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Marketing Agile Artists: How Music Labels Can Leverage TikTok's Virality

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Abstract

TikTok's meteoric rise in recent years is unparalleled by any other social media platform. From a music standpoint, TikTok differs from other social media as sound lies at the center of its user experience. Unknown artists have used the platform's democratized algorithm to get their music in front of fans; one viral song trend can catapult an artist into a massive chart and commercial success. This has led to TikTok becoming responsible for the bulk of new music discovery, from breaking new artists to resurrecting older ones. While studies have shown the link between how smaller artists have used TikTok to find a following, little research has been done to show how major labels should leverage TikTok in their marketing rollouts. Certainly, digital marketing's peer-to-peer or co-creation between larger artists and their fans has been part of music marketing for some time, and this strategy worked well for Harry Styles and Lizzo on TikTok in the summer of 2022. Yet, music virality on the platform is more often than not being dictated by the users over the strict marketing intent of the labels. This paper shows how TikTok's music virality eschews the co-creation of traditional social media marketing in favor of user-generated content. In other words, users don't merely comment or circulate content; they become the content. TikTok is changing music marketing from a co-creative ecology to a user-generated medium using micro-influencers and agile marketing methods.

Keywords: TikTok, virality, music marketing, user-generated content, agile marketing

Introduction

On May 22, 2022, musical act Halsey posted a video on TikTok that quickly went viral. The video was a low-angle close-up of the singer's face looking sad and not saying anything. The overlay implied that until Halsey created a viral moment on the platform, the label would hold their¹ new music hostage. Halsey then listed their successful sales of 165 million records, implying that the label's viral demands were unreasonable. "Everything is marketing," read the text, and stated that every artist is subjected to this form of performative labor. Halsey's statements set off a firestorm of discourse on Twitter, mostly criticizing the music industry's expectations of its artists. Halsey's video received an avalanche of responses, thereby unintentionally creating the viral moment the label had wanted.

While social media skeptics point to Halsey's anti-marketing video as an effective marketing strategy, the conversation does elicit dialogue about how artists can best leverage TikTok to promote their music. Halsey's response that they shouldn't have to create fake marketing moments on social media to release music is not a new sentiment. Marketing rollouts are a de facto part of the music industry, with labels expecting their artists to participate. Viral videos on TikTok may seem "fake" to the artists or an additional tap on their creative resources, but this is not a recent phenomenon. In the early era of MTV, many musicians balked at making music videos. Bruce Springsteen famously told his manager that he was interested in two things: writing music and playing music. Springsteen had no interest in becoming a music video artist.² His first video, the Brian De Palma shot "Dancing in the Dark," with its cringe-inducing forced ending dance with Courteney Cox, went into heavy rotation on MTV. Ironically, the video was crucial in contributing to his first top-ten single and earning the Boss' first Grammy.

TikTok, like MTV, has proven to be a robust music marketing tool for artists who embrace it. TikTok is also responsible for music discovery and breaking new musical acts such as Lil Nas X, Doja Cat, and Megan Thee Stallion. Early adopters of the platform have found both the accessibility to fans and the increased visibility of their music a vital marketing tool. Yet, early adopters were predominantly new, unknown, or indie artists benefitting from the platform's lower entry barrier and organic virality. As TikTok enters its fourth year with its emphasis on music and growth, major labels are grappling with how to effectively use the platform in their marketing rollouts. Until 2022, TikTok had still evaded market predict-

ability for established acts. Certainly, there are major label acts, such as Harry Styles and Justin Bieber, whose new releases have benefitted from TikTok’s virality. Yet it remains unclear how labels can leverage TikTok into their marketing strategy. For example, who chooses what goes “viral”? How can an artist’s song become trending audio? How are these viral songs utilized on TikTok? Is user engagement different for music marketing on a music-based social media platform like TikTok versus the influencer marketing of Instagram or the conversation-centric discourse of Twitter? This paper aims to show how TikTok stands apart from other social media platforms for marketing new music.

TikTok’s Marketing Strategy

In 2016, the Beijing-based media and tech company ByteDance created TikTok, a platform mirroring the successful Chinese version, Douyin. In 2017 ByteDance bought the video platform Musical.ly and merged it with TikTok, keeping the latter’s name while adding the former’s user base. This merger allowed the newly branded TikTok to have a solid foundation of 100 million global users.³ Initially, TikTok was considered a kid’s platform, with its challenges, lip-syncs, and dances. Due to the pandemic, TikTok’s popularity swelled by such an amount that by August 2020, it had more than 100 million active users in the U.S., reaching far beyond its adolescent user base.⁴ As of 2022, TikTok has over a billion users worldwide and has been downloaded over 200 million times in the United States alone.⁵ According to the app’s statistics page, the percentage of TikTok users from the ages of 10 to 19 is 32.5%, while users 20 to 29 make up 29.5%,⁶ indicating that as of 2022, users under the age of 30 account for over 60% of the entire platform.

TikTok’s initial appeal lies in its user experience (UX). TikTok’s business model features elements of social networking and video-sharing platforms to deliver a new way to create value for consumers.⁷ As a mobile-native app, upon opening the platform, users are greeted by a full-screen video. This singular viewing experience allows for quick bingeing and scrolling through videos. One of TikTok’s most ingenious initial onboarding strategies was the ability to view a TikTok video without downloading the app. If a friend shared a video with you—whether you were or were not a TikTok user—you could open and watch the video. This sharing ability allowed others to become part of the viral video discussion without an initial commitment. Used as a source of entertainment

and escapism, early adopters quickly became viral sensations. TikTok's extremely user-friendly platform and peer-to-peer marketing are a large part of its rapid success.

TikTok's algorithm is the other area that increased its popularity. Unlike Facebook, Instagram, or the ephemeral Snapchat, TikTok uses an engagement-driven algorithm. A TikTok user's videos become popular the more others share, rewatch, and save these videos. While this is like Instagram's algorithm, it is not the primary push of content for the photo platform. Instagram initially prioritizes content based on followers, meaning those with large followings get pushed out more than users with fewer followers. TikTok does not rely on one's followers as a driver of virality and instead emphasizes the organic traction of users' videos. Thus, those with ten followers are just as likely to be pushed out as those with 10K followers. This vaunted algorithm causes TikTok to be a ground-up marketing platform versus a top-down platform such as Instagram.

Additionally, TikTok is not insular to one's friend group to feature content. Thus, where a closed system such as Facebook will prioritize SEO (search engine optimization) shared by your friend group, TikTok is a mixture of those you follow, and content creators chosen based on your interests. While TikTok's algorithm is not fully transparent, one area of the algorithm that seems to aid in its popularity is its ability to accurately curate a user's For You Page (FYP) to their niche interests. These niche areas create deep subcultures within the platform, making targeted marketing stronger but broadcast marketing more difficult. In other words, virality is a relative term on TikTok. Often a viral trend will vary considerably from one user to another. As more users onboard, and the niche algorithm deepens, the more narrow content will be per individual user. This benefits small music content creators or those with genre-specific fans. However, how do large artists reach all these siloed niche groups?

Changing the Competition

TikTok is not only gaining on its competition in numbers, but it is also actively changing its competition's UX design and algorithms. In the summer of 2021, Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri announced a shake-up in how the photo-sharing platform would calculate its algorithm. At the time, Instagram's UX allowed for a user's choice in viewing posts, static-image feed; stories, 24-hour dynamic content; or IGLive. Instagram also created short-form videos called "Reels" to compete directly with TikTok.

Mosseri stated that Reels would be the primary metric used to push one's content out to new followers.⁸

Instagram had previously engaged in this type of direct competition in 2016 when it developed "Stories" based on an identical design to Snapchat's Stories.⁹ The move paid off as behemoth Instagram buried the smaller platform's numbers, with the majority of early adopters being teens.¹⁰ Instagram seems to be betting that it can once again outperform another platform by copying TikTok's video format.¹¹ Yet, the 2022 numbers show that Instagram is only barely besting TikTok, with 2.9 billion to 2.2 billion users, respectively.¹² Instagram's trends on Reels also seem to lag behind TikTok by at least a week, primarily due to TikTok's in-app ease at creating native video content.

Instagram's Reels is not alone in aiming to capitalize on the increasing interest in short-form videos. In 2018 Facebook launched Lasso, a fifteen-second video app. Lasso never really took off, netting fewer than 80,000 daily users, and after two short years, the underperforming platform shuttered for good.¹³ Instead of including Lasso in-platform, part of Facebook's misstep was offering it as an additional downloaded app. In September 2021, Facebook course-corrected by introducing their video, also called "Reels." Most likely, Facebook opted to use Instagram's "Reels" name to create cross-platform branding. While Facebook had owned Instagram since 2012, they'd mostly functioned as separate companies. The common name was likely due to Facebook gearing up to announce its re-branded conglomerate company, Meta, in October 2021. Facebook's addition of short-form video has worked as Facebook's Reels account for half of the platform's twenty most viewed posts.¹⁴ While Facebook is still the biggest social media platform, Reels seems to be an attempt at offsetting its aging user base by capturing a younger audience.

Both Instagram and Facebook's short-form video Reels suffer from a lack of native content. Meta's Reels rely heavily on aggregated content, with 82% of Facebook's Reels coming directly from TikTok.¹⁵ This quickly resulted in serial cross posting and duplication across apps, whereas TikTokers would simply repost the same TikTok videos on Instagram Reels, resulting in swift pilfering of TikTok content genres and aesthetics to Reels.¹⁶ To create more in-platform content, Mosseri announced in April 2021 that Reels with TikTok's watermark would deprioritize the user's discovery algorithm.¹⁷ Despite lacking a watermark, TikTok trends are easy to spot on Instagram's Reels. Over a year after Instagram prioritizes

short-form video, instead of capitalizing on TikTok's short-form video trend, the older platform seems to be having a crisis of identity.

In 2021 YouTube entered the short-form video trend with their version aptly titled "Shorts." As of 2022, Shorts just surpassed 1.5 billion users and are being watched more frequently than YouTube's main creator's channels.¹⁸ For all this emphasis on capitalizing on TikTok's IP and user base, the Chinese company still outpaces both Meta's Reels and YouTube's Shorts. This data tells us that no matter which social media platform controls the market, all social media *users* prefer short-form video content.

With so much social media leaning into short-form videos, it is paramount for music marketers to create this content. Social media has long been a part of brand marketing; however, TikTok raises the stakes for music marketing. What marks TikTok is that music has always been foundational to its platform. While Instagram privileges image over text, TikTok favors sound. Much like the discussions in the arts between painting versus film, TikTok is a transmedia approach to storytelling and encourages content-created interaction with its audience.

Co-Creation in Music Marketing

Social media changed the landscape for music marketing. "[Before social media] marketing was very formulaic—get the right to co-sign, get the right tour, and then have a shot. The fate of whether an artist would break felt more dependent on gatekeepers," stated Lallie Jones, Marketing Director at 300 Entertainment.¹⁹ Ogden, Ogden, and Long conducted a historical overview of music marketing, illustrating how music marketing has gone from a top-down approach to that of a rhizome.²⁰ Jeremy Wade Morris described how marketing has "evolved from a philosophy based on the exchange of goods to a revised logic focused on intangible resources...[with] value defined and correlated with the consumer."²¹ Several studies in entertainment marketing have framed their inquiry on the experience economy, the co-creative enterprise, and service-dominant logic. Hoksbergen and Insch examine the co-creation of music festivals on Facebook, explicitly centering their research on attendees under the age of twenty-five.²² Unsurprisingly, their research revealed little participatory action on Facebook by this demographic.²³ Prahalad and Ramaswamy define co-creation as a collaborative value creation by both the producer and consumer.²⁴ In this case, this would be the musicians and their audience co-creating marketing value for the artist's music or tours. Prahalad and

Ramaswamy go on to state that co-creation in the social media space must offer a way for customers to personalize their co-creation experience.²⁵ Personalization allows artists to connect more directly to their fans.

Most of the music marketing literature examines smaller artists establishing new business models through social media's lower barrier of entry. Gamble, Brennan, and McAdam look at how crowdfunding has removed the necessity for smaller artists to be tethered to larger labels.²⁶ Gamble and Gilmore discuss how crowdfunding is upending traditional business models in the music industry.²⁷ Morris argues that indie musicians are becoming entrepreneurs and active marketers of their music through social media.²⁸ His argument is similar to Halsey's Twitter discussion regarding jobs that were once part of a label's marketing responsibility, which are now becoming an expected part of an artist's musical output.

Choi and Burnes assert that through co-creation, record labels, musicians, and fans work together to co-create value.²⁹ These mutually beneficial relationships promote horizontal versus vertical transactions between record labels, artists, and fans. Benjamin Toscher looks at music marketing through service-dominant logic to explain an alternate theory of value creation.³⁰ Toscher argues that TikTok's users, the music industry, and musicians all work within a mutually beneficial exchange framework on TikTok, creating valuation for all actors. Toscher's research indicates that the music industry uses TikTok content creators and conduits for their artist's music.

Paul Chambers identifies how specific social media platforms and music affiliation impact creatives.³¹ This study shows how musicians, especially independent musicians, can leverage social media as a marketing tool.³² While Chambers illustrated the impact of peer-to-peer networks in music marketing, similar to studies on fan culture, his study does not delve into TikTok specifically. Additionally, I argue that Toscher's elucidation of TikTok as a vessel for an artist's music does not indicate how audio trends work within the platform. TikTok is not a simple symbiotic relationship between artists and fans. Instead, it gives much more agency to user-created content as a marketing tool over any other social media platform.

TikTok and Music

Though immensely popular, TikTok's role in music is still an understudied area of inquiry. TikTok's user-created content has been investigated for its impact on community building and identity. Specifically,

TikTok's challenges have been shown to give voice to marginalized communities through music frameworks.³³ Bhandari and Bimo looked at identity creation and the participatory nature of users on the platform.³⁴ Abidin's study on celebrity and influence shows how TikTok's features have created new attention economies and labor practices.³⁵ These studies are in concert with many academic discussions on social media and co-creation in marketing. Recent studies compared celebrity and influencer culture on TikTok to other social media platforms in influencer marketing. Yet, as mentioned earlier, TikTok's influencers vary considerably from that of Instagram, where the former works on a discovery algorithm and the latter on follower size.

Since the platform launched, media outlets have been discussing how virality can bring visibility to unknown causes or artists.³⁶ In 2022 Vox was the first outlet to use data to drill down on TikTok's relationship to music creation and the industry. Specifically, they wanted to determine 1) how new artists go viral on TikTok, and 2) how these artists use the platform to create viable music careers.³⁷ This study was the first deep dive into the relationship between music virality and music sales, tracking how new artists can utilize TikTok to shape their music careers. Mostly this data looked at how many unknown artists got signed after having a viral TikTok hit. However, this study again looks at how smaller artists can use the platform but stops short at asking how larger artists are leveraging TikTok. The question major labels must ask is, "How can our most established acts effectively use TikTok for their rollout?" Viral videos using snippets of songs have shown a direct correlation to Spotify and *Billboard* chart position, but what is the best practice for creating an organic viral moment that translates into album sales? And finally, is TikTok purely a singles-driven market?

Good digital marketing dictates consistency in brand across social media platforms. However, for music marketing, this approach feels outdated. Music must be more agile in its approach to marketing. As sound is central to viral trends, it would stand to reason that a TikTok marketing strategy is imperative to any music artist's album rollout. For music marketing more broadly, labels need to interrogate how TikTok's virality compares to co-created fan marketing on other social media platforms.

Fan Connection

Music fans love to share. There is a history of fans creating “buzz” for their favorite artists since the early development of the record business in the twentieth century. In the 1960s, this might have been Grateful Dead fans trading homemade live recordings; in the 80s and 90s, this might have been underground indie and punk zines; and in the 2000s, this might be rappers posting beats and songs to SoundCloud. Fan culture has long been a part of music marketing. With the advent of social media, music labels have actively capitalized on fans as viable parts of their marketing strategy. “Fans are now affecting how we market,” said Harrison Golden, director of marketing at EMPIRE’s label division, responsible for 2020 viral TikTok hits like Money Man’s “24” and Cookiee Kawaii’s “Vibe”.³⁸ Consider the strength of Beyoncé’s Beyhive or the BTS A.R.M.Y.

In essence, the music industry has gone from a product to an experience economy, while marketing has gone from a transactional to an attention economy. With this shift, digital marketing has become the major focus of music marketing. Additionally, record label marketers have begun to encourage fans to help spread the discourse around their favorite artists. More digital marketing should develop strong relationships with fans energizing their participatory power to stimulate new cultural ideas primarily so that music fans become active participants in making music and musicians meaningful in the market.³⁹ While the concept of co-creation effectively means the consumer could just as well be a “creative partner” in the value-creating process, this notion is closer to influencer fan action or peer-to-peer marketing.

Value co-creation in the music business challenges the producer and consumer concept in the marketplace. “Co-creation, in this sense, can be defined as the collaborative creation of value by both the producer and the consumer.”⁴⁰ This new dynamic, in turn, creates a “greater relational and engaging experience for every stakeholder.”⁴¹ More prominent labels see this as a way to offset marketing costs, while indie acts also benefit by having a closer connection to their fanbase. In theory, cutting the intermediaries makes digital marketing cheaper to produce and market music and potentially affords artists more intimate and meaningful relationships with their fans. YouTube and Twitter create a more intimate and accessible relationship between fans and artists.⁴² Musicians have become active marketers of their music through social media, with musicians replacing various jobs that were once part of a marketing team or record label. Now,

musicians have become entrepreneurs and the marketing team of their artistic output.

According to these ideas of social media co-creation, Halsey would make a TikTok video, and their legions of fans would circulate it, thereby creating the label's desired virality. In essence, this is what their anti-viral video accomplished; however, this top-down marketing approach on TikTok fails to consider the platform's functionality. TikTok is upending influencer marketing in favor of user-generated content. Instead of the artists as entrepreneurs and the fandom as "workers" where the fans disseminate the musician's message, TikTok's user-generated marketing is closer to *agile marketing* than traditional broadcast marketing methods.

TikTok's Music Discovery

TikTok is essential to music marketing. More than other platforms, TikTok is a social network centered around songs. In other words, TikTok's value-add is beyond co-creation between artists and fans, beyond digital marketing's mass dissemination, and even beyond creating an artist's "brand." TikTok's impact on music marketing is more significant than social media's "wide-scale democratization of the influencer industry."⁴³

TikTok has become integral to music discovery. According to a 2021 study, 75% of TikTok visitors discover artists there, while 72% of TikTokers associate certain songs with TikTok, and 67% are more likely to search out tracks they first heard on the app on a music streaming platform.⁴⁴ TikTok isn't just affecting music streaming; it's also impacting music sales. Music industry consultant at MIDiA, Tatiana Cirisano, found TikTok users are more likely to spend money on music and be more invested in it.⁴⁵ According to MIDiA's findings, 40% of active TikTok users pay a monthly subscription for music, compared to 25% of the general population. Additionally, 17% of these users also buy artists' merchandise monthly, compared to 9% of the general population. In other words, TikTok's audience is invested in music.

TikTok's user connection to music discovery significantly affects how labels should consider marketing their more prominent acts. Toscher argues that TikTok falls into the co-creation category: "Music providers and marketers benefit by increasing the reach and exposure of their music; business-motivated influencers benefit by creating engaging content or exploiting trending memes or songs on TikTok."⁴⁶ While co-creation surrounding TikTok videos shows mutually beneficial gains for artists and

fans, there is a fundamental misconception about 1) how these videos go viral, and 2) who is responsible for envisioning the message of the viral content. Additionally, while these figures show a correlation between songs on TikTok and their uptick in Spotify streams, there has not been a study that indicates a direct link between TikTok song virality and album sales.

From Co-Creation to User-Generated

Many acts have benefitted from TikTok's discovery. Certainly, Lil Nas X, Doja Cat, and Glass Animals all have the platform to thank for building their careers. In fact, as of this writing in the third week of June 2022, four out of the top five *Billboard Hot 100* are viral TikTok songs: Harry Styles' "As It Was," Jack Harlow's "First Class," Lizzo's "About Damn Time," and "Running Up That Hill" by Kate Bush. While Bush's chart position is primarily due to television marketing through the song's placement on the Netflix show *Stranger Things*, the other three songs are each artist's first single from their upcoming album. Additionally, the three songs have been on the chart for approximately the same time: Styles' song for eleven weeks, Harlow's for ten, and Lizzo's at nine. Each song demonstrates that the major label successfully leveraged TikTok before their artist's album release.

Additionally, all three of these new charting singles have used the song's title as their viral song snippet. For the labels, when the fifteen-second clip of music matches the name of the song, this is marketing gold. Possibly savvy marketing managers reverse-engineered all three of these *Hot 100* singles using TikTok's algorithm to appeal to a specific social media demographic. Due to this marketing possibility, it is more beneficial to drill down on traditionally organic approaches to TikTok video virality.

The short clip of music used in viral videos often serves as a shorthand for its message. This lyrical snippet is often not the song's name but instead a part of the song that resonates with TikTok users. For instance, Lil Nas X's song "Industry Baby" had an #industrybaby challenge. Jack Harlow raps the lines: "Say your time is comin' soon but just like Oklahoma/Mine is comin' sooner/ I'm just a late bloomer/I didn't peak in high school; I'm still out here gettin' cuter."⁴⁷ Videos show a series of images representing a glow-up over time.

This viral aspect takes individual bars of a song and isolates them. The context then becomes these lines individually, not necessarily the

songs. However, at times the lines do correlate to the song's meaning. "Industry Baby" is Lil Nas X's response to his critics who claim that his massive success with "Old Town Road" was a TikTok flash in the pan or one-hit-wonder. "Industry Baby" from Nas X's sophomore outing represents his glow-up as a musical artist. In this case, the viral videos mirror the song's message by showcasing user glow-ups. A notable aspect of the viral video trend of "Industry Baby" while it is Lil Nas X's song, it is Harlow who is featured. At the time of the song's release, July 2021, Harlow was not a household name. He'd certainly gained fame from his 2020 track, "What's Poppin" single, and his anointment by *XXL Magazine* into 2020's "Freshman Class," but it was "Industry Baby" that brought him to the masses and became his first number one hit. What this virality displays is how the song snippet may propel more than the sales of the intended marketed artist.

"Industry Baby" shows that virality on TikTok can come down to what message maps onto parts of the song. While the viral user videos for "Industry Baby" mostly follow the song's message, this isn't always the case. I would argue that the symbiosis between artist and listener intent is not a foregone conclusion on TikTok. Melissa Avdeeff's article on Taylor Swift's 2017 song, "You Need To Calm Down" (YNTCD), is also a musical response to her critics. The video features many members of the LGBTQ+ community from recognizable shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The song is pertinent to Swift and the comment she seems to be making is on the abundance of hate in the public discourse.

Avdeeff traces the song's conversation on both Twitter and TikTok. She finds that Twitter, a predominately discourse-based platform, centered around the song's "performative allyship" with the LGBTQ+ community.⁴⁸ For Swift, the song represents an intentional political position as she'd come under fire in the past for her politically neutral stance. The critique that Swift was merely aligning herself with the LGBTQ+ community to curry favor with this community ultimately led to mixed reception for the song both critically and on Twitter.

However, TikTok users took specific lyrics from Swift's song and made their viral challenge divorced from the song's original meaning. What Swift's virality on TikTok shows is instead of traditional marketing related to an artist's song, this trend was exclusively user-created. In this case, "YNTCD" created its meaning once it became a viral video. Because

the video only isolated lines in the song, the negative connotation, or discussions of “performative allyship” that plagued the song on Twitter are absent from TikTok’s viral “YNTCD” trend. In essence, the user-generated content pivoted the online discussion and reframed the song’s meaning. TikTok users acted not as co-creators in marketing but as damage control public relations agents.

TikTok’s viral songs have become untethered from their source material. Instead, the artist’s original song has been used as a tool by TikTok’s creators to enter a musical dialogue that may or may not have any association with the marketing or meaning of the original song. In other words, music on TikTok has become the foundational building block for the user’s video message.

These examples are essential for music marketers trying to tightly control their artist’s TikTok image. Perhaps instead of forcing Halsey to find a way for her song to go viral, there needs to be more emphasis placed on the users and how they make meaning from an artist’s song. In other words, there is little guarantee artists can control how a song will be used on TikTok, let alone ensure it will go viral.

Proving to be a user-generated platform through layered meaning with music at the center, TikTok illuminates how users interact with music and media texts through innovation and remix. These videos show how users can reinterpret a musical artist’s meaning and create meaning through their lenses. In other words, an artist’s song narrative may not directly connect to a snippet of that song’s TikTok virality. Instead, user-generated content creates its meaning through user interpretation versus artist intention.

This user-generated meaning contradicts how record label’s view artist marketing. Kristen Bender, Senior Vice President of digital strategy and business development at Universal Music Group, articulates that TikTok has become a critical part of artist storytelling.⁴⁹ This argument looks at a consistent artist brand across platforms. Music marketing on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter creates an exchange framework between TikTok’s users, the music industry, and musicians, where TikTok is mutually beneficial for all actors. TikTok’s high percentage of user participation indicates that the type of co-creation or fan marketing that has been part of social media strategy changes on TikTok.

TikTok's Participatory Framework

Unlike Facebook, whose feed is a user's network, TikTok's algorithm is based on what you like, not who you know. In addition, Instagram's influencer model allows those with the largest followings to become the most discoverable. Thus, an Instagram influencer's content is pushed outward depending on the number of followers. In contrast, TikTok's algorithm is based purely on user engagement and trending audio, meaning a user could have a small following. Still, if they create a popular video, TikTok will increase its video visibility exponentially. TikTok users can actively manipulate their personal algorithm to drive the videos they want to see. While TikTok users understand the algorithm is skewed in many ways, it remains unclear *how*.⁵⁰ Without transparency into the workings of TikTok, it is hard to state with certainty how much control users have. However, TikTok's crowdsourced content allows users to feel more in control, giving them an active participatory role in the platform.

TikTok's algorithm elucidates two takeaways for major label music marketers: 1) TikTok, unlike Instagram or Twitter, privileges content over followers, and 2) TikTok's UX is based on peer-to-peer viral creation and circulation. First, because the content is central to TikTok's virality, it is also worth highlighting that while Twitter is mainly a text-based platform and Instagram an image-based one, TikTok's foundation is sound. Even from its earliest inception of dances or lip-syncs, TikTok's earworms and user interest drove the narrative structure for video content.

Additionally, users engage more in TikTok than in other social media platforms due to its seamless in-app UX. One need not know about video editing or have the correct programs to create a video. The numerous resources TikTok provides users to make videos lower the risk and threshold of video creation.⁵¹ This means more users will create content and actively engage with its transmedia properties, including music. Tatiana Cirisano who works for a music company that tracks TikTok's musical impact, states TikTok has changed music listening from being a one-way relationship to listening to participation. Thus, from a marketing standpoint, TikTok privileges active engagement, both monetary and social (peer-to-peer) marketing, as well as user-generated content. Many artists and labels have tried the Instagram approach of paying influencers to use songs in their content. Yet many labels state that while they test varying strategies, most times, when a song takes off on TikTok, it seems to happen organically. How these viral moments get started is not as random as it appears. It is

merely a reconfiguration of top-down broadcasting to a rhizome growth pattern.

TikTok's vaunted algorithm is constantly searching for new and popular clips rather than pushing content from already established influencers. In essence, this means that anyone can see their video go viral. But unfortunately, this is the viral myth we have come to accept: virality is a game of chance, and anyone can go viral if the content is clever enough.

Mathematically this is incorrect. While it is true that someone with one hundred followers can go viral on TikTok, this is not usually what creates a viral song trend. In many ways, viral songs such as Lizzo's "About Damn Time" have much more in common with traditional broadcast marketing than perceived. Lizzo has almost 20 million followers on TikTok, meaning that her reach is broad. She also actively duets with users. This influencer engagement strategy is like the co-creation in music marketing previously discussed. Mass, monolithic, monogamous fan bases are becoming a thing of the past, so going small may be a better strategy than trying to go viral. The lowered barrier to entry for music-making, combined with the attention recession, has created a paradox: it is easier than ever to be an artist but harder than ever to be commercially successful.⁵²

Thus, if music marketers wanted to reach wide or create this virality, they would benefit from agile, not influencer, marketing. Music marketers should pull snippets of their artist's newly-released single and give them to micro or niche influencers. These groups then create the content that labels hope will stick. Ultimately, if these videos do not get enough traction, labels can iterate their marketing campaign using user research. This ability to iterate content sets TikTok apart from other social media platforms. In other words, music trends have allowed for real-time assessment of a campaign's progress. In addition, TikTok's music center and algorithmic preferences allow artists to utilize agile marketing. As the attention recession meets the fragmentation of listenership, large viral moments will become fewer and further between. In other words, as universal cultural moments lessen, micro-viral moments will increase. Virality will shift from a shared cultural short-hand to an individual niche footnote.

Gen Z MTV

While this paper concentrated on music marketing for artists currently releasing music, future research could be done by looking into the growing market for old songs that are given new life through TikTok. With

older songs, what is the correlation between discovery trends to sales? Is the algorithm for these songs reaching a new market audience for the band? For example, if Kate Bush were to tour again, would she sell out stadiums based on her virality on *Stranger Things* and TikTok? Understanding the link between sound and marketability is an area that needs more investigation.

TikTok often gets the pejorative label as a passive entertainment endeavor where one mindlessly scrolls for hours through videos. Yet even this passivity creates sonic memory for the viral songs. TikTok creates a signpost for viral songs that stick with the user long after they've closed the platform. Further research should investigate the ear-worm aspect of the platform in terms of duration and interest. Does knowing "About Damn Time" mean that the casual user will seek out Lizzo's song on Spotify? How quickly does a viral sound vanish from circulation? The popular audio sounds from the early pandemic seem long in the rear-view mirror. How long is the tail on TikTok's viral sound, and what does this tell us about the attention economy market for music?

One final area of interest goes back to the similar sentiment between today's artists like Halsey refusing to make TikTok videos and musicians of the early 80s. When MTV started, there were barely any music videos to play. Because of their lack of inventory, MTV consistently played those bands with videos. Artists who leaned into the new short-form video format saw the sales of their albums rise exponentially. Once labels fully realized MTV's marketing arm, they demanded music videos from all their major artists. As a result, both TikTok and MTV have been seen as integral to music marketing.

TikTok has been a well-established platform for helping smaller musicians reach a wider audience. Much like TikTok, early MTV was fundamental in getting smaller acts such as Devo, Gary Numan, and Eurythmics label contracts. These small acts benefited from timing and creativity in their ability to get in front of millions of young viewers. But MTV didn't just make the musicians famous; it also made its curators famous. "The stars on TikTok aren't the artists themselves—who are largely absent from the clips that make their songs successful—but rather influencers like Addison Rae and Charli D'Amelio, who are more Martha Quinn than Madonna.

This paper has tried to show that while prominent TikTok influencers such as D'Amelio no doubt help propel viral trends, micro-influencers

and user-generated content are the more effective marketing tools on the platform. Instead of relying on mega influencers, labels and artists should learn another MTV lesson. When MTV started, there was no blueprint for music videos. As I have mentioned, this allowed for a lot of creativity in what was seen on the channel. Eventually, budgets expanded, and MTV became a much more slick and stylized entity, catering almost exclusively to the upper echelon of musical artists. TikTok still holds on to a lot of its organic creativity. However, TikTok, like MTV, may become more structured, losing part of its current innovation. Record labels should encourage users to tap this wide-open space, working with content creators to become visionary partners versus constant consumers. On a recent comic roundtable, *Saturday Night Live's* Michael Che joked about his content on TikTok, "I've seen someone lip-sync my joke and get more views than me."⁵³ Maybe Halsey's marketing team should take a cue from the comic and lean into user-created chaos while they still can.

Endnotes

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