we can, for example, see in Laufey's version of "It's Been a Long, Long Time." At the beginning of the video, she comments: "A lot of you have asked me to sing this song, so here you go."[50]

These two songs, as well as the aforementioned "La Vie en Rose" and "L-O-V-E," clearly demonstrate that the kind of jazz that enjoys the greatest popularity on TikTok does not necessarily coincide with the repertoire typically associated with the jazz canon perpetuated by journalists, researchers, music documentaries, and others. For example, music by so-called jazz icons[51] such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane is not featured. Instead,

TikTok showcases songs from the Great American Songbook. Songs like "La Vie en Rose", a signature tune of Édith Piaf, and "L-O-V-E," composed by Bert Kaempfert and Milt Gabler, would probably not be considered jazz recordings at all by many jazz enthusiasts. But on a short-form video platform that is very much based on generating interaction, it appears self-evident that songs like these, which are catchy and relatively easy to sing along to, will receive more attention than virtuoso improvisations, complex compositions, or recordings that are typically several minutes long and lack catchy hooks. Jazz creators, in turn, have to work with the platform's affordances. Obviously, in terms of their repertoire choices, musicians have to respond, to some extent, to what the platform demands, what the users want to hear, and what is likely to generate interaction and visibility on the basis of TikTok's platform logic. In this respect, the platform's affordances can have a decisive influence on the musical repertoire that achieves popularity on TikTok.

As we can see in fig. 2, some of the prototypical jazz musicians on TikTok are relatively young women in their early twenties who conform to a certain prescriptive beauty norm. While they often accompany themselves on guitar or piano while singing, we can assume that they are primarily perceived as singers. Whereas jazz instrumentalists tend to be in the background on TikTok in general, the focus on young female singers clearly perpetuates gender-related stereotypes that have been typical in jazz culture for decades. In an article on women in jazz, Sherrie Tucker describes the "gender-coding of musical instruments" in jazz from a historical perspective.[52] Tucker argues that several instruments that are relevant for jazz—such as brass, bass, and drums—have traditionally been associated with men, while women were mainly—if at all—accepted as singers.[53] We can see the results of this gender-coding and the related exclusion of women in jazz historiography even today, for example when skimming through jazz history books, where typically only a few female singers but quite a lot of male instrumentalists are featured.[54] It is not very surprising that certain gender stereotypes and beauty norms are also perpetuated on TikTok, as the platform is accused of using user attractiveness as a key criterion for its ranking systems.[55] In this respect, it is obvious that, in addition to a certain repertoire, the musicians' appearance also determines their success on the platform, due to the logic of algorithmic filtering.

Conclusion

According to the corpus analysis and the analysis of individual profiles of highly popular jazz musicians, TikTok paints a very homogeneous picture of jazz. The most popular musicians who can be described as prototypical of jazz on TikTok are for the most part conventionally attractive, *white* North American women in their early twenties singing jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire mainly written by *white* male songwriters from the United States from the 1930s to the 1950s. Original compositions, improvisation, and ensemble interaction are relegated to the background, despite these being important aspects of jazz. Obviously, it is not equally easy for everyone to be successful with jazz on TikTok. Popular creators tend to need a certain musical repertoire and a certain physiognomy, and they should sing songs in English. TikTok is sometimes considered an inclusive space where everyone can find their individual niche, and this might be true to a certain degree. But if we focus on the creators who enjoy the most popularity, quite the opposite seems to pertain. This applies not only to jazz but to the platform in general.[56]

I argue that this is to a large extent due to the platform's affordances and the logic of algorithmic filtering. Creators who strive for visibility have to observe which content performs well on the platform and tailor their musical repertoire and appearance accordingly. Due to the short-video format and the platform's sociability features, like duet, stitch, and use this sound, certain jazz styles or specific songs are more likely to perform well, as it is more likely that they will attract and hold the attention of quite a lot of users. These mechanisms should by no means be understood in a media-deterministic sense but rather as a specific form of sociotechnical interplay between the platform and its users—between human and non-human actors. As the specific case of jazz on TikTok demonstrates, this sociotechnical interplay can potentially lead to a very homogeneous representation of musical cultures in digital spaces, reaching millions of people.

TikTok obviously pushes normatively attractive young people and perpetuates social stereotypes, especially with regard to gender and *race*. In this sense, certain mechanisms of cultural canonization that are typical (not only) of jazz are perpetuated on the platform. But at the same time, there are clear differences from the jazz canon as documented in jazz history books, in music journalism, and in documentaries. Compared to these traditional

gatekeepers, what the platform presents as "the best"—or at least as the most popular—of jazz tends to be influenced by contemporary popular media, such as well-known movies and series, and the focus is on jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire—not on bebop or other jazz styles widely considered "art music." Normally, Black male instrumentalists are regarded as the canonical figures of jazz. But on TikTok, young *white* female singers are the most visible jazz musicians. That is to say, certain aspects typical of jazz-related canonization seem to be reversed to some extent on the TikTok platform. On the other hand, certain tendencies of jazz-related canonization have not changed. For example, it is still the singing women, rather than the instrumentalists, who receive the most attention. There are also clear inequities in terms of *race* and ethnicity, as the majority of highly popular jazz musicians analyzed in this study are *white*. It is evident that racist biases are pervasive in digital spaces, particularly in the context of algorithmic filtering.[57] Intersectionality, understood as the interconnectedness and, at times, reinforcement of social categories such as gender, *race*, ethnicity, and class, which has been commonplace in jazz for decades,[58] plays a pivotal role on TikTok as well.

In this sense, the platform's affordances and the striving for visibility in digital spaces may spawn alternative domains of jazz-related canonization, challenging the traditional gatekeepers' narratives of cultural hierarchization.[59] Still, TikTok cannot be understood as a hermetic space but is instead influenced by certain cultural stereotypes that have long been crucial for the formation of cultural canons. This means that digital media platforms such as TikTok can be regarded as new cultural gatekeepers that bring new modes of cultural canonization into play. But these modes of canonization are still highly influenced by various cultural contexts that go far beyond digital media platforms. It is an important task for researchers to understand the platform mechanisms and the new modes of cultural canonization arising in digital spaces.

As researchers only have limited access to the APIs (application programming interfaces) of digital media platforms, it is very difficult to gain insights into the platforms' logic. Some platform companies, for example Spotify, have even tried to have research on their platforms banned by the courts—eventually, Spotify's plan failed, the research was conducted, and the results were published.[60] However, platform companies are very restrictive, and getting in touch with their employees is extremely difficult or probably impossible

in most cases.[61] One possible way to better understand platforms is to get in touch with people who don't work for platform companies but who have specific knowledge of certain functional logic systems due to their professional engagement with platforms—for example professional musicians with high numbers of followers and several viral videos. These people can tell us a lot about platform logic, and they know better than outsiders what kind of content will probably perform well on individual platforms. Another avenue that appears promising is to get in touch with music industry professionals, such as music producers and label managers or employees of social media agencies. These professionals have to develop certain strategies for showcasing musicians on platforms, or perhaps even for tailoring musical content to certain platforms. That is to say, what we need is in-depth case studies on the various production cultures that shape the image of music cultures as communicated on digital media platforms, reaching myriads of people every day.[62] This approach can complement the kind of corpus study presented in this article by investigating the production logic of individual creators and the respective platform practices.

Notes

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3. Rachel Chiu, "My phone was at 1% 🥺," TikTok.

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6. Max Peter Baumann, "Transkulturelle Dynamik und die kulturelle Vielfalt musikbezogenen Handelns," in *Transkulturelle Erkundungen: Wissenschaftlich-künstlerische Perspektiven*, ed. Ursula Hemetek, Daliah Hindler, Harald Huber, Therese Kaufmann, Isolde Malmberg, and Hande Sağlam (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 66–67.

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11. For an overview of TikTok's platform infrastructure, see Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström, *TikTok*, 56–90.

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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

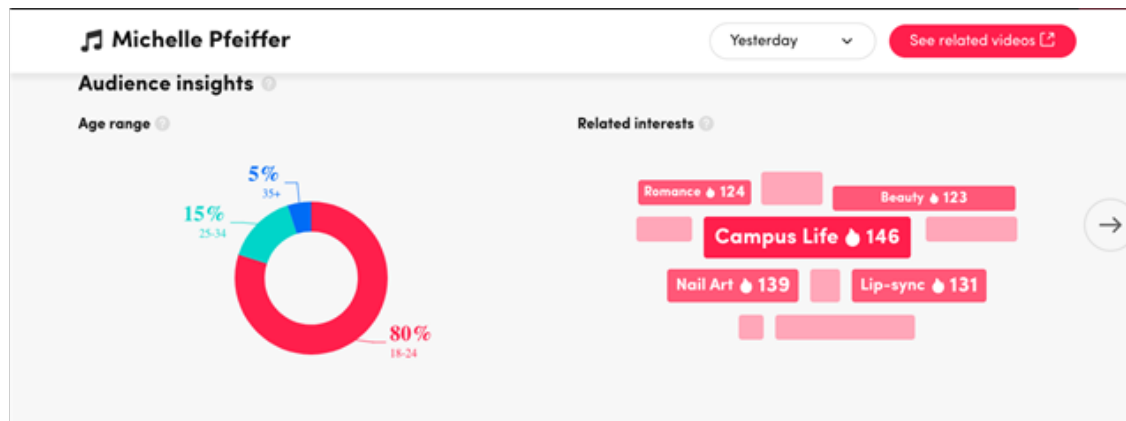network, but between a user and what could be called an 'algorithmic' version of themselves."[31]

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"

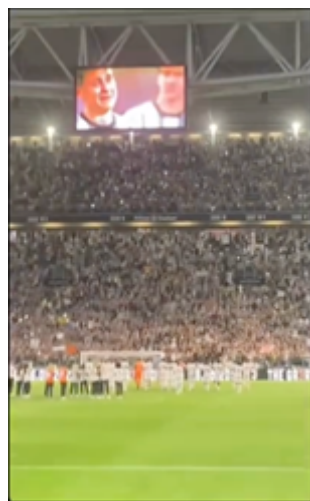Figure 3: : Screenshot of the first TikTok video based on "Quel Sorriso in volto"

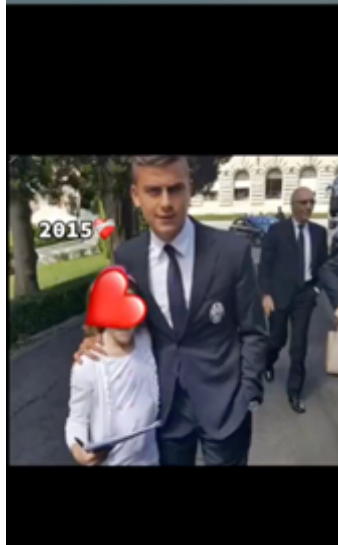Figure 4: : Screenshot of the second TikTok video based on "Quel Sorriso in volto"

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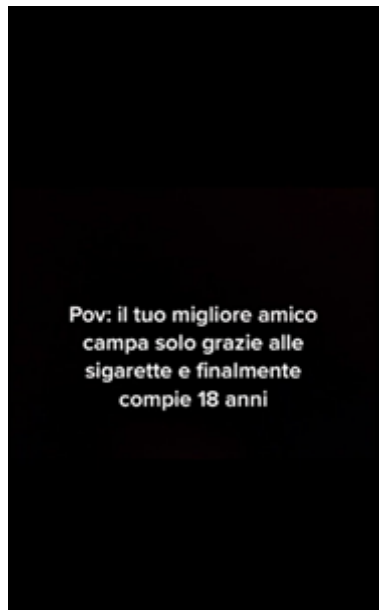
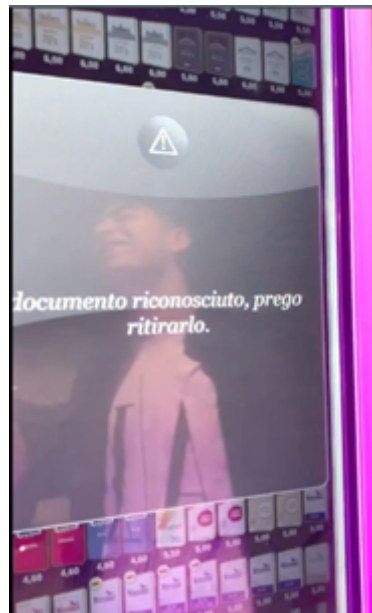Figure 7: : Screenshot of the second TikTok video based on "18 ANNI"

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).