

In your heart's TikTok: from “jabá” to trends. Strategies and algorithmic manipulation in the production of musical success

No TikTok do seu coração: do jabá às “trends”. Estratégias e manipulação algorítmica na produção do sucesso musical

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Resumo: O TikTok tornou-se internacionalmente plataforma digital de notável expansão de consumo, reconhecida como capaz de formar opinião pública, ecoar pautas e debates do momento e favorecer a propagação de tendências nos mais diversos campos da vida social. A música constitui parte essencial da experiência dos frequentadores dessa plataforma digital, na qual as composições surgem em vídeos curtos, editadas, remixadas, pasteurizadas ou distorcidas, participando e dando suporte aos mais diferentes tipos de performances dos frequentadores. O artigo explora, a partir da revisão crítica da literatura científica sobre o tema, as implicações e impactos dessas novas práticas, usos e consumo de música no âmbito da plataformização da indústria cultural sob a intensa mediação algorítmica, fenômenos para os quais o TikTok contribui de forma importante e decisiva.

Palavras-chave: Indústria fonográfica; audiovisual; vídeos curtos; indústria cultural.

Abstract: TikTok has internationally become a digital platform with a remarkable expansion of consumption, recognized as capable of forming public

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opinion, echoing current agendas and debates and favoring the propagation of trends in the most diverse fields of social life. Music constitutes an essential part of the experience of the visitors of this digital platform, in which the compositions appear in short videos, edited, remixed, pasteurized or distorted, participating and supporting the most different types of performances of the regulars. The article explores, based on a critical review of the scientific literature on the subject, the implications and impacts of these new practices, uses and consumption of music in the context of the platformization of the cultural industry under intense algorithmic mediation, phenomena to which TikTok contributes in an important and decisive way.

Keywords: *Phonographic industry; audio-visual; short videos; cultural industry.*

Introduction

Businesses in the contemporary music industry are increasingly linked to the development and application of practices and strategies focused on transforming songs and melodies into hits³ (SUISMAN, 2009; THOMPSON, 2018). In this sense, some attributes of compositions have been considered relevant for building their popularity. Among them is the number of times the public has heard a certain song and which, in fact, contributes to making it recognizable and easily remembered. It is, therefore, the construction of familiarity as a powerful element that directs the taste and musical preference of the public (THOMPSON, 2018).

The construction and publication of lists of the most listened-to songs are present throughout the history of radio and sound and audiovisual media in general, arousing, over time, passions, curiosity, and, not infrequently, inflamed discussions. The so-called hit parades have been references for popular musical preference in different societies and specific socio-historical and cultural moments since the 1930s, when the term itself appeared in the USA. Billboard magazine – the primary reference of the phenomenon – published its first hit parade on January 4, 1936. The notion was used until the mid-1950s by radio and television shows that featured hit melodies, such as *Your Hit Parade*, a North American music show that aired on the radio from 1935 to 1953 and on television from 1950 to 1959 in that country.

Since then, different methods have emerged to compile music hit lists, ranging from sales ratios for records and other retail music media, the number of times a song has played on different channels, folksonomy measures to expert music consultations.

Originating in the USA, the periodic measures of the popularity of songs expanded to become an international phenomenon in the music industry, particularly from the 1950s onward. In 1958, for example, the

3 Abbreviation of the expression hit single, which designates a song that became very popular.

Billboard Hot 100, the best-known thermometer of American music, came out. Later, other music charts became relevant in different markets.

From the historiographical point of view, according to Thompson (2018, p. 96), the Billboard listing was, however,

...formed based on lies, half-lies, and fabricated statistics. For decades, there was no way to measure which songs played the most on the radio. There was no reliable way to know what albums record stores had sold the previous week. Billboard trusted radio stations and record store owners were being honest, and neither had much reason to be so. Record companies would give a push or shamelessly bribe radio DJs to play specific discs. Record stores did not want to promote albums that had sold out. The industry was biased towards turnover. Labels wanted songs and records to go in and out of the music charts quickly so they could keep selling new hits.

Subsequently, from the 1990s onward, Billboard abandoned such practices and began to collect data at points of sale, monitor music transmission by radio broadcasting, and rely on the services of Nielsen, the North American retail research company, to increase the reliability of its charts.

In digitally mediated contemporaneity, music consumption has expanded beyond radio and television, spreading across new formats and platforms, merging, and building new consumption possibilities, especially in conjunction with videos. This format consolidated itself before the platformization of audiovisual media with music videos (video clips), a cultural artifact usually concentrated in a time interval between three and five minutes. The currently called Big Video Era (BROADBAND COMMISSION; HUAWEL, 2017; YIN, 2021) is characterized, in this context, by an exponential increase in the production, sharing, and consumption of videos and by profound changes in their display modes (ZHAO, 2018, 2021). The constant development of new technologies or their updates guide such changes, which imply substantial impacts on the cultural industry. In its current phase, the movement gains strength from the unprecedented expansion

of editing and interactive circulation of short videos, usually between 15 to 60 seconds (FENG; CHEN; WU, 219; RICHARDSON, 2019), which have become its main product and changed how the video industry relates to traditional media (ALTI; LIANG, 2021).

In this scenario, the digital platform TikTok – controlled by the Chinese media company ByteDance since the acquisition of the also Chinese Musical.ly in 2017 – quickly conquered and consolidated its own space as a global digital communication tool, especially since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, when it became one of the most downloaded apps on the internet⁴. Since then, TikTok has achieved the planetary mark of more than 1.2 billion unique visitors, of which 70 million are in Brazil, where it arrived in 2018 (WE ARE SOCIAL; HOOTSUITE, 2022).

Internet users who access and explore the TikTok application are socially called TikTokers. Their characteristic action is to produce, share, and consume performative content created by themselves – especially video selfies – through which they express opinions and build identities in a purposely fun way. The cultural production of TikTokers – mainly pre-teens and teenagers – draws on short videos created from musical fragments. It is the constitution of an essentially performative scenario in which musical remixes and bodily expressions associated with dance are mixed, unconcerned with complex technical resolutions or quality.

In the context of the type of digital consumption of music in which the TikTok phenomenon is deeply rooted, it is worth remembering what Simon Reynolds has, since the beginning of the 2010s, conceptually discussed as “partial attention syndrome” (REYNOLDS, 2011), problematizing the degradation of the audiophile experience and the depreciation of the value of music (BARCINSKI, 2011), while anticipating the retroactive movements of revivals, remixes, remakes, reissues, and returns to what is already known and experienced in culture and, particularly, music.

4 According to a survey by Kantar/IBOPE (2021), in the first year of the pandemic, the social media TikTok grew in Brazil by approximately 35% among young people and adolescents, 24% among adults aged 35 to 45, and 14% among people over 55 years.

Music is, in fact, an essential part of the TikToker experience (KANTAR; TIKTOK MARKETING SCIENCE, 2022). Music appears edited, remastered, pasteurized, remixed, or distorted, participating in and supporting the most different types of corporal/facial performances. Essentially, the intention is the reproducibility of the short videos produced, their memetization, and their most vertiginous viral spread possible. Therefore, music becomes an instrument for building hyper-social exposure and, eventually, the fame and success that unfold for artists or performers in penetration on other platforms, such as Spotify, YouTube Music, iTunes, and Apple Music, among others.

TikTok has become a notable social network, recognized as capable of forming public opinion, echoing current agendas and debates, and favoring the spread of trends in ideas, concepts, music, and people (LEMOS, 2022b). TikTok's management algorithm specializes in valuing content interpreted as being in line with the "trends" of the week, which thus achieve a higher number of views, practically regardless of the number of followers of the person who posted it. (GUINAUDEAU; VOTTA; MUNGER, 2021).

Aiming to explore and problematize this new dimension of the insertion of online platforms in modeling music production, distribution, and consumption as well as their impacts on the cultural industry associated with music, focusing on the case of TikTok, this research elaborates a critical review of the literature available on the subject in the Brazilian and international scenarios. From this approach, the paper establishes the following lines of discussion: the role of affordances in constructing TikTok as a memetic platform, algorithmic manipulations in shaping trends, the influence of TikTok on other digital platforms, and its emerging relationships with the music industry.

TikTok: “affordances” at the service of building a memetic platform

Studies have understood the so-called social media websites as privileged spaces for self-representation and stimulation of identity construction processes (PAPACHARISSI, 2011; VAN DIJCK, 2013a, 2013b) based on the connections of Internet users with friends, family, acquaintances, and subjects with whom they wish to relate in general. In fact, in the construction of online social networks, both Facebook and Instagram, as well as other similar ones, instituted, from the beginning, the practice of what became known as a social graph, a mechanism that gathers searches for shareable content only in the universe of contacts between profiles of followed and followers, freely agreed among themselves.

Such possibilities derive from the affordances and resources of the design and architecture of the platforms that stimulate actions, such as liking, commenting, sharing posts, and viewing profiles, among others (BOYD, 2010), favoring large spaces for self-management, despite the growing interactive role of the action of non-human agents in the process (BHANDARI; BIMO, 2020).

The TikTok digital platform breaks this format of attachment based on social bonds without restricting or modifying the narcissistic and egocentric essence of relationships. On the contrary, TikTok encourages its users to go in different directions, dedicating less time, interest, and actions to audiences for which they represent a social role while, at the same time, acting in a more immersive way with their selves. For Bhandari and Bimo (2020), it is a shift from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal sphere.

Contrary to the practices of online social media (Facebook, Instagram, and others), the use of TikTok’s algorithms universalizes content search, bringing together Internet users who do not even know or recognize each other. Undoubtedly, the disruption of any sense of digital community prevails, opening a dominance of algorithmic, atomized, and probabilistic management based on the momentary reactions and

expressions of subjectivities and mental states of the users of online social media (STOKEL-WALKER, 2020, 2022).

On TikTok, the home page is called the For You Page (FYP) and displays videos that the platform's algorithms have selected as relevant to the interests of its users, unlike other online social networks such as Facebook, where content distribution prioritizes posts from friends and/or organizations that the person follows. When scrolling through FYP, TikTokers are constantly engaging with new content that is frequently updated and algorithmically curated based on a wide variety of user data (TIKTOK, 2020a). It is, therefore, a way of creating and exploring passive habits of viewing and consuming content.

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To facilitate the achievement of these goals, besides the algorithmic use, the application created and made available different affordances of the application to direct actions for creating and publishing new micro-videos, such as stitching and duetting (KAYE et al., 2021a; 2021b, 2022; ABIDIN et al. al., 2020). The app added the *Stitch* option in October 2020, allowing TikTokers to cut and appropriate small segments of a video from other platform users and produce their re-edits and remixes (TikTok, 2020c). To some extent, *Stitch* replaces, in a more integrated way, a previously released feature called *Duet*, which allows TikToker to record and share their videos paired side-by-side or threaded with videos produced by other creators (WEIR, 2020). *Duet* creates an opportunity for parasocial interaction, understood as a unilateral relationship between individuals and popular figures in the media (JARZYNA, 2020;

TIKTOK, 2020d). These available and easily located options on the home screen – given the size and location of the record button on the screen – make recording and posting videos more intuitive for users than locating people to follow or interact with.

The cultural production circulating on TikTok has evident characteristics of memetic communication (imitation, replication, persistence), which the platform's affordances and structure stimulate. Such phenomena led researchers Zulli and Zulli (2020) to define TikTok as a memetic text capable of generating an "imitation audience" aggregated in new forms of sociability. The analysis proposed by these authors thus expands the theoretical and methodological usefulness of the meme, allowing the conceptualization and visibility of new types of public in the platform.

By studying micro-videos produced and propagated on TikTok, Hautea et al. (2021) addressed this communicational phenomenon from the operationalization of the concept of affordances that promote and encourage online affectivity, as proposed by Treem and Leonardi (2012). Such affordances focus on favoring conditions of visibility, editability, and the association between different actors and content posted on this online platform.

According to Papacharissi (2015a, 2015b), communication processes in social media are intensely mediated by affectivity, favoring the mix between fact and opinion, politics, and affection, shaping the quality of online interaction and participation.

Trends: emergence of cultural manifestations v. algorithmic manipulations

The appropriation of the concept of trends and its distortion by TikTok is notorious. Unlike the epistemological field linking the concept of trends to Cultural Studies (GOMES et al., 2021), which recognizes the depth and sociocultural meanings of movements of taste and consumption, the social media fabricates and discards "trends" in ever shorter periods

of time. The fact the platform communicates to its market partners the “trends” it intends to promote in the following week has already become public.

The possible and eventually materialized manipulation and forging of successes is evident, especially in the musical field, the very essence of the TikTok platform. Such practices, made concrete in “trends” and their social boost, do not differ essentially from the already old and well-known methods of intentionally forcing the dissemination of songs through the payment of bribes (“*jabá*” in the Brazilian popular and journalistic jargon), or the manipulation of the expression of audiences’ tastes and preferences (such as constant and consecutive forged calls to broadcasters requesting the performance of a specific song or artist).

According to specialists responsible for the periodic ranking of the most listened-to songs in Brazil, music consumption in the country is diversified and follows different distributions according to the types of media. Consumption via streaming – which includes Amazon Music, Apple Music and Beats, Deezer, Spotify, Google Play Music, Napster, and YouTube Music platforms – is more upscale, involving a greater diversity of styles. On the other hand, preferences of consumption via radio are more popular and concentrated in country music. In the case of radio, the presence of “*jabá*” tends to be more evident. As the journalist and music producer Marcus Preto explains, “Music platforms are upscaled. Not the radio; it is popular. And more: the radio is *jabá*. So, *these songs are there because a force, mainly agribusiness, makes this market move with much more power.*” (DEL RÉ, 2022, p. 10, emphasis added).

The 2005 film *2 Filhos de Francisco* masterfully records the historical strength of agribusiness and country music in the practice of manipulating the boost of musical hits in Brazil, especially in the scenes in which the father of the country duo Zezé de Camargo and Luciano, Francisco Camargo, makes countless and consecutive anonymous phone calls to radio stations asking them to play songs by his children, whose success had not yet taken off.

The current practices of cultural consumption in platform media, both in the international and national scenes, do not differ essentially from these previous distortions in the music scene. For example, in an interview for journalist Augusto Diniz from the Brazilian weekly newspaper *Carta Capital*, singer Tulipa Ruiz stated: “Today, the algorithm is the new *jabá*. Previously, radio stations received to play an artist’s songs. Today, if you do not pay for boosting, your music will not appear. *Your music will appear less if you do not pay the algorithm*” (DINIZ, 2022, emphasis added).

TikTok’s influence on other online social media and the music industry

The instantaneous and notable global success of TikTok has been inducing, since the emergence and internationalization of the platform, changes in the functionalities and tools of digital social media, both beginners (like the French BeReal) and already established ones, especially Facebook and Instagram (Meta). Furthermore, TikTok has been impacting the routines and operation of music streaming platforms, such as Spotify, which has already established the Hot Music Charts TikTok Brazil on its platform, listing the most played songs specifically on TikTok.

Such phenomena have provoked several online social media to seek to introduce modifications, especially from 2022, attempting to imitate TikTok to increase their competitiveness. Instagram, for example, carried out tests for the presentation of full screens and recommendations of third-party content in timelines regardless of whether or not its users have expressed a specific interest in the topic addressed⁵. These modifications followed the launch of the Reels short video editing tool to maximize the retention of the attention and online permanence of its users, a significant metric for negotiating with advertisers (LEMOS, 2021).

5 On July 27, 2022, Zuckerberg stated on the company’s Q2 earnings conference call that recommended posts and accounts in feeds represent about 15% of the total on Facebook and a higher percentage on Instagram. By the end of 2023, they will reach 30%.

Consecutive alterations provoked exacerbated criticism and dissent from its oldest and most entrenched users, who favored maintaining the previous format. The international resistance movement began to rely on the engagement of prominent influencers who access the platform, such as the Kardashian sisters, among others (NEWTON, 2022), which made Instagram give up, at least temporarily, these innovations or part of them.

Although the digital platform TikTok builds its social self-representation based on attributes of simplicity, relaxation, fun, creativity, and sharing, in practice, its behavior reveals one of the highest levels of negotiation aggressiveness compared to its competitors. Such initiatives and practices – aligned with the Chinese culture of innovation and promotion of acute competition (DE KLOET *et al.*, 2019; TAN, 2019) – materialize especially in tireless and fast dynamics of production and implementation of new tools and affordances, whose results aim at increasing audience engagement, visibility, and business deals for brands, artists, and performers (TIKTOK MARKETING SCIENCE; HOTSPEX, 2021).

Such strategies include the creation of its music streaming channel, TikTok Music, registered in November 2021 in Australia by ByteDance, which owns a platform where internet users can download, buy, play, and share music they only heard a fragment of or learned about from micro-videos produced and disseminated by TikTokers. With access only allowed to a restricted audience initially, the tool presupposes and promises gradual expansion to its entire audience of users. It should also allow users to create, share, and recommend playlists, comment on songs, and stream audio.

ByteDance already has experience with music streaming. In 2020, the company launched the Resso app in India, Brazil, and Indonesia, reaching more than 40 million monthly visitors in November 2021 (OSAWA; MA, 2021). Resso has some of the same features described in TikTok Music, such as creating playlists, sharing music on social media, and interacting with the app's community. In Brazil, TikTok has

a command that redirects users to Resso, so they can listen to the full version of a song they are interested in, which helps keep the public within the ByteDance ecosystem (OSAWA; MA, 2021). Just as TikTok had a profound impact on the way social media sites operate, it is possible that a music streaming app with TikTok ties could change the music streaming industry, forcing services to adapt.

As part of the TikTok developer program, the short-form video platform also announced a new feature called the Profile Kit, allowing creators to showcase up to six TikTok videos outside of it. TikTokers will be able to integrate their profiles into Linktree, which already serves as a landing page for TikTok creators to share social links and contact information, which should help build curriculum references for creators looking to close commercial deals with companies and brands seeking this new format of digital influencers (THE NIELSEN COMPANY, 2022).

Final considerations

The Brazilian music industry annually generates considerable financial amounts, besides involving many agents. In 2021, according to the Central Office of Collection and Distribution (Ecad) – a non-profit entity designed to carry out the collection and distribution of copyrights arising from the public performance of national and foreign songs –, the distribution of copyrights in the country totaled R\$ 901 million, approximately less 5% compared to the previous year, primarily due to the pandemic. The amount benefited 267,000 composers, musicians, performers, and other holders, besides industry associations. In the accumulated until September 2022, the industry collected R\$ 824 million and benefited 286 thousand artists and other holders (ECAD, 2022). In recent years, the growth of music streaming and other music consumption channels in digital media has been driving the global expansion of the market, providing the opening of new fronts and opportunities for emerging artists and labels and important rediscoveries of compositions and old or practically forgotten authors and interpreters through the strength of the long digital tail.

An intricate series of doubts, polemics, and controversies involving, among other relevant topics, the remuneration for the rights of composers, music publishers, and owners of recorded songs marks the music industry's relationship with TikTok, situated in an essentially new experiential context but with significant economic dimensions. In the legal field, projects and initiatives already aim to contemplate and protect content distributed via streaming, with which, however, TikTok's operations cannot be confused, configuring an open, not standardized field, a dangerous gap from the point of view of distributive justice of value in the music chain.

In this context, the international experience of TikTok outside the Chinese environment deserves close attention. Not only TikTok achieved recognized impacts on the shaping of taste and the forging of trends – sometimes artificial and biased – of music consumption and the global expansion of the market, it also actively participates in the construction of new models and digital platform spaces in the contemporary cultural industry, where social media, websites, and apps copy each other, and where users influence each other in terms of practices, languages, and narratives emerging in digital media.

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