

# I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



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*INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology*

No. 9, December 2022, pp. 51–73.



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# TIKTOK AND SOUND: CHANGING THE WAYS OF CREATING, PROMOTING, DISTRIBUTING AND LISTENING TO MUSIC<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** TikTok has become one of the fastest growing online empires in the last decade, and one of the most influential social media tools today. By centering the short-video format tailored for smartphone screens, this platform sets forth the sonic component of the audio-visual material in ways which have been unexplored in the social media realm on a global scale before. In this article I will explore the ways in which TikTok has made an “aural turn” (Abidin and Kaye 2021), and thus changed and influenced the processes of music-making, music listening and music promotion. Special attention is given to the tools creators have at use (such as Duets, Stitches, livestreams, short form of the video), as well as the circumstances that ensue when these tools are combined with the algorithm and the entire ecosystem of this app (such as the highest yet possibility of virality, pressure to optimize content to be ‘catchy’ and likable, fast release on other streaming apps). The article also investigates the TikTok-influenced image of the contemporary music industry, as well as the multifaceted use of sound as memes.

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<sup>1</sup> This study is the result of research conducted within the Institute of Musicology SASA, funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (RS-200176), and by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, project *Applied Musicology and Ethnomusicology in Serbia: Making a Difference in Contemporary Society* (RS-7750287).

I would also like to thank Ana Đorđević, Adriana Sabo, Monika Novaković, Rijad Kaniža and Milan Šuput for their careful reading of my text and useful comments and suggestions.

**Keywords:** TikTok, music, sound, meme, music produsage, music promotion, music technology.

## INTRODUCTION

With its breakneck rise in popularity come the pandemic and the times of isolation – as one of the top 10 most downloaded apps in the last decade (Vizcaino-Verdú and Abidin 2022, 884), one of the fastest growing brands in 2020 and 2021 (Morning Consult), the most popular website of 2021 (Cloudfire), and the “official entertainment partner” of the Eurovision Song Contest 2022 – TikTok was seemingly only an app intriguing just to teenagers eager to participate in dance challenges. Overcoming the expectations and the patronizing discourse surrounding it, this platform has, in fact, changed the ways in which we consume, create, and interact with audiovisual content in just a couple of years. Moreover, it has vastly transformed the ways in which we experience music, including the perspectives of the creator, the audience, and the music industry/traditional mediator between the first two.

In his introductory chapter to the edited collection *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, Trevor Boffone frames “TikTok as what Raymond Williams calls a ‘formal innovation,’ or new cultural practices that push against well-established mainstream culture” (2022, 3). The innovations and cultural impact introduced by this platform are discernable in several key features. To start, content creation on TikTok is best described by the terms produsage or prosumerism – the types of participation in online environments which transcend the division between passive consumption and active creation of content.<sup>2</sup> TikTok ‘producers,’ more commonly known as TikTokers, engage with this digital ecosystem in a noticeably more casual, immediate and intuitive way than seen on other social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram or YouTube, which, on the other hand, developed a more polished and curated environment over the years. Its user-friendly interface makes it even easier to record and edit video clips, as well as react to content with video responses via options such as Duets and Stitches. Coupled with the easy-to-use aspect, the addictive quality of this app is also rooted in its powerful algorithm and enormously potent organic reach of the content. Finally, what is especially important for the present paper, the platform sets forth the sonic component of the audio-visual material in such ways which have been unexplored in social media before and on a global scale.

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2 The term produsage was popularized by Australian media scholar Alex Bruns with his book *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (2009). On the other hand, prosumerism is more often used in the field of marketing, business and economy. See, for example: Buzzetto-More 2013; Santomier and Hogan 2013.

Building on the hypothesis proposed by Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin that the “TikTok’s audio background is one of its main unique features” (2022, 885), in this article I will explore the ways in which TikTok has changed and influenced the processes of music-making, music listening and music promotion, with an intention to contribute to the foundation for future research of the status and practices of music and musicians on this app. My research is based on a user experience on TikTok as a consumer who intentionally ‘trained’ their algorithm to show diverse types of music content, as well as on the internet sources, newspapers articles and, most importantly, already rich scholarly production that TikTok expansion provoked. Before turning to the analysis of said processes, I will give an overview of the TikTok’s history and main features, with special attention given to the role of sound it fosters.

## **ABOUT TIKTOK**

TikTok as we know it today emanated from a merger of two previously existing software, a widely popular Chinese short-form video sharing app Douyin (抖音), and Musical.ly, also a Chinese social media platform specialized for short lip-sync videos. Namely, the company ByteDance released Douyin in 2016 for the Chinese market exclusively, and acquired Musical.ly in 2017, which were then merged into one software and all the existing accounts were transferred to TikTok. With all the possibilities and the prior popularity of the two apps, TikTok was launched in 2017 for the international market, and it became available worldwide on August 2, 2018.

The features mentioned before – the content creation possibilities, ease of operation, monstrous algorithm, and probability of reaching significantly larger numbers of people – also did not come without its problems and challenges. Since its beginnings, TikTok has had to deal with (or has inexplicably ignored) problems with users respecting or administrators maintaining community guidelines, censorship, cyberbullying, harassment (see Anderson 2020), promoting and upholding misogyny (Daly et al. 2022), white supremacy, racism (see Boffone 2022b; Ile 2022), xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and far-right extremism (see Weimann and Masri 2020). Likewise, issues with monetization and unregulated/insufficient payments through the Creator fund (Green 2022), addictiveness, allegations of reduced attention span in users, “dangerous” participatory challenges, data security and such, are the result of the relative ‘greenness’ of the platform combined with its main functioning characteristics.

On the other hand, more than one billion users and various scholars also attest to TikTok’s positive and good sides. For example, Boffone underlined this ambiguity:

TikTok is filled with joy, escapism, pleasure, education, and community-building, even if the platform bolsters systemic racism, classism, ableism, and the like. (...) TikTok can be both of these things; there is nuance (Boffone 2022, 6).

Coincidentally, the enormous growth of TikTok is interconnected and concurrent with the Coronavirus outbreak and the global pandemic that followed. Its prospect for community making through the immediacy and easiness of video communication indeed came in hand during the time of mandatory social isolation. As the research suggests, during 2020 TikTok had a beneficial effect on the mental health of its users (Situmorang 2021), as it became instrumental in online learning and coping with school assignments/stress (Literat 2021), and also helped in getting valuable – albeit not always accurate – public health information across (see Basch et al. 2020; Southwick et al. 2021; Southerton 2021).

With such an unprecedented ‘boom,’ TikTok quickly started to influence and enforce a shift towards a more vertical video friendly environment for the already existing social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Most notably, the popularity of the short video pushed by the new app practically enforced developers at these well-established companies to introduce a new feature – Reels on Instagram in August 2020<sup>3</sup> and Shorts on YouTube in September 2020. This reorientation has received different reactions: while many Instagram users lament this new focus on the video instead of the photographs that were the trademark of this app, the YouTube realm started to introduce a new perspective into their website in order to more organically incorporate the new content tool. Namely, as internet content creator, science communicator and entrepreneur Hank Green explained, with having both YouTube videos and YouTube shorts, this website becomes a place where you can decide whether to watch something (a video from a creator one is familiar with and already subscribed to) or to keep watching something (a TikTok-like thread of short videos from random creators you do not follow) (Green 2022b).

However, the appeal of short video content remains primarily a TikTok feature. The still unmatched algorithm is the characteristic feature that separates it from its peers and the previously existing apps TikTok is often being compared to (such as Vine, Snapchat, and others). As Bhandari and Bimo point out, Tiktok is the only one “of the major social media platforms on the market (...) to position its algorithm at the center of the social experience it engenders; the algorithm determines the type of video content the user is exposed to” (2022, 2). Therefore, the user experience is led and determined by algorithm, which is it-

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3 Company Meta, which owns both Instagram and Facebook, also launched Reels on Facebook in September 2021 for the US market and in February 2022 globally.

self a ‘quick learner’ of one’s interests and favorite topics. Spending most of their time consuming new content (especially on the dominant, exploratory “For You Page”), TikTokers are aware of the algorithms ‘ability’ to quickly and accurately ‘read’ them and customize the content to their liking – often in the most uncanny ways – and the fact that it affects the longitude of time they spend on the app (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 5). One is thus able not only to introduce and virtually establish oneself via the direct content production, but also – thanks to the fact that, unlike on other popular social media platforms, TikTok profiles are inherently public – to build the “algorithmized self” (Bhandari and Bimo 2022) through the never-ending stream of videos coming their way.

### **“MAKE THIS A SOUND”: AUDIO COMPONENT OF TIKTOK**

The importance and even prevalence of sound on TikTok has been stressed on many occasions. What differentiates the audio component here is the possibility of using sound as a ‘ready-made’ element and a base for memes. This includes both released songs and musical pieces, as well as the audio content recorded by the users.<sup>4</sup> Namely, the option to “make a sound”, whether separately or by extracting it from your already existing video, opened a possibility of becoming viral based on the unproduced and ‘raw’ sound – be it music, speech, sound effects, or other.

Aside from using *a sound* as a foundation to one’s video in a dance or other challenges, memes, lip-syncing, reactions or as a ‘mood setter’, TikTok thrives off the already mentioned features Duet and Stitch, which further creates the possibilities of working with sound on the app. Both of these options can be seen as the successors of two features of the app Musical.ly – BFF and Q&A. Musical.ly’s “Best Fan Forever”, i.e., BFF feature,<sup>5</sup> made it possible for two users to connect their accounts and create separate videos with the same background music template, and combine it into one video (Savic 2021, 3184). However, this feature did not support adding more audio layers to the original, since “it was introduced as a way to dance or lip-sync alongside others (Musical.ly 2017)” (Kaye 2022). On the other hand, Q&A enabled users to answer posed video questions with video answers.

With TikTok’s takeover of Musical.ly, the latter feature was eliminated, and the BFF was “rebranded” (Savic 2021, 3184). However, I would argue that although the Q&A might be officially cancelled, the core idea still exists and func-

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4 Often, when viewers of a certain video realize the “meme potential” of the sound that video contains, there will be a flood of comments in line with “make this a sound” sentiment.

5 Also dubbed by the preteen users of the app as the Best Friends Forever feature.



tions through the Stitch feature, where one user is able to answer to a video, and have it play after the whole fragmented/edited original. The Duet and Stitch features have, therefore, allowed for different types of manipulation of sound in communication to other users' content, whether it be layering or continuance on the existing sound. As I will show later in this text, these two options, together with an option of creating an original sound, shaped the way music is made, reacted and listened to, as well as promoted on TikTok and even beyond.

### **Making music / working with sounds**

In this subsection of the text, I will look further into the characteristics of TikTok that are instrumental for creation of music in this app, both in terms of the software's technical features and concerning the environment that the users create on this platform. In other words, the attention is given to the tools creators have at use (such as Duets, Stitches, livestreams, short form videos), as well as the circumstances that ensue when these tools are combined with the algorithm and the entire ecosystem of this app (such as the highest yet possibility of virality on social media, pressure to optimize content, make it 'catchy' and likable, release it on other streaming apps such as Spotify).

The already mentioned Duet feature was, as expected, "immediately appealing" to musicians (Kaye 2022, 60). The possibility of combining your sound with another creator's sound to create a new blend would obviously be interesting to musicians, especially during times of social isolation.<sup>6</sup> This type of collaborative music making can – and it most often does – happen between the previously mutually unfamiliar users, at least in the professional sense. It should also be noted that many TikTokers – particularly those who strive towards the best possible internet and social media presence and presentation – record, layer and mix the sound of their Duets within the separate musical software, and then use that file instead of the 'organic' sound of Duet.

One initial video and every consequent recording that is created in this queue can, theoretically, in continuation have a countless number of different duets and, therefore, a countless number of sound outcomes. The first video is a "call-to-action" of a kind, an invitation to everyone who feels intrigued to answer (musically or otherwise). For choir singers, it can be the bass singing its part of the SATB arrangement of a choral piece, or, for virtual bands, any of the instruments playing the line of a well-known song or an improvisation. The

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<sup>6</sup> For example, D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye explored the collaborative music making on TikTok during the first several months of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, through the case study of @JazzTokOfficial profile. See Kaye 2022.

building of virtual choirs, which became widely popular with the work of American composer Eric Whitacre,<sup>7</sup> was now possible without tedious montage and individual recordings that had to be edited into one; choirs, as well as any other vocal, vocal-instrumental, or purely instrumental ensemble, started forming without clear guidance, one sound layer at a time.

One attention-worthy example of such collaborative music making started uncovering in late 2020 with a video of Scottish postman and folk singer Nathan Evans. Namely, Evans recorded a cover of “Wellerman”, a sea shanty (a type of song originally performed by seamen aboard merchant ships and fishing ships since the 1400s, cf. Parr 2021) and posted it on his profile on December 27, 2020. The video itself frames Evans sitting in front of the camera (see Figure 1), lip-syncing to a prerecorded sound that contains Evans singing a cappella, with multiple vocal tracks added in the chorus of the song and steady beat of his hand hitting on the table.

Soon after, the TikTok was taken away with numerous Duets to this cover, making it viral together with the hashtags #seashanty and #seashantytiktok.<sup>8</sup> Almost instant virality, numerous duets to this video, remixes of his sound, and many subsequent covers and original songs by Evans propelled his career and led him to a three single contract with Polydor Records, of which “Wellerman” was officially released already on January 22, 2021.<sup>9</sup>

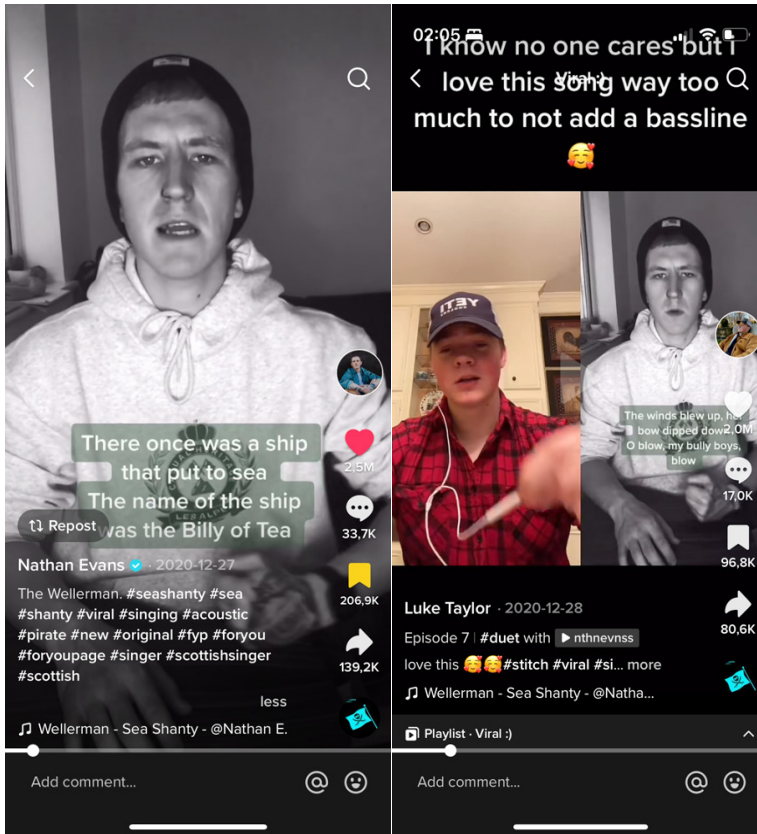
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7 The first instance of Whitacre’s virtual choir – Virtual Choir 1 *Lux Aurumque* – was launched on YouTube in March 2010. See more on the history of this long-lasting project on Eric Whitacre’s website (<https://ericwhitacre.com/the-virtual-choir>) and his YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@virtualchoir>).

8 At the moment of finishing this article, #seashanty hashtag had 6.9 billion views on TikTok, while #seashantytiktok had over 430 million. Google Trends also underlined the virality of this trend by announcing on January 12, 2021, that the term “sea shanties” as a search term reached its highest point in Google’s history (Parr 2021).

9 In 2022, Nathan Evans released an album titled *Wellerman – The Album* with the label Electrola. The album contains 14 Evans’ renditions of shanties, as well as the two remixes of “Wellerman” and “Drunken Sailor”. See more at: <https://www.discogs.com/release/25170967-Nathan-Evans-Wellerman-The-Album>.





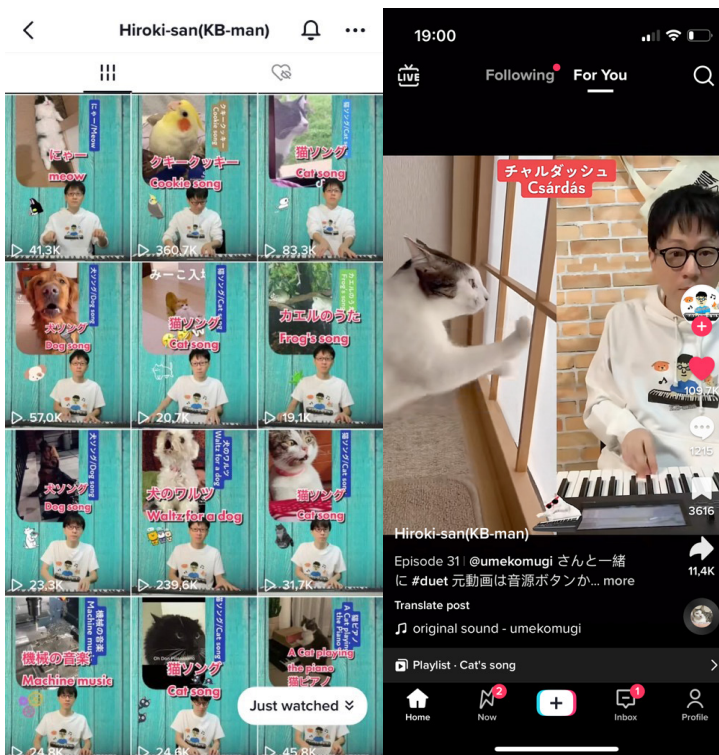
**Figure 1.** Screenshots of Nathan Evans’s video and one viral duet by American singer Luke Taylor.

The story of “Wellerman” is among many examples of inspiring and reaction-provoking original videos. With various levels of success, many people post their invitation to collaboration into the TikTok void. These “Sing/Play with me” videos span from invitation to make Duets to cover already famous songs, to instigation of improvisatory collaborations. American singer Patrick Smith (@pat.smith85), for example, combines these two: aside from clips of him singing and playing covers or his original music, Smith also records TikToks inviting viewers to duet his videos and sing covers in a jazzy manner. He also includes a visual component, adding on screen the song’s text, which is divided into verses that are supposed to be sung by him and his virtual partner alternately. Going further, a genre of the “open verse challenge” has developed, where musicians of various genres give an opportunity to their followers to duet their music video and ‘fill in the missing parts’ of their new songs on their own, textually and musically.

On the other hand, one of the possible approaches to Duets and outcomes thereof is also described and examined by D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye in his al-

ready mentioned paper about the @JazzTokOfficial profile (2022). Kaye underlines the advantages (finding the community, doing jazz challenges, promoting music, inviting the audience to participate via the Duet feature) and disadvantages (having to outsource final editing of videos to another platform, for example) of having a musical community and shared profile during the period of Covid-19 lockdowns.

An intriguing inter-species trend also gained massive popularity. Namely, since pet and animal videos make up a large portion of TikTok and internet content in general, it is not surprising that musicians started “duetting” animals producing musically inspiring sounds. An account that collected over 11 million likes on his videos with “musical duets with animals”, @hirokisan79, belongs to the Japanese composer and arranger Hiroki Takashi. In these videos, he makes an arrangement of an already existing musical piece or a song or composes something completely new, based on the sound that the animal makes in the original video (the sound can be of animals’ voicing or of some other recorded animal activity).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.** Screenshots of Hiroki Takashi’s page and the *Csárdás* video.

10 For example, one of his most viewed and liked recent videos shows a cat scratching a door in a consistent and regular beat that could suit a tempo of a quicker musical piece. Duetting that video and sound, Takashi played Vittorio Monti’s *Csárdás*. See also Figure 2. <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFxnryYT/>.

With the Stitch feature, a direct musical collaboration (as seen with Duets) is unlikely, mainly because there is no option to add sound to the original post or layer tracks of sound when stitching a video. Furthermore, the stitched video is only up to five seconds long. This means that the video that is used for further stitching is meant/made to be a provocateur of a reaction. The user that is stitching a video can also choose which part of the video they are going to react to; in that reasoning, one could enable the Stitch option on their videos, and invite people to sing, play or react to a musical performance in their own video with the words “stitch this with a video of...”. However, this feature is not primarily used in the musical community for virtual music making, but mostly for verbal or other answers to the original poster. For example, user @theneedletok stitched with a video by @moshpitjones, reacting to a sentence “all the music sounds the same”. In their answer, TheNeedleTok gave several examples of music artists and albums to listen to that could possibly change the original poster’s mind.<sup>11</sup>

Musicians on TikTok can also benefit from the livestream feature, even though this software trait is not limited to TikTok users. Nevertheless, TikTok livestreams appear on the “Following” page and on the “FYP”, reaching their already existing followers, as well as potential new listeners. In their detailed guidelines for creators, TikTok highlights what the “best practices to keep in mind” are when going live: prime time hours, the duration of a livestream, lighting, active engagement with the audience, good quality of sound and internet connection, etc. (TikTok 2022). The host of a livestream can now also have up to five guests on their stream, however, given the different locations, stability of internet connection and delays in communication, this feature is not ideal for collaborative music making. On the other hand, a virtual gig-like atmosphere can be achieved if a video/gig is streamed from one place.

There are, of course, other examples of concert streaming coming from the big production companies. In 2021, the famous Lotte Duty Free Family Concert was streamed on TikTok, and it featured major K-Pop star bands such as BTS, Super Junior D&E, TWICE, ITZY, and TOMORROW x TOGETHER. Prior to this, The Lotte Duty Free company organized many successful online events with tickets and an “online gate”, however, this was one of the first of its kind on TikTok. In June 2022, Italian band Måneskin – the ESC 2021 winners and a global sensation ever since – played and streamed a free concert from Berlin without the live audience as a gift to their fans.

Turning to the issue of the duration and the obligatory dimensions of TikTok videos, there are several aspects that should be considered. Namely, although TikTok elongated the videos up to 10 minutes since August 2021 (for some users), the platform is best known and used for videos lasting from 15 seconds to

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11 See: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFxvJxPT/>.

one minute and, more recently, even up to three minutes. This demand for short videos that grab the viewer's and listener's attention within the first few seconds hugely influenced the ways of presenting musical pieces on this app and, consequently, even on the music writing itself. As Robert Prey (2020) and Jeremy Wade Morris (2020) underlined, music artists can nowadays feel compelled to 'optimize' their work in terms of songwriting and song production to increase their visibility on platforms, most notably, on Spotify. Morris further points out that

music, as data, adds pressure on musicians and producers to think and act like software developers, treating their music not just as songs that need to reach listeners, but as an intermingling of sonic content and coded metadata that needs to be prepared and readied for discovery (Morris 2020, 2).

Although Morris and Prey write about different internet music platforms, this statement especially rings true for musicians and music promoters on TikTok.

If we take into account the sounds that are the drivers for the duration of the videos – be it as a meme or as a musical excerpt – we can see that, thanks to the initial setting to the video duration, the majority of them last from just several seconds up to one minute. A request – or, rather, a limit – like that can most certainly influence the way we listen to existing music, but also the way we compose new music intended for large audiences and uses. It has almost become an unwritten rule to think about and project a verse, chorus, or a bridge of a song, which could fit the ideal duration, be appropriated into meme or otherwise trending sound, and have a potential to go viral.<sup>12</sup> Together with becoming a meme, releasing a sound excerpt from a song that is soon to be published on music streaming platforms is likewise being used as a hook. A recent example of a highly viral sound that has led to a global anticipation of the full song release happened in Summer/Fall 2022. Sam Smith's and Kim Petras' song "Unholy" was teased on TikTok with an excerpt from the song that featured the chorus on August 22, 2022, becoming an instant viral hit. The release was scheduled for September 15 but had to be postponed to September 22 because of Queen Elisabeth II's passing and funeral. Even though the song performed extremely well in charts, its release date delay sparked a fiery debate on the fast-paced TikTok about the music industry and big production companies who do not yet realize

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12 Recently, many have pointed out that even the biggest pop music stars have not been immune to this trend. One of the most notable examples of such practice is the already famous sound meme "It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me" from Taylor Swift's latest album *Midnight* (2022). See, for example: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/anti-hero-trend-taylor-swift-tiktok-b2227478.html>.

they need to act faster in a world or on an app where trending songs change in a matter of days or weeks.

What can also influence the type of presentation of musicians and their work besides the duration are the dimensions, and the obligatory upright position of the captured frame, designed to best take advantage of people's smartphones. That means that just copying and pasting horizontally recorded videos that were made for platforms such as YouTube can be seen as lazy and unwilling to commit to a TikTok audience.

As implied previously in the text, TikTok is not an application tailored for listening to music and collecting songs into playlists, although verified musicians and bands have a special section of their profiles to separate sounds from the video content. It is, thus, crucial for music artists to know how to use their popularity 'take-off' on TikTok and recognize when to release viral or otherwise successful songs on other music streaming apps. TikTok gives an opportunity for fast organic growth and a virality based on the sound itself, and can thus streamline and propel many potential music careers.

### **Promoting music / pipeline to *the real* music industry**

As early as Spring 2020, the instructions of how to achieve virality of TikTok with your music started to appear. For example, in their YouTube video titled "TikTok Music Promotion | How To Get Your Music Viral In 24 Hours", music marketing agency Burstimo based in London shared possible promotion strategies for musicians on TikTok. The presenter gives two approaches: one for those who want to engage in TikTok produsage themselves, and the other for those who would rather delegate that task (Burstimo 2020).

According to the first strategy, apart from creating and recording music, a musician must actively work on gathering a like-minded community, creatively present to them the music and details about the creation process, explain the meaning of the songs, and, finally, reach out to influencers on the platform with propositions for collaboration. The other route of promoting music on TikTok presumes a musician has analyzed and divided their songs into shorter (15 seconds or so) clips, and then reached out to influencers who could produce a viral dance challenge or other trend based on the sound. Burstimo supposes the music is already made independently of social media before acting on these steps, but, as I have emphasized above, that is not always the case, and this strategy of actively thinking about the next viral trend very much influences the creative process.



More recently, in 2022 marketing platforms for music professionals such as Feature.fm introduced a feature titled “evergreen pre-save” (Feature.fm 2022; Leight 2022). This option would allow musicians who become viral with an excerpt from a new and unreleased song to see how much of their audience would engage in “pre-saving” the release (of known or unknown date) and demonstrate their interest by leaving TikTok, i.e., the initial platform, with a click to the external link. Simultaneously, the marketing agency would gather more information about the fans by collecting their email and other data.

Much has already been said in the media about TikTok virality and the right moves for aspiring musicians when they achieve it. In their extensive research of new and emerging musical artists that became viral with their new releases on TikTok in the period from 2020 to 2021, journalists Estelle Caswell from Vox and Matt Daniels from The Pudding explored the ‘behind the scenes’, or the follow-up on the ‘happily ever after’ of TikTok virality and the influence of that particular type of virality on music culture and the music business (see Caswell and Daniels 2022). The first thing to note was the already mentioned and so-called “TikTok-to-Spotify pipeline”, followed by dissecting the network of record labels, distributors, independent artists, and their formulas for success in the now-significantly-changed music business. Namely, in addition to the demand of TikTok users in terms of releasing the music on Spotify, the journalists also analyzed the names on the Spotify 200 new artists playlist, only to discover that the quarter of them (in said period) came from TikTok, of which 46% signed a major record deal (Caswell and Daniels 2022). Additionally, the overall number of artists who got signed by a major label from January 2020 to December 2021 is impressive: out of the 367 in total, 129 happened as a result of a TikTok viral moment (Caswell and Daniels 2022, 13:58).

Successful (self-)promotion on TikTok leads musicians into the arms of the readily available and ever-watching eye of the music industry. The mindset that is comprised within these couple of lines – “if you want exposure, you have to be on TikTok. And not only that – you have to post, post, post” (Caswell and Daniels 2022) – inevitably directs musicians to a point where they can decide whether to sign a deal with a record label, go independent, or do something else. With the labels monitoring trends on TikTok, this platform also started developing its own tools for music distribution. TikTok’s own music distribution platform, SoundOn, was launched on March 9, 2022. Like other similar platforms, SoundOn distributes music to various streaming services (Spotify, Apple Music, Resso /by ByteDance/, Deezer, Pandora, Joox, as well as back to TikTok), leading TikTok into another branch of the music business.

In a seemingly post-Covid world, apart from internet platforms and applications a music artist should be able to ‘go into the real world’, that is, to go on tours, sell merchandise, and secure their career in that way as well. An





**Figure 3.** Screenshot of the Caswell’s and Daniels’ video showing the proportion of artists discovered on TikTok compared to others.

illustrious example of translating the TikTok fame into the “real life” is the story of Sam Ryder, a British singer who got famous on the app with his enchanting covers of popular music classics. In 2022, Ryder represented the United Kingdom at the Eurovision Song Contest, placing first in jury votes and second overall. What followed were the released singles, album announcement, concerts and collaborations with many established artists and, most notably, his performance with Queen members Brian May and Roger Taylor at a tribute concert for Taylor Hawkins at London’s Wembley Stadium in September 2022. Ryder’s example is not an exception – indeed, during 2022, many of the musicians who firstly became famous on TikTok started actively touring and engaging in concert activities.

As for the previously acclaimed musicians and their work, most of them (and their social media teams) discovered TikTok as yet another platform to promote and spread their music. Likewise, having in mind the soundtracks of the new films or television series, evergreen songs such as Kate Bush’s “Running up that Hill” (included in season 4 of the *Stranger Things* series) came to the center of attention of a global audience and, among other benefits of reviving and re-releasing songs from decades ago, easily achieved TikTok virality.

## Consuming / using / listening to music

Up until this point in the text, the prominence of sound on TikTok was emphasized in various ways, primarily from the perspective of musicians and the music industry. Now I will deal with the place and role sound and music have in users' experience on this app.

When speaking about the sound library on TikTok, in the moment of writing and revising this text, the number of commercially available, royalty free songs is beyond 600,000 (TikTok 2022b). This means that there are thousands more sounds available for non-commercial use, while the number of existing sounds which are not songs or song excerpts in a traditional way is countless and ever-growing. Understandably, a large majority of those sounds will never be reused or become viral, but the ones that do usually become globally recognized sound memes. Having that in mind, the potential for user creative engagement is enormous.

An independent website Tokboard collects and analyzes data from TikTok, providing insight into the most popular sounds and users on the platform.<sup>13</sup> On their page, Tokboard presents the top 100 most used sounds in a weekly or monthly overview, coupled with their individual statistics: the author, the number of views they accumulated, and the number of popular videos made with the sound (see Figure 4). This statistics also show the speed with which TikTok songs come in and out of trend.

Looking into screenshots presented in Figure 4, we can see that the viral sound pool consists of well-known pop music songs, classical music, remixes, and original sounds created by authors for TikTok in order to provide mood-based background music or a soundtrack of any kind. It is also quite noticeable that the titles of the sounds are not given according to some rule or norm – for example, in August 2020, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (recording of Pachelbel Chamber Orchestra) was trending under the title of "Classical Music".

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13 In their About section, Tokboard says: "Tokboard is powered by a data-collection engine which is constantly fetching data from the TikTok platform. The database now contains data points for more than 80 million top videos and 5 million users, taking up more than 50 gigabytes for metadata alone. As TikTok is extremely large, we cannot pull 100% of its data but instead keep a subset of the popular videos for top sounds. As a result, the play counts we display should be thought of as a close lower bound (we estimate the videos which we index account for more than 96% of the total play counts)". Tokboard also pointed out they were being threatened by ByteDance while having their previous name, Tiktometer. See <https://tokboard.com/about>. Last accessed on November 29, 2022.

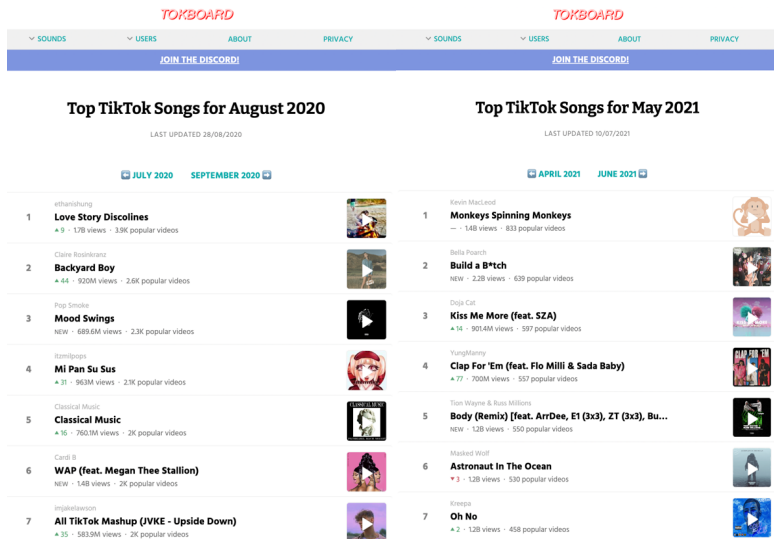


Figure 4. Screenshots of Tokboard statistics for August 2020 and May 2021.

This array of sounds represents the audio library primarily used as a meme or working by the principles of audio memes. Whether they are memes in a strict sense, lip-syncing or challenges based on a sound, they all set sound as the driving force and an impetus for every video reiteration and recreation of the sound. Using the term ‘audio memes’ to denote this phenomenon Crystal Abidin and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye write:

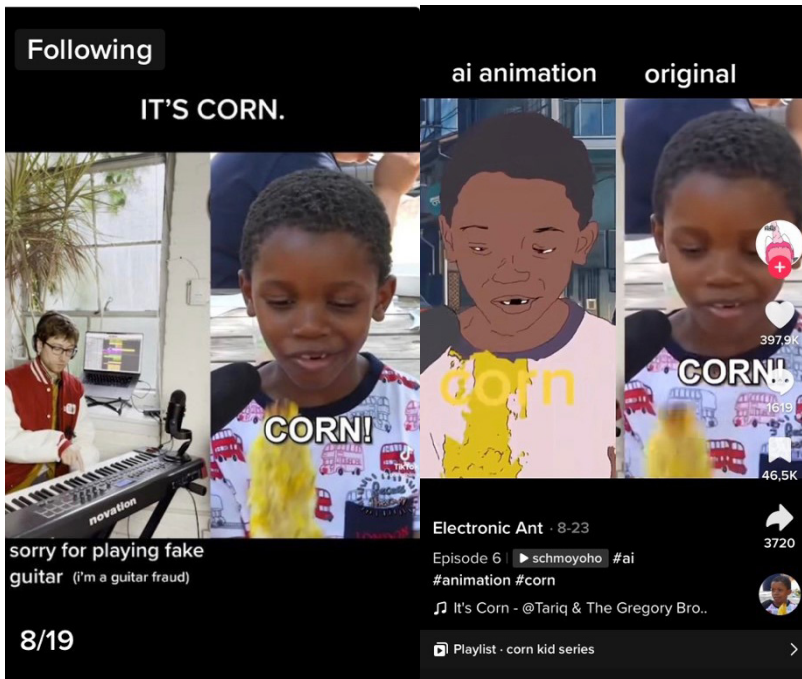
TikTokers often rely on the lyrics of specific songs to tell a story (e.g. when the lyrics are central to lip syncing, when the punchline of a video is a specific lyrical line in the song); consider the musical and rhythmic shape of a tune to advance the storyline of their video (e.g. when a beat ‘drops’, when a song transitions to ‘bad recorder playing’); complement or juxtapose audio memes against video content and textual captions (e.g. song to provide ambience for the storytelling, song to change the tonality of storytelling to sarcasm or parody); or organize and streamline content into specific silos (2021, 58).

Furthermore, Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin pose that the notion of music challenge, which is an extremely popular and diverse ‘game’ based on the sound used, can be seen as audio meme modes of (transmedia) storytelling (2022, 901). They discern many different types of these challenges: recognizing playlists; checking playlists; comparing musical recognition level; recognizing speed; checking the fandom level; remembering/forgetting songs; knowing or not knowing a song; following the rhythm; belonging to a group; singing songs; testing citizenship; lowering hand fingers; listening to any song (i.e., recognizing songs of any genre); checking addiction to TikTok; reacting/

not reacting to music; looking for friendship; showing the mood; lip-syncing skillfully; and testing musical skill (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022, 900). Combined with the gamification of sound, these challenges produce group affiliation codes and the sense of belonging (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022). We can acknowledge that some types of challenges overlap, such as testing citizenship and lowering hand fingers, which can, for example, be counted as song recognition exercises in general.

Abidin and Kaye (2021) explore the “earworm” quality of the sound together with their “templatability”. This means that the sounds have a special quality to entertain and occupy the human brain and psyche as no other form of content, which has led to the “aural turn” in memes on TikTok (Abidin and Kaye 2021, 61).

The sound template, as a frame in which a meme is to happen, provokes millions of videos on TikTok. One of the latest viral trends on the app was the remixed sound titled “It’s Corn”, which, in the original version, contains an interview of a boy Tariq talking about his love for corn for Recess Therapy.<sup>14</sup> This initial sound was then “songified” – made into song – by The Gregory Brothers, a.k.a. Schmoyoho.<sup>15</sup> Soon enough, the song became a viral meme where people showed their appreciations to corn and, even more so, different types of things of their own liking (by showing it in the videos and adding changed lyrics to the



14 See video recording of the interview here: <https://youtu.be/1VbZE6YhjKk>.

15 Hear the TikTok viral version of the song here: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMFQ4X24j/>, and the complete song here: [https://youtu.be/\\_caMQpiwiaU](https://youtu.be/_caMQpiwiaU). It is important to note that Schmoyoho released the song and had the royalties split with the original creator, Tariq.



screen). The song started an avalanche of covers, duets, stitches, remixes and reactions, also entering the musical repertoires of radios, choirs, bands and other performers globally. It is worth noting that this is just one of many examples of such a reach for a TikTok sound meme.

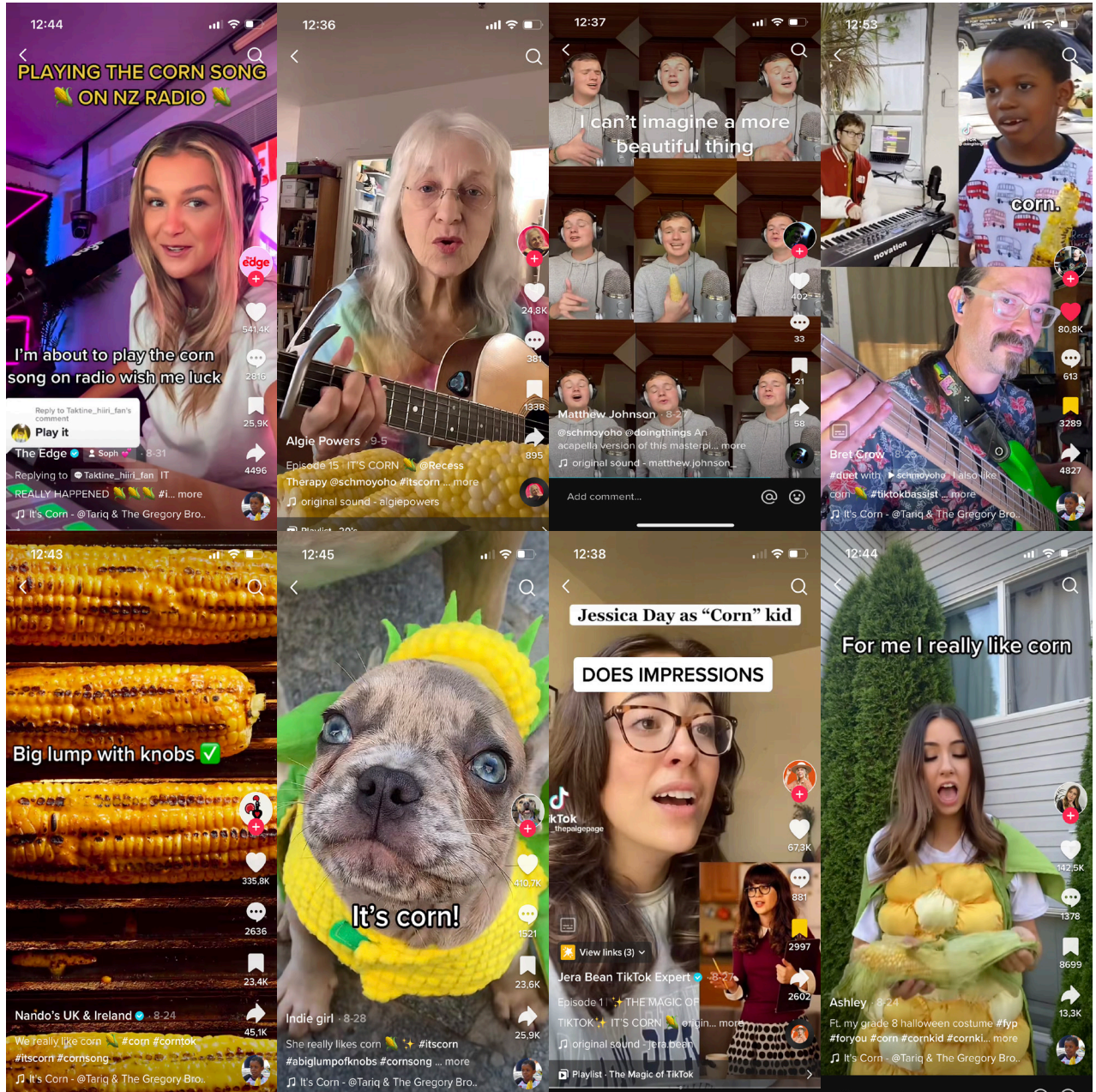


Figure 5. It's Corn original and covers/reactions screenshots.

The potential that sounds have on TikTok sparked an occurrence of TikTok coaches who specialize in recognizing current and future viral sounds. These accounts then themselves strive towards virality while “coaching” people on ways to use a specific sound. Practically, in stating the obvious for the majority of TikTok users, these creators find their own audience, but mostly just ‘ride the wave’ of a sound that is about to be or is already trending.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

By focusing on sound on TikTok in this article, as well as on music in its many realities on this app, my intention is to contribute to the scholarly literature on this topic that is growing at a fast pace. Thus, I made an overview of the history of the app, as well as its main features, technology-wise, that allowed for sound to become so prominent. It should not be surprising that this “aural turn”, which happened on such a large scale and among so many people that consume content on TikTok, strongly affected the processes of contemporary music making, the state of the music industry and the habits of today’s listeners and consumers of music and sound in general. Likewise, it should come as no surprise that TikTok not only directly impacted the development of new, imitational features on the biggest social media and video sharing outlets, but also changed the way the music industry functions in terms of discovering new artists, as well as distributing, streaming, and selling music.

The *sound* has become a currency on TikTok, a driving force and a shape holder for the communication of trends, memes, challenges, group belonging, and setting new pathways in music. As I pointed out, the Duet feature – and, in particular, its option to use and layer on to the sound of the original video – is one of the primary game-changers of online musicking. It enabled collaborative music making online with limited editing skills, which became essential during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also widely argued that the form (in terms of dimensions as well as the duration) of TikTok videos, coupled with the promised and always-already achieved virality, is also shaping the way musicians structure, compose, and arrange their new pieces, songs and *sounds*. Sounds that show potential and align with the algorithm (or are promoted by influencers – as the marketing industry suggested) soon enough gain traction and aim towards virality. And when the sound becomes viral, the rest is history... until the next trend.



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**TIKTOK AND SOUND:  
CHANGING THE WAYS OF CREATING, PROMOTING, DISTRIBUTING AND  
LISTENING TO MUSIC  
(summary)**

This article addresses the issue of sound and music on TikTok, one of the fastest growing online empires in the last decade and one of the most influential social media tools today. By centering the short-video format tailored for smartphone screens, this platform sets forth the sonic component of the audio-visual material in ways which have been unexplored in the social media realm on a global scale before.

The “aural turn” (Abidin and Kaye 2021) that happened on TikTok at the same time changed and influenced the processes of music-making, music listening and music promotion. Special attention is given to the tools creators have at use (such as Duets, Stitches, livestreams, short form of the video) – which were especially important for collaborative music making and communication during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown – as well as the circumstances that ensue when these tools are combined with the algorithm and the entire ecosystem of this app (such as the highest yet possibility of virality, pressure to optimize content to be ‘catchy’ and likable, fast release on other streaming apps). The article also investigates the TikTok-influenced image of the contemporary music industry, as well as the multifaceted use of sound as memes. As shown here, TikTok not only directly impacted the development of new, imitational features

on the biggest social media and video sharing outlets, but also changed the way the music industry functions in terms of discovering new artists, as well as distributing, streaming, and selling the music. Moreover, research shows that the TikTok environment shapes the way musicians structure, compose, and arrange their new pieces, songs and *sounds*.

Article received: October 30, 2022  
Article accepted: November 30, 2022  
Original scientific paper