

MSoSc in Management of Creative Business Processes

The Changes in the Cultural and Social Meaning of Music: The Case of TikTok

Master's Thesis

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1 Abstract

The music industry is facing radical changes due to the spread of new phenomena and trends, such as TikTok, a social media platform whose popularity starting to increase from 2019. It has a significant and consistent relationship with music as sounds are its main language: it offers the opportunity to upload visual content to which a sound is always complementary. Its impact can be noticed by looking at quantitative data and cases that demonstrated its relevancy within the music sector: for instance, it pushed the career of many artists as well as the popularity of many songs. Those examples opened up the research question that aims at detecting whether TikTok is having a deeper impact on the music industry, especially on the way individuals are valuing the social and cultural meaning of music. Therefore, the research project is structured so to provide knowledge about the current literature on music and its value, and to enrich it with further insights thanks to the development of a qualitative research on a sample of 9 people that represents the artistic and the production/distribution side of the music industry. The aim is to outline how TikTok is causing several changes in the music industry, being a digital, democratic and worldwide social media platform: it is affecting, in particular, three processes - the discovery, listening and making of music - leading to changes when it comes to the way the social and cultural meaning of music is defined. Music is one of the most relevant forms of art; it shapes and it is shaped by the society and culture in which it is consumed and produced. Also, it has always been affected by improvements caused, in particular, by digitalization. TikTok is making music more accessible both in consumption and production while enhancing the risk of going towards an homogenization of sounds, content and culture. Therefore, its impact has to be analyzed in order to outline the direction towards which the music sector is going and which are the challenges it has to face in the future.

2 Introduction

TikTok is a social media platform that has gained popularity starting from 2019. Its core business consists in giving users the chance to produce, share and look at visual content related to specific sounds. In doing so, it is having a disruptive effect on the artistic and cultural sectors: the majority of content on the social media platform takes inspiration from several forms of art. The most influenced one is music as TikTok's main languages are sounds: it has pushed the career of many artists and songs that, at the moment, are at top positions on global charts. The research question aims at investigating a deeper impact of TikTok on the music industry: the influence it is having on the way individuals are valuing the social and cultural meaning of music. In order to detect the changes in the social and cultural meaning of music, firstly, it is relevant to analyze the literature that aims at contributing to the definition of music and its peculiarities. In particular, the first part, is divided into four paragraphs. The first one concerns the two-sided music market, its four dimensions and the five polarities between which it has to find a balance according to the theories developed by, respectively, Khaire (2017) and Lampel et al. (2000). Secondly, digitalization and globalization are introduced as they are causing its constant disruption: in particular their relevancy when it comes to the democratization of culture, promotional culture and the subsequent social contagion process. Once gained some knowledge about the music industry, it is necessary to focus on deepening the social and cultural value attributed to music: being a creative product, the theory of Bourdieu (1986) about the three values it generates is outlined while Khaire (2017) and Negus (1995) are used to better define how music is assessed and valued by individuals. Furthermore, music's influence on the way individuals define themselves and their relationships with the others is investigated through, especially, the theories introduced by Willis (1973), Nussbaum (2003) and Jakubowski and Ghosh (2021). In conclusion, the focus is on the main critics concerning the evolvement of music in time outlining, in particular, its commodification, as discussed by Adorno and Simpson (1941). The literature review is, then, used to define the main elements to be investigated in collecting qualitative data through semi-structured

interviews on a purposeful sample of 9 people that work within the music industry, in particular on the production and distribution side of the market. Therefore, after introducing some characteristics and quantitative data to explain the functioning of TikTok, a thematic analysis is run so to look for interesting insights and elements that can confirm, refuse or contribute to the literature explored in the first part of the thesis. The coding of data collected outlines three main patterns affected by the spread of TikTok: discovery, listening and making music. After having assessed these three themes, the objective is to discuss the changes in the social and cultural value of music, building a connection with the literature review. Consequently, all the insights and conclusions reached through the analysis of data are re-discussed in respect to the insights provided by previous researchers. In particular, the theory of Willis (1973) and Khaire (2017) are contextualized within the music scenario influenced by the visual content shared on TikTok: the former cannot be applied as the social and cultural value of music is not anymore defined in respect to a specific social group, but it is the result of a discourse between producers and users (Khaire, 2017) that happens, for its majority, on a global and democratic social media platform such as TikTok. Therefore, TikTok is also looked at as part of the digitalization and globalization processes and the phenomenon of commodification discussed by Adorno is re-framed taking under consideration the influence of the historical period and the socio-cultural environment in which music is produced and consumed. Furthermore, the fact of being a global and democratic social media platform is relevant when discussing the role of TikTok in enhancing democratization of culture while causing a potential loss on the side of cultural democratization. Finally, the disruptive effect of TikTok is analyzed in framing its consequences on the four dimensions that characterize the music market (Khaire, 2017), and on its five polarities (Lampel et al., 2000). In the conclusions a summary of the results and contributions reached through the research is provided as well interesting insights for further research about the impact of TikTok on the music industry.

3 The Music Market

Music is an artistic and cultural product and, as such, it has to face the dynamics of the market. Consequently, the notion of music market is introduced. The aim is to better define the origins and functioning of the music industry as well as the actors involved within its highly dynamic environment. Furthermore, being music recognized as a form of art, it is also relevant to outline the tensions that arise when a cultural product should meet the supply-demand mechanism.

3.1 A two-sided market

The music market is defined as a two-sided market: a player has the opportunity of serving two different but interdependent audiences leveraging on the same asset, the talent of the artists (Ordanini, 2021). In the music industry, the two segments are consumers and advertisers. It is relevant to develop a specific and effective strategy for each one of them as they are correlated and the success or failure of one will affect the other. Therefore, a short analysis of the structure of the two different sides of the market is provided to better explain this codependency.

First, there is the **consumer side** that includes both the recorded music segment and the live music one. The main focus, for research purposes, will be on the recorded music segment composed by labels and publishers. At the top level of the classical production-distribution-consumption structure, there is the raw material, the music talent, that can be divided into two assets: performers and songwriters, since those who perform the song are not necessarily those who wrote it. In the latter case, the exchanges are regulated by copyright law, as the music market is a two-sided partially regulated market. In generic terms, each time someone wants to use a song written by someone else, they must pay its owner as the aim is to forbid third parties to make unfair commercial use of an original creative content. In addition, record labels are relevant intermediaries in the relationship between the artist and the consumer and, at the moment, there are three main players: Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group (Stone, 2020). They own almost the 70% of the market

share and they detain a consistent part of music consumption that is highly related to the so-called *catalogue*, composed by music introduced years ago. Moreover, on the distribution side, a huge change is detected, due to digitalization, a phenomenon that is better investigated and explained in the next chapter. Broadcasters are still relevant, especially for promotional purposes, but record labels are making money by distributing music on digital platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music.

There is a two-sided market because all these mechanisms described within the recorded market segment provide assets to **advertisers** that, in order to promote their brands, leverage on music and artists. They relate their identity to a specific artist or song. Certainly, this is beneficial for the artist as well. To better understand the role of sponsorships and the presence of a two-sided market, some examples can be made as Universal Music Group and its *UMG For Brands*. It has the aim of using music and artists to accelerate business: for instance, one of their main artists, Taylor Swift, has collaborated with Lenovo that has sponsored her first and exclusive concert in Europe to promote the album, *Lover*. The aim was to associate the new Yoga Laptop of Lenovo with the positive sentiment around the release of the new album of the artist. Another example is Spotify Free where a part of the experience is for free as it is paid by advertisers: if you subscribe to it, advertisements will disappear.

3.2 The 5 polarities of the music market

The music market is balancing between five polarities that usually characterize cultural industries since they provide non-utilitarian and experiential goods that face highly unpredictable demand patterns and production processes that are difficult to monitor (Lampel et al., 2000).

1. **Artistic values vs economics of mass entertainment:** music is a cultural product and its artistic value should be preserved while compromising with its entertainment value. The recording industry tends to generate a continual conflict between the aesthetic and the commercial (Stratton, 1982);
2. **Product differentiation vs market innovation:** in cultural industries the main tools to win

over competitors are novelty and familiarity. A new music product should be original but not too different from the others in the same category so that consumers feel safe in consuming it and market success is reached;

3. **Demand analysis vs market construction:** there is a tension between what the consumers want and what the artist aims at communicating. A song gains success because it, accidentally or deliberately, taps preexisting consumer preferences. If the songwriter decides to push a genre or style that is not expressively requested, market failure is risked. At the same time, if the artist pulls the demand of customers, the cultural product can be distorted as well as the artistic vision;

4. **Vertical integration vs flexible specialization:** the actors within the music market should decide if integrate all the value chain or get specialized on a specific task: for instance, an artist can collaborate with a record label or produce and distribute autonomously;

5. **Creative systems without suppressing individual talent:** within the music industry, the individual and the network should collaborate and reinforce each other role in generating and delivering creative value.

To sum up, the five tensions within the music industry are supposed to coexist and balance in order to reach a successful market position and the delivering of an authentic artistic outcome.

3.3 The four dimensions of the music market

The music market is defined, also, according to the theory of the four dimensions (Khaire, 2017). The theory is, generically, applied to markets of creative industries. Primarily, it is necessary to underline that markets of creative industries start to exist when two conditions are met: suppliers and buying entities have to agree on the value of the product/service while the market should have a certain stability in terms of consumers believing that what they are buying is congruent with shared norms

of appropriateness. Therefore, markets emerge at the intersection of commerce, commentary, culture and consumption. The *commerce* dimension is the process of selling things. In the music industry, it is performed by producers, such as artists, record labels and distributors. The *consumption* dimension, instead, includes patterns of demand and they are a consequence of the shared conceptions of value and are influenced by the *commentary*. The latter is one of the most important dimensions in creative industries as it contributes to define the value of the artistic/cultural product. There are several actors, in the music environment, that can make a discourse influencing the perception of an artist or a song and, because of digitalization, they are expanding and are more difficult to control. Therefore, other than record labels and awards, social media and websites are starting to contribute in defining the meaning and value of a musical product. To sum up, the commentary has an impact on the desirability of a song or an artist as it hints at the match between the value expected by consumers and the one that the artist wants to deliver: it can appease the tension between the demand and the offer. Finally, music, as a cultural good, is an embodiment of ideas and desires of an individual that assembles different instruments and shapes the sound to create something unique (*culture*). All these dimensions, especially culture and commentary, play significant roles in the process of creating and defining the music industry and its value.

4 The impact of digitalization and globalization on the music industry

The music market has been mainly shaped by two phenomena: digitalization and globalization. They have caused many changes in the strategic thinking of record companies and artists as well as in the consumption and production of new songs and albums. In fact, they have led to the rise of life-changing tools such as downloading, music streaming platforms and social media. Also, they have disrupted physical boundaries making culture more democratic, so more accessible and reachable by a global audience. This chapter aims at deepening their history and relevance in order to outline the benefits and drawbacks they have caused in respect to the music industry.

4.1 Digitalization

Since its beginning, music has been highly affected by digitalization. In the 90s, music consumers were used to buy CDs or cassettes from record shops. In order to play them, they used electronic devices at home or in the car as well as mobile devices such as the Walkman. Other than personal devices, radio and television actively participated in the spread of music.

Everything has changed with the advent of Napster in 1999. It was a peer-to-peer service that allowed the free-downloading of songs. It got accused of copyright infringement as it caused a fall in revenues from recorded music for years: in 2012, recorded music revenue was down by 70% in respect to 1998 (Aguilar and Waldfogel, 2016). Consequently, technologies pushed record companies to rethink about the way they operated and the digital makeover of legal music officially started. In fact, in 2003 the iTunes Music Store was born, together with the realization of Apple's iPod portable media player: music started to be paid and downloaded and it became more accessible to everybody from everywhere. Also, the core of the recording industry's business model changed since consumers would no longer need to purchase an entire album to listen to one song. Another main step of the digital revolution can be related to the birth of streaming, in 2008. IT music services started to be developed (Spotify, Apple Music etc.) and music was dematerialized into a digital product (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). To sum up, digitalization allowed the creation of platforms able to compress sounds and store them in files easily accessible and shareable through the Internet (Molteni and Ordanini, 2003).

Figure 1 outlines the impact of digitalization on the music industry throughout the years, by looking at the changes in the revenue's composition. Starting from 2001, few years after the birth of Napster, a constant decrease of selling of physical products can be detected as well as a slow increase in downloading. In 2010, streaming has started to gain a major position in the consumption of music, becoming the main source of income in 2019 and causing the decrease of downloading.

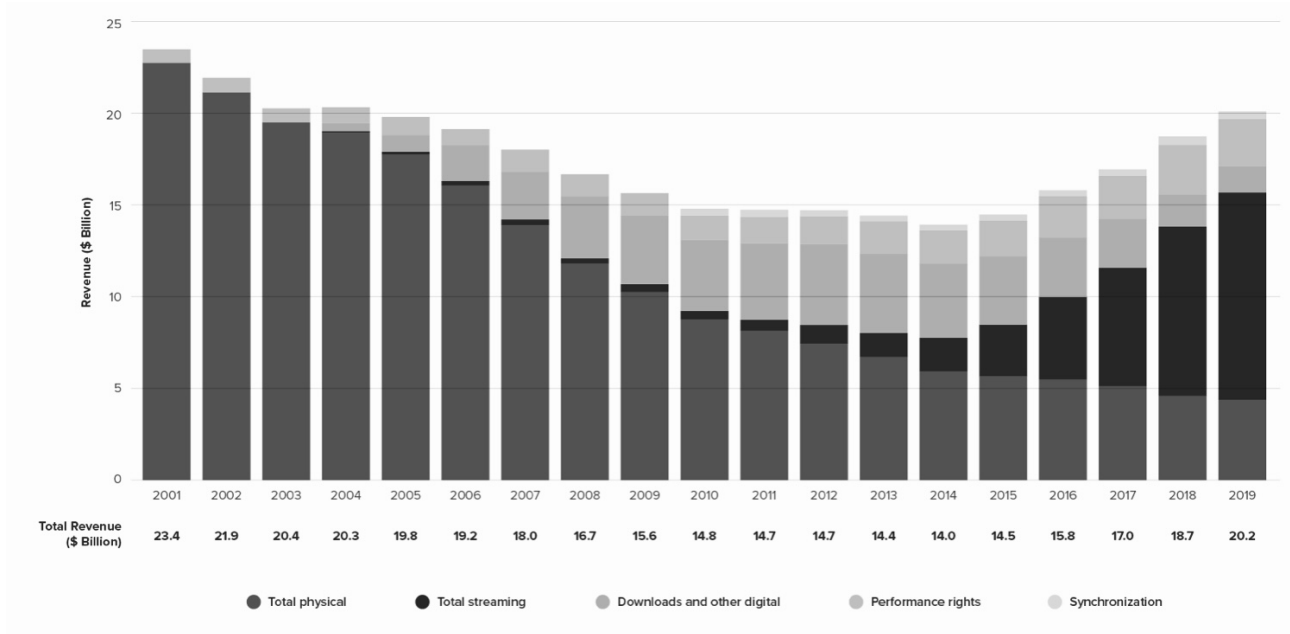


Figure 1: Global Music Recording Industry Revenues, 2001-2019 (Stone, 2020).

4.1.1 The dichotomies of digitalization

Digitalization is, simultaneously, a process of stabilization and destabilization. For instance, its spread has produced more opportunities for musicians: they can reach a wider and more international audience and, especially emergent artists, can access the music market more easily. At the same time, it has made revenues for record companies more uncertain as it has intensified the competition and challenged their business models. Furthermore, selling music is a part of a musician's enterprise: in fact, revenues are generated especially by licensing, merchandising and touring (Klein et al., 2017). Music consumption has been affected as well: it was destabilized by digitalization but then it represented the opportunity of setting up new kinds of consumption patterns. The impact of Napster on consumption patterns has been deepened, trying to detect the motivations and uses of online music (Molteni and Ordanini, 2003). In particular, they highlighted that online music was easily accessible and allowed the consumption of a variety of genres for free, as well as the creation of playlists with music files coming from different artists and albums. Certainly, right now, music is not anymore free, also because of Napster being accused of copyright infringement, but the motivations and uses of online music are the same and have

been integrated in new processes. In using music streaming services, consumers have the opportunity to access a wider catalogue of artists and genres, to create playlists, to share their music with their friends, paying a fixed fee on a monthly basis. At the same time, those processes forced artists and record labels to change their strategy and sources of revenues.

Generically, there are two possible visions on digitalization: *dystopian* and *utopian* (Brusila et al., 2022). The former is related to the idea that technological progress is the latest step in the decline of human culture while the latter looks at digitalization as an offering of new ways of increasing socio-cultural wellbeing. For dystopian visionaries, music has been damaged by technology that has allowed the standardization of its production and consumption leading to its commodification. On the other hand, utopian visionaries believe that digitalization improves the agency of individuals to express themselves and to use music as a way to enhance their individuality and relationships, leading to the development of active consumers and socio-cultural groups.

Another dichotomy, when it comes to digitalization, is *democratization of culture* vs *cultural democratization*. On one side, there is an effort to make culture equally accessible by everyone while, on the other side, the idea is that everyone should be able to choose which culture embrace and consume to represent themselves. Certainly, digitalization has offered equal opportunities to produce and consume music (*democratization of culture*), as well as it has created social groups and decentralized communities (*cultural democratization*).

However, drawbacks can be highlighted as well. The main problem with democratization of music persists in what kind of music is spread through new media: for instance, pop music is highly consumed while there is a decline of the consumption of classical music that has to reshape itself to meet the new demand. Democratization seems to be capable of forcing the idea that people should be offered only what they ask for but, when it comes to arts, the willingness of the artist cannot be neglected. An example of adaptation of the cultural product to the preferences of consumers can be noticed in the Netflix TV series *Bridgerton*. The story is set back in the 19th century and the main settings are

dance halls, so music is a fundamental part of the show. In order to make the series more appealing and reliable for the audience, the authors decided to realize the classical version of contemporary hits such *Sign of The Times* by Harry Styles and *Wrecking Ball* by Miley Cyrus. It became one of the most distinctive traits of the TV series. Also, other than the positive line of thinking that now music aims at giving people the opportunity of expressing themselves socially and culturally, it should be underlined that the re-coding of online music into new meanings can be a threat to the original material. Music consumption, in particular, is re-shaping and altering songs according to the tastes and preferences of the individual who consumes it. However, the artist behind a song should be protected and the main intent of the cultural product should be preserved. The singer Adele, during an interview with Apple Music, stated: *if everyone is making music for TikTok, then who is making music for my generation?*. Some artists may compromise with the preferences of the audience in order to reach a success that will allow them to release their true and real music (BBCNews, 2022). The artistic vision can be affected and partially damaged.

4.2 Promotional culture and globalization

The development of digital platforms was caused by the union of digitalization with promotional culture. In fact, music is considered a cultural product and, as such, two key dimensions in its consumption are socio-network effects and demand reversal (Molteni and Ordanini, 2003). In consuming cultural products, social and cultural values are gained and a *social contagion process* emerges: tastes and preferences of individuals are shaped by continuous interactions with others. However, when many people consume the same product, there is the risk of *demand reversal*, and it ceases to be attractive, becoming mainstreams. Consequently, record companies and artists should find a balance in being conservative and innovative when it comes to the music they produce and release.

Promotional culture has a relevant role in the music industry: nowadays, artists, other than releasing songs, should brand and promote themselves on non-digital and digital platforms (Klein et al., 2017).

Marketing is becoming a fundamental part of their daily life: they are pushed to build brand identities across different media. In fact, the music market, as previously explained, is a two-sided market and, on one side, there is advertisement. In particular, social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, are becoming the primal tool people use to keep on being updated about their favorite artists. The narrative behind an album or a song is going further the product itself and it is shaped by what the artist lives and shares about his private life on a daily basis. As a consequence, the brand of an artist is a core asset to be leveraged in pushing him/her career and success. Artists should navigate through these complexities, they cannot ignore it (Klein et al., 2017).

Digitalization is, also, giving the opportunity to artists to become global and break through boundaries: for instance, they can license their music on an international level or can use social media to reach a wider audience. Technologically developments, together with a free-market ideology are leading to the creation of a global economic sphere (Dolfsma, 2000). Therefore, globalization is amplified: it is creating an interdependence among countries that is leading to standardization of societies and cultures (Villodre, 2014). As a consequence, those who rule economically, have the power of controlling the development of culture. An homogenizing process is risked. To sum up, both globalization and digitalization can be seen as providing cultural products with the opportunity of circulating widely and across borders. However, they can be defined, also, as a threat in enhancing commodification and standardization. In fact, music is not only affected by globalization, but it has started to be considered as a mean through which it is enhanced, considering also its growing relevance from a socio-cultural point of view.

5 Music and Society

Once introduced the origins and functioning of the music market, it is necessary to go deeper in defining what is music and its socio-cultural dimension. When providing a definition of music, the focus is on

the several values it delivers and on who are the actors involved in defining and delivering them. Instead, when converging the attention to its socio-cultural dimension, the impact on social bonding and evoking emotions and memories are outlined. To sum up, the aim of this chapter is to investigate the interconnection between music and society that can help in better analyze and understand all the variables to take under consideration when studying a sector-changing phenomenon like TikTok, where both music and society have a predominant role.

5.1 How can we define music?

Aristotle stated: "It is not easy to determine the nature of music, of why anyone should have knowledge about it" (Mary, 1978). Music embraces several definitions and cultures that prevent the possibility of a unique definition. Therefore, the notion of music is investigated considering this limit. In general terms, music can be defined as an art that combines vocal or instrumental sounds to produce a rhythm or a melody in order to entertain or express something such as emotions or thoughts (Epperson, 2021). It is consumed by everyone daily, and it has assumed different roles within several cultures and societies while being a universality of the art world. However, only in recent years, researchers have started to question more themselves about the importance of music and its role and value in everyone's life. In fact, music is considered to be a primary form of artistic expression that has relentlessly produced value for several stakeholders that can be merged in three big categories: creative artists, gatekeepers and users (Throsby, 2002).

If it is true that music generates a *value* for its stakeholders, it is not unique but of different kinds. In fact, creative products do not only generate an economic value but, especially, social, cultural and symbolic ones (Bourdieu, 1986). The latter can be defined as the ability of music to help an individual or a group in building an identity, embodying the meaning of a song or of a genre, while the former can be related to the fact that consuming a certain kind of music puts people inside a certain networking. Finally, music generates cultural value in delivering knowledge and enhancing beliefs and personal

thoughts. It can be useful to deliver some examples to better understand these values:

- **Social value:** cultural practices are related to social dynamics and can reinforce patterns of social inequality (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). For instance, opera music has always been perceived as accessible only to a certain segment of society and, in consuming it, the individual set himself in a certain networking and social environment;
- **Cultural value:** music can provide knowledge and lead to reflections. In considering the song of the Irish band Cranberries, *Zombie*, an example of cultural value can be delivered. The track is about the bombings in Northern Ireland that, in 1993, caused the death, in particular, of two children. It is a song that had been used as an anti-war anthem and it is still used to deliver knowledge about the past as well as it is re-contextualized to be used in other occasions;
- **Symbolic value:** music can support in building an identity. For instance, considering the lifestyle and culture of those who own an Harley-Davidson, to better define their identity, they consume hard rock music: it becomes a symbol of their identity and belonging to a social group that shares common interests and habits.

As a consequence, music can be defined as a patterned human activity, both social and individual (Cross, 2001). The value is created by people and interactions within each other: music generates value when it interplays with an individual or a group. Researchers have defined music as a primary and symbolic mode of communication between the audience and the performer (Barton, 2018). As a matter of fact, value is not only defined by the person that creates it - in our case the music artist - but it is the result of a *discourse* (Khaire, 2017). The value delivered by a musical product is based on its shared understanding and desirability. The notion of *commentary* is highly related to the notion of *discourse*: through comments and evaluations, it is able to appease the tension between consumers and artists when it comes to understand a creative product. Also it has an influence in defining the value and desirability of an artistic/cultural output as it is composed by those that Khaire (2017)

defined as *intermediaries*. The *discourse* is a nonlinear and iterative path that involves the interaction of several actors as *producers* (artists, record labels etc.) and *intermediaries* (critics, magazines, social media etc.). The former can be defined as those responsible for manufacturing the good/service and contribute to the *discourse* through promotional materials. The latter are entities, individuals or firms that are not economically involved with the product but help in its understanding through critics, reviews and evaluations. In particular, it is relevant to deepen the role of intermediaries, since music is a creative product with a highly symbolic counterpart that, sometimes, requires special knowledge to be interpreted. As a consequence, consumers rely on intermediaries to better understand its meaning: since they do not gain a profit out of the consumption of the output, they are more reliable.

Music has to be defined also in relationships with its social and cultural dimension. This link is enhanced especially by the phenomenon of *cultural re-assessment*: creative products are constantly re-evaluated and perceived in several contexts that generate other types of value (Negus, 1995). For instance, some songs from the musical *Hamilton*¹ had been used during Black Lives Matter protests while they are originally employed to narrate the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of the Fathers Founders of United States of America. Therefore, music has the potential to enhance people's lives and beliefs as well as societies. Its experiencing is characterized, in fact, by two complementary dimensions (Hesmondhalgh, 2013): the link to the private self and the basis of collective and public experiences. They are defined as complementary since they can reinforce each other. For instance, listening to goth music and soaking its style in the representation of one's self to the outside, defines an identity as well as positions the self in a cultural and social group. Also, the social group is reinforced by the actions of the individual. Therefore, music can act as an *agent of empathy* between people, but it should not end up in damaging the identity and tastes of the individual in favor of an homogeneous collectivity (Clarke et al., 2015) as it is becoming more difficult to avoid the personal sphere to be constantly

¹Winner of 11 Tony Awards in 2016, *Hamilton* is a musical written and directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda and based on the biography of Alexander Hamilton, written by Ron Chernow.

affected by the world around (Illouz, 2007). To sum up, music can be defined as affecting and being affected by cultural and social phenomena: there is a mutual relationship.

5.2 The socio-cultural relevance of music

Human life is embedded in music. Music's role and importance is different depending on cultural settings (Herndon and McLeod, 1981): culture and music are related since they define one another while enriching and maintaining the characteristics of a certain human society. However, there is not a unique definition of culture (Barton, 2018). For instance, culture has been defined as a set of learned and shared behaviors (language, art, religion etc.) through which feelings are expressed as well as an empty vessel that people have to fill with meanings. In this case, acknowledging what is culture is relevant in its relationship with music that can be defined as a set of cultural practices that bound up with the individual (Martin, 1995). The meaning of music has been associated to the way it is received and appropriated by the audience, giving it both a cultural and social dimension (Bennett, 2000). People all around the world engage in music-listening and making, even if it does not satisfy a primary need. However, some studies have outlined that music enhances some activation patterns in the human brain (Nummenmaa et al., 2021): it has the capability of enhancing a wide array of subjective emotions that are related to ourselves (music-evoked memories and feelings) and to relationships we build with the others (social bonding).

5.2.1 Social bonding

Several studies have outlined how sharing music tastes intensifies social bonds, in line with the literature about how similarity in various domains leads to social attraction. Music, in fact, can be considered as a great conversation starter, especially when meeting new people (Boer et al., 2011). Generally, individuals listen to specific genres of music (*musical categorization*) that can give a hint about their personality traits and value orientations: for instance, individuals who listen to rock are more likely

to reject conservative values as well as people with self-transcendent value priorities listen to jazz and classic music (Boer, 2009). Having music preferences influences, also, relationships established with the others since individuals who like similar music show a higher level of social attraction. Sharing values is fundamental when creating a social bond with someone: it is mutually rewarding and it leads to interpersonal attraction.

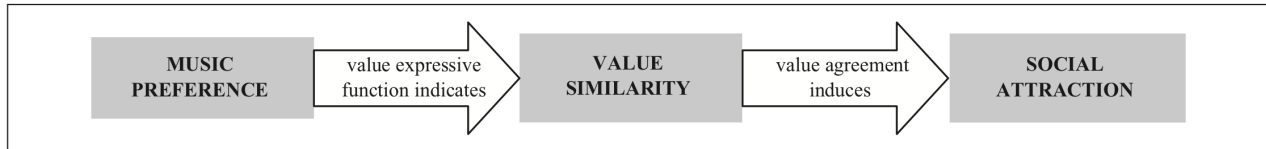


Figure 2: The Musical Bonding Model (Boer, 2009).

The Musical Bonding Model (Figure 2) shows that music preferences express values. If these values are similar to the ones of someone else, a social attraction is established. Consequently, having the same tastes in music leads to a social bond between people. This model proves how music can help individuals in being included and accepted in social groups.

In fact, the ability of music in setting a social bond is given by the fact that music represents a remarkable meeting point of intimate and social realms (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) as it provides a basis of both self and collective identity. Being a cultural product, music, as well as arts, movies and TV series, is becoming a relevant tool through which expressing who we are and which are our ideals as well as a mean through which being included in the conversation. Digitalization, other than making our private more public, is making creative products more accessible, leading to a major consumption of them that, consequently, are becoming relevant topics to discuss on a daily basis.

Social attraction can lead to the establishment of social groups that associate themselves with a specific genre of music. However, music can be associated to social groups in several ways (Willis, 1973):

1. The value is *totally socially given*: a group of people is accidentally exposed to a certain kind of music. Basically, it means that the art form has no intrinsic value that makes it suitable for a certain social group. An example could be the ensemble of music genres listened in the Western

society: people are socially exposed to songs that belong to genres like pop, rock, indie, rap etc.;

2. The value is *totally intrinsic and autonomous*: music keeps its integrity, independently from how a social group responds to it. It has its own aesthetic, and the social group needs to adapt to it. An example could be church songs for Catholics that cannot change their aesthetic and they should adapt to them and their value;
3. The value and meaning are *given socially, but within objective limitations imposed internally by the art form*: the meaning of the art form can adapt to the social group it relates to. Being the common ground of the two previous ways, many examples can be given concerning social groups that relate to a certain kind of music, but without damaging its integrity such as hippies or goths.

In conclusion, our social bodies are so embedded in music that we feel the urge to move anytime we hear the beat of a song or musical form. We mimic each other's expressions, postures and preferences to affiliate with the others and music facilitates such a process.

5.2.2 Music-evoked memories and emotions

Music is a relevant cultural form, able to define who we are, what we feel and what we want (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). It has the ability of better shaping our memories, experiences, choices and feelings related to them. The relationship between music and emotions follows three predominant historical explanations (Higgins, 2011): music imitates or represents emotions, music arouses emotions and music expresses emotions. In modern times, the way music appeals on our emotions has changed from the past. Since emotions are considered to have a narrative structure, in the past, they have been considered as possible to be perceived especially in novels, films, and plays, but not in music. In fact, the reader/spectator, in those cases, could feel emotions towards (Nussbaum, 2003): the characters and their feelings, the sense of life embodied in the stories, the possibilities of someone and coming to

understand something about life and their own desires. Unlike movies or books, music was lacking a representational structure, making less obvious how it could be related to our lives since the emotional material was restrained in abstract musical forms in which feelings were crystallized and generalized. Recently, instead, music has been connected to a variety of discourses and meanings (Hesmondhalgh, 2013): there is the lyrics, the phenomenon of digitalization is making possible for the consumer to access more information about performers, to look at recorded-performances or music-videos, and to engage with the content at 360 degrees. There is a narration to which listeners can connect their emotions. These changes can be better understood through an example: *All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version) (From The Vault)* by Taylor Swift. It is a first person song in which the central character is the artist herself and it talks about a breakup and all the thoughts and remembering it can cause. It narrates specific events and moments, the personal growth of Taylor and how leaving him was the best choice for herself. Also, the music is soft and slow and shows this tension between pain and growth as well as remembering and forgetting. The song lasts ten minutes, way more than the standardized length around 3 or 4 minutes. However, its length is not damaging its accessibility as people are engaged by the story and the meaning behind it. *All Too Well* is able to represent, arouse and express emotions. Also, it covers all the four ways in which emotions are evoked according to Nussbaum (2003):

- Listeners can identify with the character of Taylor Swift and her emotions as well as imagining the emotional experience she went through (*characters and their feelings*);
- Listeners can or cannot embody her point of view about how changing and leaving behind can be a possibility of growing and not only a cause of suffering (*sense of life*);
- The song can highlight new possibilities for people that are going through changes in their personal life: they can reflect on the importance of choosing what is right for themselves (*possibilities*);

- People who felt the same way, might become aware of their feelings and take decisions for their future according to them (*understand something about life*).

The bonding is enhanced thanks to visual content, a short-movie that better explain its meaning. To sum up, *All Too Well* shows that a song can allow listeners to feel and imagine what others may feel as well as to remember a certain moment in their lifetime: nowadays music appeals on emotions.

Moreover, music is related to memories. Music has the ability of enhancing autobiographical events thanks to the frequency we listen to music and to cultural traditions that couple music to significant lifetime events such as a wedding or an initiation (Jakubowski and Ghosh, 2021). Some previous studies have highlighted that music can cause a wide array of memories that are, predominantly, positive and related to social themes (Janata et al., 2007) but they did not investigate the everyday experience of music-evoked autobiographical memories (MEAMs). On the contrary, recent studies have deepened the role of MEAMs in everyday life, in particular, Jakubowski and Ghosh (2021): they analyzed a sample of 31 participants that were required to monitor their music listening throughout the day looking for MEAMs. Results showed that people experience MEAMs especially when their attention is not directly focused on listening to music (*back-ground music*). The majority of songs related to these memories belongs to popular music genre. Also, it should be highlighted that six songs are reported by different participants due to high media exposure of them during a certain period of time, as well as their cultural connotations (for instance, *Everywhere* by Fleetwood Mac has been associated to dancing at weddings by two participants). MEAMs occur at least once per day and during routine or cognitively undemanding tasks such as driving or relaxing.

This study shows how much music is embedded in our life and its relevance in defining our experiences and memories: on an individual-level, the impact of music is unavoidable. However, the private dimension of music is constantly affected by the public one, as underlined previously: our excitement or sadness at hearing a song can be intensified by the sense that others share that feeling (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The socio-cultural dimension persists in the individual sphere.

6 The risk of commodification and standardization

Culture and commerce have always travelled on parallel tracks, but the phenomena of globalization and digitalization are causing a collision between them that can result in having negative consequences. In fact, music is considered as going through a process of commodification that tightens the art form into market dynamics that aim at making a profit out of it. As a consequence, quantity is winning over quality and listeners are losing their ability to perceive the difference between good and bad music. Also, the standardization of music can be related to the influence of external factors and the resemblance of many elements and sounds between songs that are leading to loss of tastes and critical ability, following the line of thinking of Adorno.

6.1 The tension between music and commerce

Societies produce and consume culture as a form of individual and collective expression (Lampel et al., 2000). For an artist it is difficult to face market conditions; a balance is needed to attract audiences and have the resources to produce more content. Being music a cultural product, it is affected by the constant tension between commerce and creativity. In the music industry the perceived success rate is very low, as it produces more failures than successes, so the pressure on the artists is very great (Stratton, 1982). Therefore, the artist feels the pressure coming from the market and place him/herself in opposition to it. According to Willis (1973), the necessity of being commercially successful, can limit the creativity of performers that would feel obliged to repeat established and well-known successes. The recording industry is constantly projected to the future with the aim of identifying the *next big thing* on the market that will ensure success: *anticipatory approach* (Negus, 1995). Audience's preferences are quite unpredictable and difficult to satisfy when it comes to cultural products. The demand is so unstable that something previously defined as non-commercial can turn out to be highly successful years later. In fact, the notion of *deferred success* (Moulin, 1987) is usually associated with creative outcomes: the more gatekeepers recognize the quality of an art, the more its incremental commercial

success grows no matter when it was released. Another element that can influence the deferred success of a song is *cultural re-assessment* (Negus, 1995), a phenomenon previously discussed when focusing on the socio-cultural relevance of music.

6.2 The commodification of music

According to some, digitalization is improving the commodification of music. It is not simple to give a definition of commodification that is broad and narrow enough to include all the phenomena by which cultural products are affected. Following the intent of the research, the focus is kept on the critical point of view of Adorno.

In the years, the commercial music has been highly related to Britain and USA (Negus, 1995) and popular music. Nowadays, the adjective *commercial* is perceived to have, especially, a bad connotation related to music products that are standardized and commodified. Adorno has outlined how music commodification is implementing the market share but decreasing the critical capacity and understanding of what the individual is listening to. He has defined popular music as being the opposite of serious music (Adorno and Simpson, 1941). His major critic is that music is becoming standardized in terms of musical schemes (verse-chorus-verse-chorus pattern) and styles, while serious music is extremely complex, and every part depends on its relationship with the other parts of the song (Twigg, 2014). In popular music you can easily substitute a verse with another while in serious music it is not possible (Joseph, 2021). The standardization of popular music is related to the need of catching the attention of the listener and gain a profit out of it.

According to Adorno, a phenomenon that enhances the commodification of music is called *plugging*: excessive repetition or imitation that leads listeners to become attracted by the same things. Ideally, popular music pushes songs that are identical but have a one isolated trademark that can make them appear innovative and original. Therefore he relates *plugging* to the notion of *glamor*, highlighting that producing popular music is equal to place neon lights on a shop to attract the attention of the

customers: it is glamorous, but everyone does it and it is not original. To sum up, if a song is played multiple times, listeners start to think it is already a success when truly is just a repetition of previous tracks. Plugging puts a social pressure on the listener: intermediaries, such as radio-broadcasting companies, can define and shape tastes and preferences of the individual that is, therefore, subtly deprived of the freedom to reject certain songs or tracks. This phenomenon is defined as *ambivalence* (Adorno and Simpson, 1941): listeners are not readily accept what they listen to but are influenced by *flimsy rationalizations*. For instance, old music is rejected since it is, unjustly, classified by the mass as *corny* in respect to the new one and, therefore, it is enjoyed with the feeling that what is familiar to the listener is, by definition, superior. Consequently, disliking a contemporary song is not classified as an expression of subjectivity but as rebellion towards what the majority accept. It can put you out of your social and political environment. Although the vision of Adorno about commodification of music is quite radical and extreme, it can be used to better understand how the production and consumption of music is changing and evolving because of external forces that affect it, primarily digitalization and the spread of new media such as TikTok.

7 The Case of TikTok

TikTok is a social media platform that has exponentially increased its popularity starting from 2019. It is the result of the combination of two different apps (Tidy and Smith Galer, 2020): Musical.ly and Douyin that, in 2018, ByteDance merged together.

On TikTok, you can upload short videos and share them with a huge amount of users. You can have your personal account and you can follow, like and comment videos published by others. The main page is the *For You Page* where the algorithm shows content that you are likely to enjoy and appreciate following what you publish, research and like, as well as content that it's going viral and gaining popularity. The app is available in more than 150 different markets and, at the beginning of 2022, it has recorded about 1 billion global daily users (D'Souza, 2022). These data outline a worldwide use of the app. The content is heterogeneous and it includes videos in which the user act, sing or dance. In fact, it has been defined as a form of entertainment and it has pushed the career of many content creators, influencers and artists, as well as created the figure of the *TikToker* who creates videos professionally and promotes products and services. Consequently, it has become a marketing tool of great relevance. Also, it is building relevant partnerships with festivals, such as the 2022 Toronto International Film Festival, and events, such as Eurovision 2022.

Focusing on key statistics, provided by the TikTok Annual Report, it can be outlined that (Iqbal, 2022):

- TikTok, in 2021, generated \$4.6 billion with an increase of 142% in respect to 2020;
- The active users are estimated to reach 1.8 billion by the end of 2022.

The variety in the age demographics (Figure 3) is showing an increase of the target audience as well as a major acceptance of the platform that, especially at the beginning, had the stigma of being only for teenagers.

One of the main concepts related to the platform is virality. It is a commonly used and understood

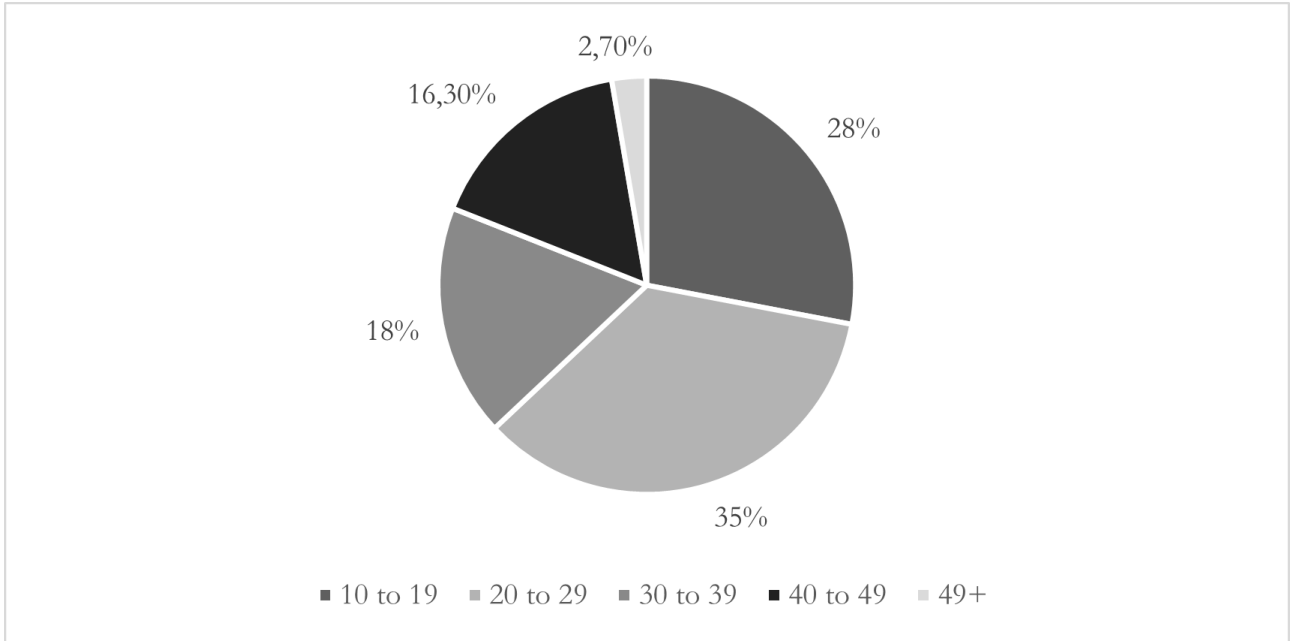


Figure 3: TikTok Worldwide Age Demographics 2021 (%), (Iqbal, 2022).

concept that refers to the process by which content circulates rapidly (Valdovinos Kaye, 2020). A content becomes viral when it passes from one person to another scaling into larger social phenomena. TikTok provides a well-established algorithm that is able to identify content with a good potential and to let it go viral. For this reason, it has become an indispensable marketing tool for the majority of the companies that try to gain the attention of the audience: going viral can have repercussions on professional careers and outputs.

Music has always been a consistent part of TikTok. It is not a music-streaming service such as Spotify or Apple Music, it is a video-sharing app that offers a commercial library of free-to-use music tracks (Rodgers, 2021). In the beginning, there were some controversies concerning the unlicensed use of music. In fact, it has been estimated that 50% of music used on TikTok was unlicensed (Nicolau, 2020). In introducing the music market, the relevance of copyright was highlighted as it is the main element that, within a market that has to find a balance with an artistic/cultural dimension, guarantees to the artist an economic sustainability. Therefore, some tensions were generated between the social media platform and artists/record labels as TikTok was not considering itself as a music streaming service and, consequently, was not paying for its use of music. However, sounds are at the core of their

business being based on short-videos: music and sound are TikTok’s universal language (TikTok, 2021). At the moment, the relationship between TikTok and record labels is reaching a balance: the social media platform has licensing contracts with Warner Music, Sony Music Entertainment and Universal Music Group.

7.1 The Methodology

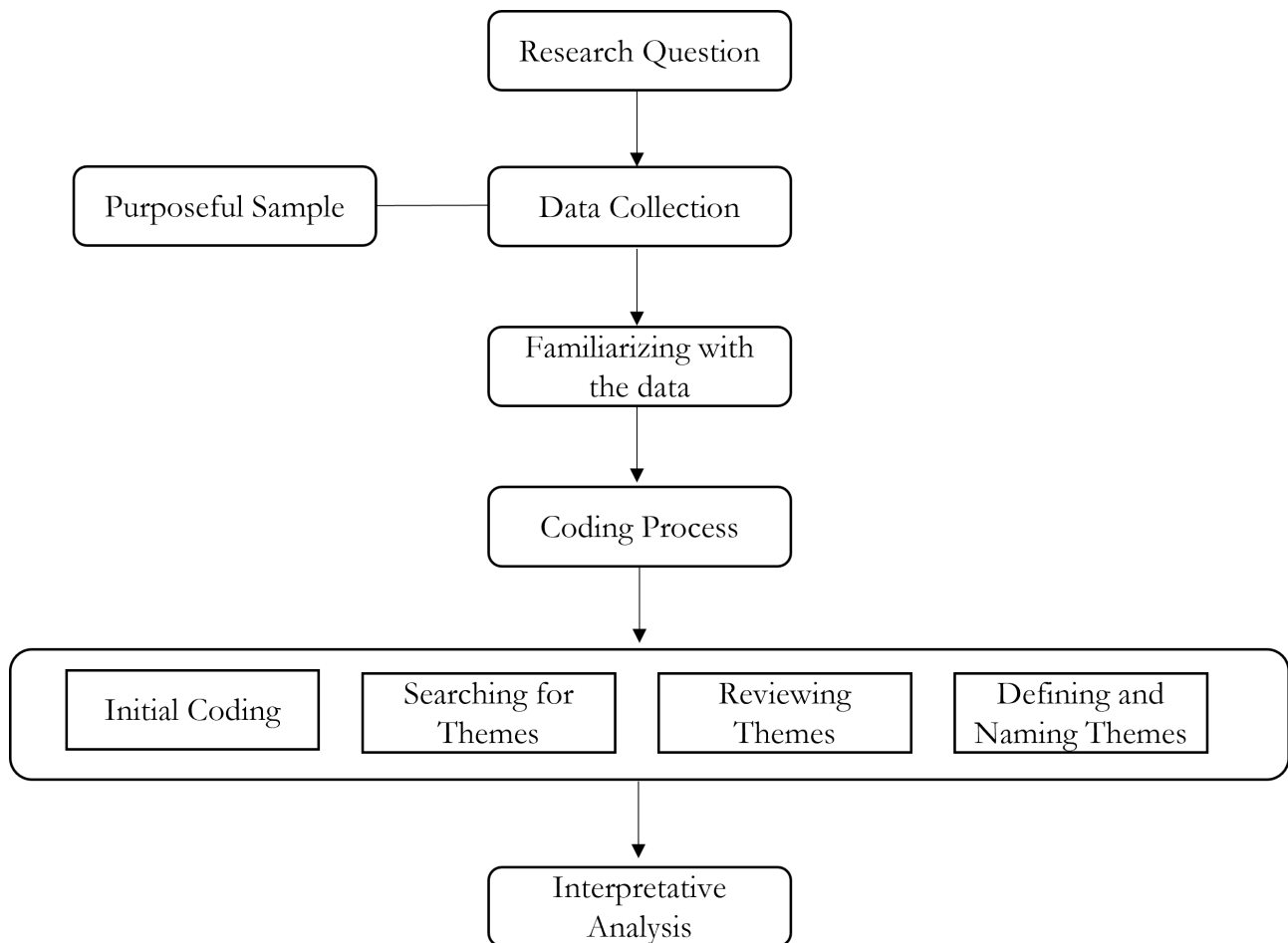


Figure 4: Research process through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The focus of the research is on the impact of TikTok on the music industry and how it is shaping its social and cultural meaning. The research process follows the structure introduced in Figure 4.

The social media platform is proving to have a huge impact on the music industry, its functioning, as well as its production and consumption. It is shaping the way consumers approach and perceive songs

and artists as well as the way artists and record labels approach the production of creative content to be shared and released. The decision to pursue a research about TikTok and its impact on music comes from the observation and acknowledgement of some interesting phenomena and data.

Firstly, I introduce some quantitative data that captured my attention when investigating the relationship between TikTok and music:

- 47% of users, after listening a new song on TikTok, search and add it on their music streaming services (TikTokforBusiness, 2021);
- 75% of users declared to discover new artists through TikTok and 63% confirmed that they hear new music, they've never heard before, on the platform (TikTok, 2021);
- 67% of Tiktokers is motivated to interact with the music featured in videos and they actively search for it on streaming platform (TikTok, 2021);
- 72% of TikTokers agrees that they associate certain songs with the social media platform (TikTok, 2021).

These data shows that TikTok is having an impact on music discovery and listening. The majority of people tends to move from the social media platform to music streaming services in order to stream the integral version of songs and, consequently, TikTok has the indirect ability to push the streams of certain tracks in respect to others. Also, a process of association is outlined as users relate certain songs to the social media platform.

Secondly, I have been fascinated by two cases:

- The case of *Dreams* by **Fleetwood Mac**: a song released almost 45 years ago, after becoming viral on TikTok, made it at No. 21 position in the Billboard Hot 100, reaching its best streaming and sales week from 1977 (FearSmith, 2021);

- The case of **Olivia Rodrigo**: she was known as the main protagonist in *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* but she had never released music before January 2021. Then, she released *Drivers License*, her debut single, that went immediately viral on the social media platform and, consequently, reached the No. 1 position on Billboard charts in less than a week (Albert, 2021).

These two examples opened up the question in my mind whether TikTok is actually changing the cards on the table when it comes to music. Specifically, I started to question myself if not only it is changing the business side but, especially, the social and cultural one as TikTok is quickly gaining popularity worldwide and music, as it has been demonstrated through the literature review, has a very relevant role when it comes to individuals and collectivities. I questioned myself about the impact TikTok is having on the way music is perceived and the meaning people relates to it.

7.1.1 Collection of Data

In order to collect data, I have pursued a qualitative research handling individual interviews in a semi-structured way: they had been conducted online, through video-calls and they had been recorded and transcribed. The decision to run individual interviews comes from the necessity of better collecting information through a one-to-one approach. Instead, the decision to follow a semi-structured approach is related to the desire of gaining information that are not necessarily evident to the eye of the interviewer so that the research could have explored different perspectives through heterogeneous data. The interviews were prepared looking at the literature review while keeping in mind the aim of the research. In particular, depending on the professional role handled by the interviewee, I decided to investigate between several themes such as the socio-cultural value of music, digitalization, globalization, commodification and democratization. For instance, when interviewing emergent artists and active users of TikTok, the first questions were about what does music mean for them and how they discover music while when interviewing experts of technologies and digital strategies, first of all, I questioned them about the impact of digitalization on music.

Some ethical principles are followed. First, confidentiality is guaranteed. The aim is to protect the privacy of participants and to set a relationship of mutual trust (Baez, 2002): only the researcher knows their identities, especially because some of the participants are relevant personalities and their public reputation has to be preserved. Therefore, the vehicle through which confidentiality is guaranteed is anonymity (Wiles et al., 2008): participants are referred to through the professional figure they represent.

7.1.2 The Sample

A qualitative research was developed and, therefore, a purposeful sample was created so to have the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, 9 people representing the different actors involved within the music industry, were selected according to their knowledge of TikTok and their involvement in the music industry. In particular, the sample is composed by:

- **An expert of technology and innovation** who works and collaborates with a digital magazine born on Instagram in January 2020. The choice of interviewing such a professional figure is due to the insights and data he can provide about the performance of TikTok and its impact on the music market. Furthermore, being an average consumer of music, opinions about consumption can be provided;
- **Two representatives of record labels**: the first one comes from one of the biggest record labels on the market while the second one comes from an independent record label in Italy that collaborates with a consultancy agency in order to better manage its talents and creatives. Both professionals interviewed work in the digital department of their companies: specifically, the first is the Head of Digital Services & Consumption while the second is the Head of Digital Strategy & Innovation. They were interviewed for their deep knowledge about digital strategies to promote artists and songs, being TikTok a quite strong marketing tool in that sense;

- **Two emergent artists and active users of TikTok:** both the interviewees are trying to push their careers as music artists and recently released their debut singles. Also, both of them, have a huge following on TikTok equal to, respectively, 206,400 and 502,800 users. The decision to interview them came from their double role as artists and active users of TikTok that they use on a daily basis;
- A **music teacher** that shares tips and suggestions on TikTok: being the owner of a music school, because of the pandemic that stopped his business activity for a while, he decided to download TikTok and to share knowledge about music and singing with users. He was chosen as having a deep knowledge about the history of music and its meaning, for his deep collaboration with young people trying to approach the music industry and his active use of TikTok;
- An **independent music artist and author** that collaborates with several artists and releases music: she has a conflictual relationship with TikTok where she has an account but struggles in managing it and its language and, generically, refuses its rules in sharing content. Her point of view and perception about the music industry can provide deeper insights about the position of the artist and his conflictual relationship with the rules of the music market;
- A **music artist** that has employed social media platforms since the beginning of her career: she got discovered through Instagram and YouTube and then she participated to a very important talent show in Italy. Also, she publishes covers and small part of new songs on social media platforms and she tries to communicate with the audience never losing her authenticity and artistic vision. She can provide insights about the position of the artists in the current music scenario;
- A **radio speaker** that works for one of the most important radio broadcasters in Italy: radio broadcasters have always had a relevant role in the promotional and distribution process of music and it would be interesting to investigate their positioning after the spread of TikTok.

7.1.3 Thematic analysis

Once collected the qualitative data, the analytical process of coding started: the aim was to search across data for repeated patterns. I decided to run an inductive thematic analysis (bottom-up approach) to be able to identify, analyze and report some specific themes across my data set. The analysis is developed following an interpretative approach: starting with the description of data and moving to interpretation so to theorize the meanings and implications of the different themes. I have adopted a realist approach in theorizing meaning from the data collected; therefore, in the analysis, I have theorize motivations, experience and meanings in a straightforward way. The thematic analysis that I have pursued can be divided into six phases according to Braun & Clarke (2006). However, I have approached it as a recursive process, which means I moved back and forth, according to the needs of the research.

1. **Familiarizing yourself with your data:** at the beginning of the process of analysis, I have transcribed the nine interviews in order to be able to easily move back and forth between the entire data set. The transcriptions are highly-detailed and accurate. The objective was to get familiar with data collected;
2. **Generating initial codes:** I started to do an initial coding attentively looking for relevant words or group of words so to detect similarities and differences between the interviews with the different actors in the music industry. For instance, the majority of interviewees mentioned *virality, listening, impact on the music industry, discover, visual content related to a sound, TikTok, Spotify, trend, fast, social media, repeat, everyone* etc.;
3. **Searching for themes:** once defined the main words or group of words, I started to combine them into potential themes through an interpretative analysis. For instance, I noticed a pattern in combining words like *virality, repetition, trend, visual content related to a sound* and I grouped them under the label *listening to music on TikTok*;

4. **Reviewing themes:** potential themes were in need to be defined and better-detailed. Therefore, I reviewed data for each theme so to check if they were coherent within the pattern and, subsequently, I moved back and forth through the transcriptions to be sure that the themes were coherent in respect to the entire data set: the aim was to be sure not to have missed relevant data and to have coherently collected them within each theme. For instance, *listening to music on TikTok* was better-combined and defined with other group of words such as *passive and active listening* and *engagement*;
5. **Defining and naming themes:** once defined the main themes, I provided them with a concise name that was able to clearly identify the essence of what each theme was about;
6. **Producing the report:** the final analysis and the write-up of the report is developed following the themes defined during the coding process. Data are reported, analyzed and interpreted in a detailed, but concise way.

At the end of the thematic analysis, I have detected three main areas of change in the music industry, following the spread of TikTok:

1. The **discovery** process
2. The **listening** process
3. The **making** process

Therefore, the analysis will be developed respecting these three main directions so to draw some conclusions about the changes in the social and cultural meaning of music as it is the specific aim of our research. Through the assessment of data collected, many insights and controversies have emerged as TikTok is something completely new to the music environment that has started to face and approach it, especially, in the last two years.

7.1.4 Limits and Strengths

Data collected and, therefore, the analysis, have strengths and limitations, especially on the level of the sampling and data collection. In fact, the sample is composed by representatives of the main actors of the music industry and they have relevant roles in respect to the objective of the analysis. It is surely strong and it refers to two dimensions of the music market: artists and production/distribution. The consumption dimension, instead, is not portrayed as, in order to have significant data, it would be necessary to have quantitative data on a wider sample and on a different population; therefore, in the analysis, the perspective of consumers was deducted from the assumptions and comments provided by artists, record labels and distributors. When it comes to data collection, instead, the main strength is related to the fact that the interviews were run on an individual level: this has allowed a good collection of data as interviewees were feeling comfortable in sharing their opinions. Surely, another element that has contributed to a detailed and truthful collection of the data is the fact that the anonymity is guaranteed. The main limit in data collection is the fact that all interviewees were Italian so the discussions were held in their mother-tongue language and not in English: I have proceeded with the translation of data needed, trying not to change the sense and intentions of their wordings. In doing so I reproduced as accurately as possible the source text, did not change the form of the language and expressed the meaning in a manner that is understandable (Larson, 1991). One of the main threats comes from the fact that the exact equivalence or meaning of words across languages may not exist (Regmi et al., 2010). However, being familiar with participant's culture and language reduces potential threats to the validity of data (Larson, 1998).

7.2 The Discovery Process

An expert of innovation and technology, in answering to the question about the impact that digitalization is having on the music industry, immediately mentioned TikTok and defined it as something that:

...has created a new model, more genuine and far away from the other social media platforms, in which you interact with people that you know, and that propose videos with sounds that can be shared by others so not only recording audios, but also songs, and this has completely changed the music market as 83 of the 200 artists on Spotify are unknown artists that became popular on TikTok and, consequently, top artists on Spotify...

Not only he has defined TikTok as a new actor within the digital environment, but also within the music industry. According to his point of view, to become popular on TikTok, is equal to become a top artist on Spotify and this leads to an interesting point of reflection: an artist does not need anymore to sign a deal with a label to gain success as if one of his/her songs goes viral on TikTok, it goes viral on Spotify. This is highly related to the notion of *virality* that is how people reach popularity on TikTok that is based on an algorithm that aims at bringing the right content to the right user following his/her likes, comments and content shared. However, it needs to be highlighted that there is not a specific formula or a price to pay in order to gain virality. Therefore, music discovery and consumption are becoming more unpredictable for the actors of the music industry. Furthermore, a representative of one of the most important record labels outlined that the music market has been disrupted by the spread of short videos and that:

...TikTok, clearly, guides in this as it has changed the way music is consumed and it has changed the discovery source of music. Today, music discovery that, previously, was happening with a big relevance on YouTube, is practically all on TikTok.

The interviewee is outlining a huge impact of TikTok on the way music is discovered and, consequently, consumed: the process is moving from YouTube, one of the main tool in which the discovery of music and new artists took place in the last fifteen years (for instance, Justin Bieber was discovered, in 2007, through a video uploaded on the platform by Scooter Braun), to the social media platform.

This data, as well as the fact that the majority of interviewees immediately mentioned TikTok as one of the main tools through which they discover music, lead me to look out for data about the

discovery process. The data collected lead to the identification of three different directions involved in this process (Figure 5).

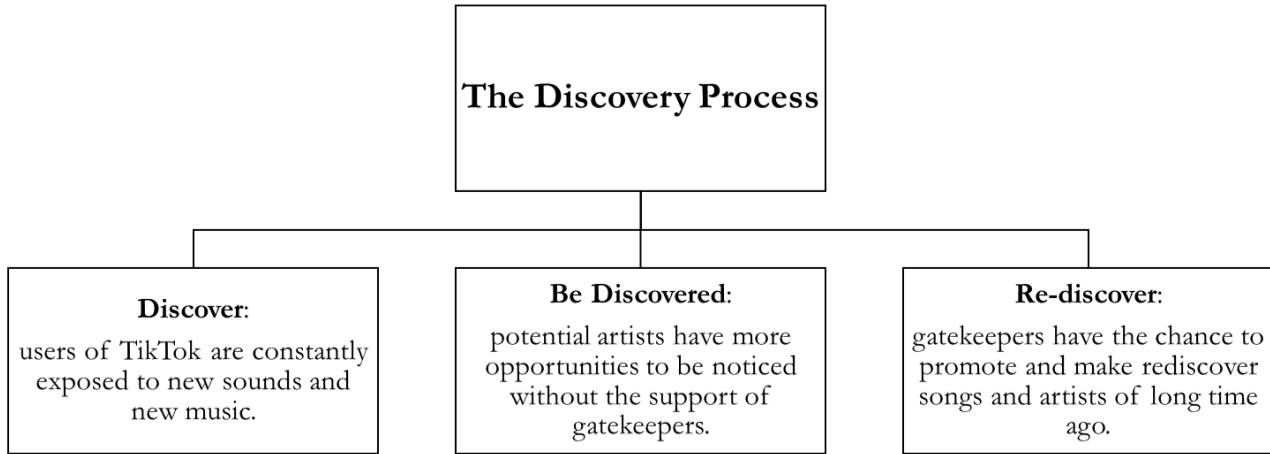


Figure 5: The three directions influenced by TikTok in the discovery process of music.

7.2.1 Discover

It has been demonstrated that the discovery of new music is highly influenced by the platform. Being sounds the language of TikTok, it is very likely that, together with a trend, a certain song gains more popularity in respect to others that are not associated with a visual content. In the introduction to the case study, quantitative data about the behaviour of users when listening a track on TikTok have been outlined: 67% of TikTokers is motivated to interact with the music featured in videos and they actively search for it on streaming platform. Data collected during interviews with some artists and active users on the platform can be analyzed and used to discuss the discovery process. In fact, when asking about the ways in which they discover music nowadays, they answered:

I surely discover it, and I said that also to one of my colleagues of the summer camp I work at, on TikTok that helps a lot from this point of view, TikTok makes you discover lots of songs.

Probably on TikTok, with trends that start to spread around and also through charts and

the radio. I don't search for it a lot.

They immediately mentioned TikTok, without receiving any input from the interviewer within the question. It is interesting to notice that people are acknowledging and discussing how TikTok is having an impact on their music consumption, as well as there is an acknowledgement of the fact that trends and, therefore, virality is shaping somehow what consumers are listening to: a lack of active behavior in researching for new songs is detected. Furthermore, they were able to make examples of songs they discovered on the social media platform such as *In The Stars* by Benson Boone and *Glimpse of Us* by Joji: they relate their discovery to TikTok. However, they mentioned other tools used to discover music. Looking into this matter, some other data collected are introduced:

I, also, use Spotify a lot as, sometimes, it creates playlists just for you. For every genre you listen to, Spotify creates a playlist, such as the one mix for you in which there are both songs you have saved and new ones, also there you can discover other songs. You can also put shuffle or the radio on Spotify and you discover many. Sometimes, I also use YouTube, some covers or some video suggestions appear on it. However, surely, (I discover) everything on the Internet, the radio is perfect to let songs stuck in your head but to make you discover them it works less than the Internet.

The interviewee outlined the importance of Spotify and YouTube in his discovery process. It is interesting to notice that the Internet is gaining a huge importance and it is taking over the discovery process of music while the radio is perceived as an instrument that makes you get affectionate to songs more than discover them. Actually, a radio speaker outlined that he perceived a change in the songs that are chosen and transmitted on the radio:

You know why? Because of social media platforms. If I think about Savage Love by Jason Derulo, when it was released, it was always used on TikTok or in Reels on Instagram, but not much more than that, you did not hear it on the radio. Then, it has been transmitted on the radio and everybody had the chance to hear it. You notice there is a change, today

music is chosen also by social media platforms, not only by radio broadcasters... the song you constantly listen to on social media platforms, sooner or later, it is possible that you hear it on the radio.

He is confirming that radio broadcasters are going through a change in their role because of the spread of a social media platform like TikTok. Especially, it can be outlined that the discovery process starts on social media platforms and, then, once discovered, songs are transmitted by the radio. Therefore, the power of the radio within the discovery process is decreasing.

Another fascinating insight is that the discovery process is spacing around multiple genres: a trend that was enhanced by playlists on Spotify and it is spreading, also, thanks to TikTok where music is a corollary to visual contents and, as such, the aim is not to classify it into genres. Therefore, users of the social media platform tend to discover and consume several genres that are, also, merged together, as outlined by an artist and active user of the platform:

Lately, I cannot distinguish music genres because they are a mix. If TikTok decides, for a period of time, to push only trap music, then it trends and people start to listen to it again.

In the 90s-00s, it was easy to distinguish between pop, rock, etc.

The discovery process of music within TikTok is changing music consumption not only when it comes to genres but also when it comes to listening to singles rather than albums. Interviewees declared that they discover music, also, through playlist on Spotify that mix different genres and artists, as the expert in technology and innovation outlined:

I am a big fan of music streaming platforms, of playlists, in particular. I don't get passionate about a song but of a playlist I search for using a key word.

All these discovering processes do not aim at making the user entering in contact with an album, but are skewing the consumption of music towards singles. Furthermore it is interesting to notice that Spotify is setting a new way of consuming music: following a mood or topic within a playlist. One of the artist and active user of TikTok admitted:

I am ashamed to say that I do not listen to albums, it is an horrible thing. I should start to do it, I listen very few of them, but it is important to listen to them as they make a lot of culture, very few times I listen to them when they are released. I listen to a lot of singles with few exceptions.

While admitting that he does not consume albums, he outlined their importance in terms of culture and music education. The element of discovering music through a shuffle system and to focus more on singles than albums, however, is something typical of the radio, as well:

The possibility of the radio is that the song is random, you can listen to a contemporary track and after you can listen to an older one, you don't know what can happen next. You can listen to whatever, you can like it or not, if you don't like it, you change, if you like it, you stay on the radio and you listen or, third option, you don't like it, but you listen to it because you want to try something new and to see if you can like it or not, you try to listen to it again at home, and then you wait for a song you like more.

The possibility of spacing around multiple genres is something that the radio, generically, has always provided and listeners have always approached it in several ways. However, the radio speaker outlined a difference between the discovery process on the social media platform and the discovery process through a radio broadcaster:

The TikToker has a role that can be considered to be like the one of the radio speaker, to give you information, to make you discover a new song, but how many of those songs are remixed? Another issue emerges because you have to look for the original song that you heard in a visual content where it was speed up, slowed down or soiled somehow, how many songs do we hear on social media platforms that are soiled?

Basically, the difference stands in the fact that on the radio you surely listen to the pure and untouched version of the song while, on TikTok, you enter in contact with versions that are quite often distorted. It is interesting to notice, also, that he is not referring to it as a reassessment of the musical product but

as a process that ends up in soiling the authenticity and value of the track. Also, it is not facilitating the discovery process because users are required to look for the original version of the track that is not always directly available on the social media platform.

When commenting on his way of discovering music, an emergent artist and active user of TikTok outlined:

I discover newest tracks especially on TikTok with trends, but also on Spotify charts, when you put music in the background. I own a bar so I put the radio or the Spotify charts and trending music is streamed.

The discovery process of music is, therefore, related also to listening in the background, an element that is quite relevant to investigate, especially because, on TikTok, music consumption is not the core activity. Also, he related Spotify charts to trending music outlining that charts are indirectly influenced by TikTok. Remember when, at the beginning of the chapter, the association between trending on TikTok and reaching high positions within charts on Spotify has been made by the expert of technology and innovation interviewed. TikTok is able to influence in several ways, directly and indirectly.

To sum up, TikTok is not taking over all the process of music discovery, but it is acquiring a relevant role. In this sense, it is interesting to outline, also, that one of the interviewee firstly declared not to be too much influenced by TikTok when discovering new music but, then, looking at his recently saved on Spotify, he acknowledged that he actually streams lots of songs first heard on the social media platform:

I am a big fan of music streaming platforms, of s, in particular. I don't get passionate about a song but of a playlist I search for using a key word. Sometimes, I heard songs, also, on TikTok and search for them on Spotify... Actually, I discover many songs on TikTok, now that I look at the ones that I have saved (on Spotify).

It is a quite relevant element that outlines how much TikTok is impacting the discovery process. There is a strong influence that not necessarily people are able to notice.

However, drawbacks can be detected in the discovery process on TikTok. Previously, the radio speaker outlined that there are chances you enter in contact with a remixed, and therefore distorted version of the song: it can result in damaging the value of the song or in asking for further effort to the user that has to search the original version. Also, a representative of an independent record label explained:

When you perceive that a platform is more good at launching in respect to others, all the attention goes on it and I am afraid we are losing track of lots of artists that simply do not have an interest in being on TikTok because they don't want to reach that particular target, they want something else for their music and we are losing them because we focus only on TikTok or a certain type of artists.

Record labels are developing launching strategies especially on TikTok because they are assuming people use it more than any other instrument to find out about new artists and songs. As a consequence, some artists and tracks are ignored or not promoted as much as others; not all the artists aim at reaching that particular target and you cannot force a strategy for them: it would be a waste of material and non-material resources. It is a choice that comes with the extreme assumption that consumers are only looking at what TikTok offers, while data showed they use different tools. To sum up, TikTok allows a fast process in the discovery of music but it can lead to the loss of relevant musical works.

7.2.2 Be Discovered

When it comes to chances of being discovered, TikTok has demonstrated to be very effective and to be able to launch numerous recording artists. It has the potential to launch careers making a newcomer artist reach the global charts without investing too many resources. In the introduction to the case study, it was outlined the case of Olivia Rodrigo whose debut single became viral on TikTok, launching her musical career on a global level and leading her to the achievement of outstanding results in terms of streams and prizes. Artists are embracing this opportunity, as outlined by the radio speaker:

There is this perception that things changed, that an artist, in order to launch his/her music,

previously was using YouTube, but today he/she would not start from YouTube but from another social media platform or maybe he/she would release its music on YouTube with the objective of move it on TikTok and make it become a hit.

TikTok is looked at as a great instrument to be used when it comes to gain popularity as an artist and to turn songs into hits because of its efficient algorithm. Being a social media platform it provides the artist with the possibility to be discovered and reach a wider audience. In fact, an artist interviewed explained:

I had been discovered through social media platforms: I gained popularity thanks to them.

Before participating to the talent show, I started uploading cover songs on Instagram and YouTube. If I had not used them, probably, I wouldn't have been able to reach this point.

She outlined that social media platforms had a great role in pushing her musical career, especially at the beginning.

When discussing together with a representative of an independent record label about the impact of digitalization on the music market, she explained:

10 years ago, the average consumer was discovering music thanks to the radio, television, movies and there was the figure of the gatekeeper that had all the information so that the radio selected tracks and albums to promote basing itself on an editorial choice. At the moment, this power is slowly moving towards music streaming platforms, so that Spotify editors have a lot of power and many artists believe that it is too much but, according to me, there are some platforms, specifically TikTok, that made being a gatekeeper something absolutely democratic and that everyone, if you have the right tracks, the right virality and the right timing, at the right place in the right moment, can become viral and be discovered by people.

In analyzing this data, it is relevant to outline that they are confirming what has been previously discussed when investigating the influence of TikTok on the discovery of music: the social media

platform is contributing to the decrease of power of radio broadcasters as it is turning the role of gatekeepers within the music market in something *absolutely democratic*. Everyone can access the music market and gain success if they take actions at the right place at the right time: virality on TikTok does not have a specific formula so to be discovered is not something necessarily related to talent, but also to publish a track in the moment in which it is more likely to gain success depending on several variables that are not necessarily known. Actually, during the interviews, an artist complained about virality:

I have a conflictual relationship with TikTok. From one side, a platform like TikTok allows emergent artists to obtain visibility without going through traditional methods such as labels or managers, it gives you more control on your image. On the other side, it is not a democratic process as it may look like, because the great thing about music is that it has to be more meritocratic: if a song is good, it goes. On TikTok, for how the algorithm is structured, the correlation between quality and streams is not immediate.

She acknowledged that TikTok is an opportunity in the process of being discovered and controlling the perception consumers have of you, since you are not under the control of a label. At the same time, she outlined that it is not democratic, but it is skewing the consumption towards a certain kind of artist that has the resources to go viral on the platform, not necessarily the talent which makes his/her success well-deserved. It can result in an absence of correlation between streams and quality of the artistic/cultural product. She has a different point of view in respect to the representative of the independent record label that defined TikTok as a democratic tool. Therefore, the notion of *democratic* is investigated. An expert of innovation and technology explained that TikTok:

...it has completely change the music market as 83 out of 200 top artists on Spotify are unknown artists that went viral on TikTok and, consequently, top artists on Spotify so, from the point of view of digitalization, concerning social media, TikTok had a heavy impact on the music industry.

Therefore, not only he outlined how charts are impacted by the virality of TikTok, but, especially, that almost the 50% of the most streamed artists on Spotify are not popular but emergent ones that own their success to the social media platform. As a consequence, you do not have anymore to sign with a record label, as TikTok offers equal opportunities to be discovered and to gain popularity. Record labels are losing their power on the market and have to deal with TikTok to keep up their positioning: they actively use it to make consumers discover their artists. In fact, a representative of a record label mentioned how the social media platform can be seen by the artist as an opportunity. Artists should exploit it by using their own language when communicating to their target. It is not necessary to stick to the rules defined by TikTok: it can be exploited without giving up the artists's authenticity and ways of communicating. She introduced the case of Jovanotti, a very popular Italian artist that became famous at the end of the 80s:

Jovanotti has a boomer² flavor, and, at a certain point, he started to do TikToks and now he lives on the platform and he does many contents per day. He found his way of communicating, maybe he does not do it perfectly according to TikTok policies or functionally in respect to the algorithm, but he feels comfortable and people perceive him as authentic and effective.

The strategy is effective. As a matter of fact, he has almost 14 millions likes and he is followed by almost 800.000 users, increasing the chances to be re-discovered by younger users. Moreover, another data that highlights the importance of social media platforms and the importance of adopting the proper way of communicating, is provided by an artist when questioned about the role of social media platforms in her career:

In my career, I needed social media platforms and I still need them: in this moment I use them in the best way possible to grow even more, to communicate the correct messages, and to build a connection with thousands people as social media platforms are worldwide.

²Boomer is a word used to identify those people who try to keep up with trends for young people even if they do not belong anymore to the target and, consequently, they may look out of context.

7.2.3 Rediscover

The last process that emerged from the interviews is the rediscovery process that is quite interesting to investigate, looking at it from the point of view of record labels. On TikTok, it is quite common that songs released years ago become viral. In the introduction to the case study, it was outlined the case of *Dreams* by Fleetwood Mac that has reached its peak position on charts after almost 45 years from its release, after going viral on TikTok. A representative of a record label outlined the importance of TikTok especially when it comes to old-fashioned tracks:

An incredible and impactful trend is the one of the so-called resurgent track. We have created an international team that works on resurgent tracks that are catalogue tracks with at least three years of life but that for the users of TikTok behaves as new tracks because, eventually, they have never heard them before, they become viral on the platform, they generate movements within the platform and they, not always in such an evident way, push the streams on streaming platforms. It has always happened with tracks because they put them on a TV show such as, for instance, *Stranger Things* but now it happens a lot on TikTok.

In particular, TikTok seems to be highly effective in hyping the so-called resurgent tracks: catalogue tracks with *at least three years of life*. Even if they had been released in the past, they behave like tracks released in the present as the users of TikTok never heard them before: the notion of *deferred success* by Moulin (1987) can be related to this phenomenon as the more gatekeepers recognize the quality of an art, the more its incremental commercial success grows, independently from when it has been distributed. On TikTok resurgent tracks are recognized as relevant by users and this leads to an increase in their economic success, increasing their streams on music streaming platforms. Also, she mentioned TV series as a typical tool used to push some old tracks referring, in particular, to the case of *Running Up The Hill* by Kate Bush. The song was released in the 80s and has been used in one of the main scenes of the last season of *Stranger Things* in 2022: as a consequence, it reached No. 1 position in the majority of global charts after years from its releasing. It is interesting to outline the

similarity in the process, in the sense that both on TikTok and on a TV series, old tracks are related to a new visual content that pushes its popularity in the present. TikTok gives a chance to rediscover music and to value a work that was ignored, underrated or forgotten. Especially young people can get in touch with tracks they may have never heard before:

It is beautiful that many young people, at the moment, that maybe would have never reached certain songs, rediscover tracks. Also *Stranger Things* that has used the song of Kate Bush and now it is back at No.1 in charts. I love these phenomena.

Record labels, instead, *gains benefits from a business point of view since you look at the streams*. It is interesting to notice that TikTok is associated with the idea that you can gain relevant outcomes on the business side as the social media platform pushes the popularity of an artist or a track. However, the same representative of a record label outlined that:

Truly, speaking if I were an artist, there is not an economic interest, since for the artist if his/her song becomes or does not become a trend on TikTok, does not change a lot. Generically, artists work on advance payments and they do not gain a lot from royalties. It is more about having a cultural impact, extremely temporary but relevant, so the artist that release a summer single wants it to be the most streamed song of the summer, the most viral track on TikTok, even if economically it does not change a lot. The final objective for the artist is to impose himself/herself on a cultural level, in the top 10 of new releases.

TikTok is not employed to have a direct economic impact. It does have an indirect impact on the economic results because it can generate more streams, but it is perceived more as an instrument that artists and record labels use to have a cultural/social impact, in order to gain a good positioning within the music environment. Economic results are a consequence, not the intent both for record labels and artists.

Some drawbacks are detected within the rediscovery process. An artist and user of TikTok has outlined its risks:

When songs from years ago go viral on TikTok and people start to listen to them only because of it, I do not appreciate it because those songs are not only a trend. It happened with a song of Aretha Franklin, a huge artist, that people recognized saying “yes, it is the trend of TikTok” but truly, that song is history. However, it is normal and it does not bother me that much since the most important thing is that music is discovered.

Therefore, one of the main risks in bringing back old tracks on TikTok is that a song that is part of music history, can be reduced to a TikTok trend and, consequently, its history and importance is ignored.

To sum up, TikTok is having an impact in the discovery process of music and, consequently, is shaping the consumption of music, according to the perspective of record labels, artists and users. They recognize its socio-cultural relevance and threats within the music environment. After having introduced the changes in relation to the discovery process of music, it is relevant to outline how TikTok is affecting the way people are listening to music.

7.3 The listening process: passive listening

The data collected outlined the influence TikTok is having on the way individuals listen and perceive music. Therefore, in the following paragraph, these changes are investigated considering, in particular, the notion of passive listening.

During the majority of the interviews, the sample had consistently outlined the difference between active and passive listening, providing interesting and elaborated insights. Before proceeding with the analysis of data collected, it is necessary to specify the difference between active and passive listening when it comes to music consumption: an active listener is engaged from an intellectual point of view and process the information provided by the sound and the lyrics, while a passive listener does not focus all his/her attention on the sound or lyrics: music listening is complementary to other activities (O’Bannon, n.d.).

TikTok has changed the way we consume music. According to me, music consumption has only one medium that is the music in that moment. There can be a passive listening with the radio and the playlists or an active listening so following the artist and listening to the discography. The engagement is the temporary involvement with the content, together with the video, the caption, the text, the references and also a little bit of the song that is on the TikTok. In this kind of listening to music, unfortunately, music is a corollary.

This insight was provided by an artist/author when questioned about the difference between music consumption and music engagement. She outlined that the main difference resides in our span of attention and perception while listening to a track. The notion of passive listening goes deeper when it comes to listening to music on TikTok. It assumes a different frame: the artist outlined how music listening is just part of the temporary experience of looking at a visual content where music is one of the elements and not the main one. When defining the notion of passive listening, in fact, it has been defined as a complementary activity to other activities. Another comment provided by a representative of a record label can be used to deepen on this aspect:

People now discover music on TikTok and have the chance to find it and immediately get affectionate to it, because when a song becomes a trend, it enters in a spiral so that people hear it, fell in love with it and search for it on Spotify, adding it on playlist and so there is this relationship with the song that is driven by the content. It is a passive listening but not a passive listening like when you listen to the radio. It is a passive listening because is driven by a content that you liked and you felt in love with the track.

Firstly, the notion of passive listening, for the way that is intended when associated to the radio or playlists by the interviewees, has been related to a decision-making process. Consequently, you are passively listening to music when you are unintentionally subjected to the listening of certain tracks in respect to others. On TikTok, in fact, users do not decide to consume a certain kind of music, as they are provided by the algorithm with content you may be interested in and that has specific sounds

and tracks. There is not an active search for new music content, but the majority of music consumers follow what is more appreciated online, without questioning more or searching deeply, as outlined by a record label representative:

It is not anymore I open Google and I search which are the most interesting albums of the last year, I just look what goes online and I decide what to listen to.

The notion of passive listening had been related, also, to the way consumers enter in contact with the song or the artist. The passive listening on TikTok is related to the idea that you do not listen to the song as a primary activity but a complementary one: it is conveyed through a visual content. It is a passive listening because is driven by a content and, consequently, it is legit to ask whether the visual content has an impact on the perception you have of that track. In fact, an artist and user of TikTok, in answering to the question about the eventual impact that TikTok has on the way he perceives music, declared:

It changes the perception I have about songs. According to me, to a song you are able to relate videos you have appreciated or trends that you have liked. It completely change the perception of the song, also the way you listen to it because you wait for that specific part (that is related to a trend), but if you would have not heard it on TikTok, that part would have been just like the rest of the song. It changes the perception in a positive way, it makes me appreciate songs more because there is that part of the song I repeatedly listen to on TikTok and then I discover more about the song thanks to that small part. If I would have listened all the song without the influence of TikTok, probably, I would have not appreciated it.

According to the interviewee, the perception do change. In particular, he declared that he associates songs to the visual content he heard it with for the first time: a process that is done also by another artist and user of TikTok interviewed.

Surely, unconsciously, there is the memory of the first time I heard that song. I am able to

separate the music from the context of TikTok: about a song I need to appreciate the feelings it gives me from the harmonic point of view, the voice, the instruments so, actually, after hearing it (on TikTok), I travel with my mind and I associate it more to what I think.

Therefore, if one of the artist and active users of TikTok had specified that, afterwards, he is able to relate the track to something more personal, the other had highlighted his doubts about his effectively appreciating the song for what it is since the small part heard on TikTok has a consistent impact on his choice to like it or not. It seems like the perception is conditioned by the way a small part of the track is related to the visual content and, therefore, TikTok can be able to shape the way a song is perceived: the interviewee was clearly doubting his tastes and preferences. Also, record labels showed to be aware of the fact that the song is influenced by the visual content as one of the representatives outlined: *the relationship with the song is influenced by the content*.

Passive listening enhances a sense of engagement on TikTok as the platform relates music to an engaging visual content. Also, active listening may verify indirectly in the moment in which TikTok stimulates the curiosity of consumers that actively search for the integral track or for more discography from the artist heard on the platform.

Another element that has to be highlighted is the use of the adverb *repeatedly* in relation to listening to a small part of a track on TikTok. Virality seems to have a major role when it comes to music engagement as it makes content circulates rapidly: the algorithm of TikTok is able to calculate and to spread sounds that users are more likely to appreciate and to use in their video content. The more the sound becomes viral, the more people engage with it in producing visual content, the more the user is likely to enter in contact with it, passively: this is the reason why the interviewee has mentioned a repeated listening of a track on the social media platform. Therefore, virality is related to repetition as it is more likely to enter in contact with a viral content more than others. It can be questioned whether the fact of repeatedly listen to some tracks on TikTok has an impact on our preferences, a question that one of the interviewees has brought on the table when talking about the way he looks

for music:

TikTok helps a lot in discovering music, it dominates charts: however, it would be interesting to understand if people save songs heard on TikTok because they hear them a lot and they stuck into their head or if they really like them.

There is an open question about whether virality on TikTok has an impact on our tastes and preferences that are indirectly influenced in a certain direction and are affecting charts and results within the music industry. A *social contagion process* is detected. In the literature review it has been defined as a process in which tastes and preferences of individuals are shaped by continuous interaction with others. The notion can be taken and elaborated in the context of TikTok where the interaction happens in a digital form, through likes, comments and sharing, and the more a sound is used by the others, the more the individual is likely to enter in contact with it and being influenced in consuming it. The social contagion process entered in the digitalization era thanks to virality.

In conclusion, one of the interviewees stated:

Music gains the attention and it is fundamental for everything. When you are in a place and there is music, you have certain feelings about that place.

In the literature review, it has been discussed that, even when in the background, music has an impact on perception and emotions. Jakubowski and Ghosh (2021), in particular, demonstrated that music-evoked autobiographical memories emerged, especially, when the attention is not directly on listening to music. It comes naturally to ask if, on TikTok, those memories emerge when passive listening to a track while watching a video-content. Also, to better discuss this point, the idea of Nussbaum (2003) can be brought on the table. The researcher outlined how music, in respect to the other forms of art, did not have a representational structure. However, on TikTok, music is projected into a visual structure and becomes part of a certain storytelling where emotions are represented, aroused and expressed through an ensemble of elements. Consequently, passive listening, intended in the way it is passive because music is conveyed through a visual content, can lead to emotions, even if the individual

is not directly involved in the storytelling but it is looking at something created and shared by someone else: the user can feel or imagine what others feel. The main risk is that while listening to a song, the user does not relate it anymore to something personal but the memory and emotions remain related to the content it has been associated with on TikTok, breaking the ability of music to have a personal and unique impact on the individual, as outlined by an artist interviewed:

I hope that, in time, this lightness in understanding things will disappear, especially on TikTok, where music is a must... there is too much lightness in listening to music.

It can lead to the loss of critical capacity in understanding tastes and preferences as well as to the loss of the symbolic value that can be given to a musical product by an individual.

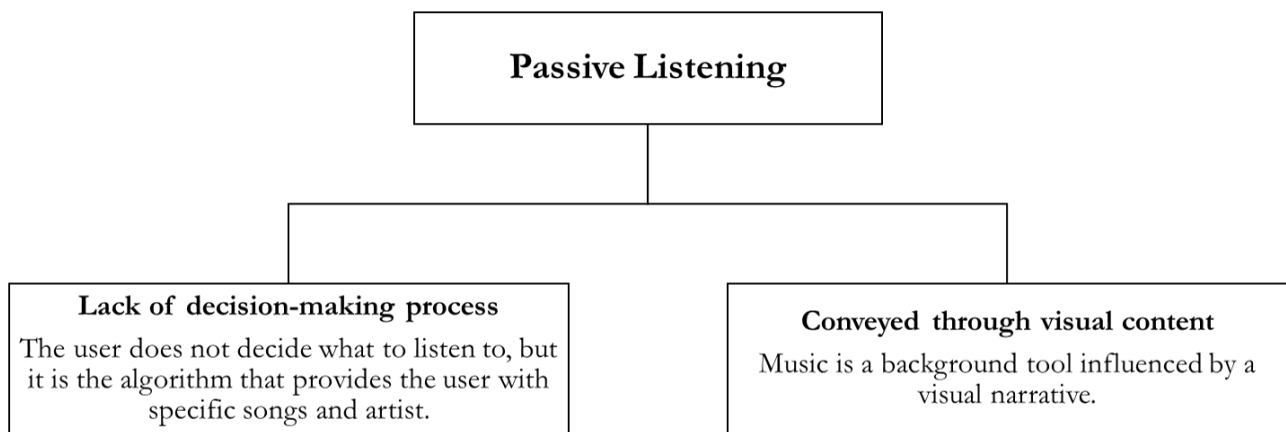


Figure 6: The two ways of passive listening on TikTok.

As a matter of fact, some of the interviewees do have a doubt about the way they are perceiving music nowadays and the impact of TikTok on it.

To sum up, TikTok pushes a passive listening of music that is affected by virality, and therefore repetition, and can be declined in two different directions (Figure 6).

7.4 The making process: TikTok is entering the creative process

TikTok has an impact on the process of making music. According to data collected, it is affecting the way of producing and releasing music and, therefore, artists and gatekeepers are developing new content and strategies according to the new needs of the marketplace in which they operate (Figure 7).

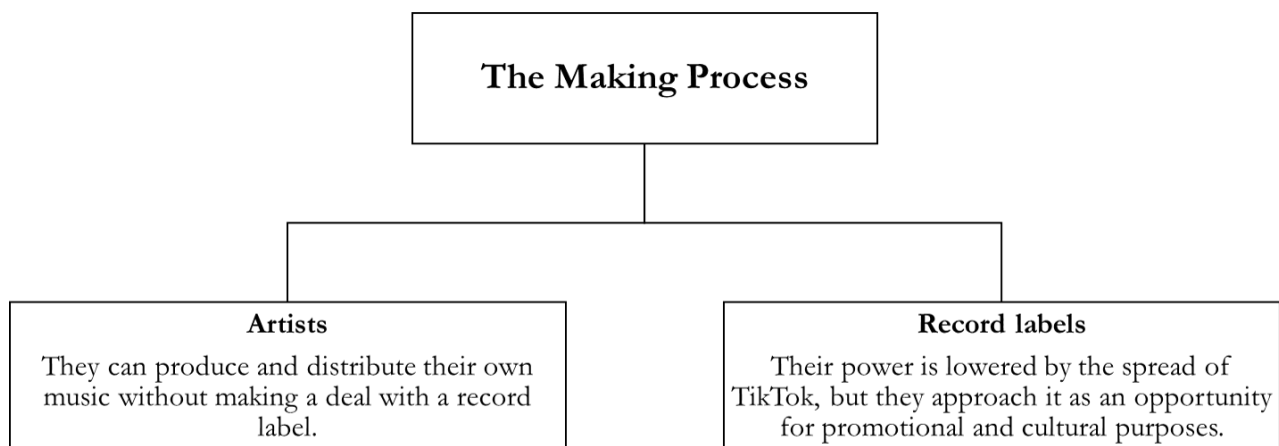


Figure 7: The main changes in the making process of music due to TikTok.

One of the main changes that has been detected concerns the opportunity for the artist to produce and distribute their own music without making a deal with a record label. Some interviewees highlighted the opportunity for emergent artists to be discovered and heard without being under any label but just by sharing their music on TikTok. Therefore, record labels are facing a loss of power within the music environment as gatekeepers: they are not anymore indispensable for an artist in order to access the music market. However, they are approaching TikTok as an opportunity more than a threat, after having established deals with it in the latest years: it is better to find a balance than to fight such an influencing actor. In fact, it is used as a marketing tool to be included within the digital strategy to promote an artist or a song. It is interesting to outline that its role is so relevant that new professional figures have been developed within record labels such as:

In my team, from January 2021, there is a person that is in charge of influencer marketing and

all the activities that go around TikTok, also in terms of analyzing trends and data, because it is a necessity that we started to have from half of 2020... In Italy there are two figures that follow the music side of TikTok: one follows the artists on the different social media and the other one is in charge of the editorial part of TikTok.

Moreover, it is interesting to look at the way the strategy is developed, after the spread of TikTok, by a representative of a record label:

After having analyzed the target, we look for the right channels to push an artist. Identifying the target allows us to say: if it is a song more teen or viral that has a good potential to become viral because we understand that in the refrain, in the chorus, there are some sentences, some catch phrases that can be re-used, therefore, surely, we will use a channel that involves content creators, to make potentially viral contents on TikTok or Reel Instagram. If, instead, it is a song with a higher target, that typically it is not active in following the new discography released but it is necessary to narrate them the discographic novelties, such as a millennial worker, then the best strategy is to do ads that appears on Instagram Stories targeting very well the people that are supposed to receive them.

TikTok is part of the digital strategy developed for certain artists or songs. Identifying the target is a necessary and mandatory step that outlines how TikTok is not necessarily the right instrument to promote a content but that it always depends on who do you want to reach.

TikTok had a huge impact, I cannot neglect what you read on many articles, that when there is a new song, one of the first questions is: "Okay, but does this track have a potential on TikTok?". It did not happen to me personally to reach the point where you ask the artist to change something within the track, to give up a part of his artistic side or, let's say, his attitude or preference, to make the track more appealing for TikTok. Fortunately or unfortunately, it depends from the point of views. I think fortunately because what the artist wants to do on an artistic level is respected, at most the record company or the team that follows the

editorial and authorial aspect of the artist may give suggestions: maybe on some sentences or words that have more potential not so much for the TikTok platform but for the target.

It is true that now TikTok is perceived as the main promotional tool to enhance the popularity of a song or an artist: it immediately comes to gatekeepers' mind when they have to promote novelties within the music industry. Also, a relevant detail that introduce the role of the artist within this scenario, is outlined: the artistic side can be influenced by the market side. The representative of a record label believes that, generically, the artistic side should not be influenced by the market but, sometimes, it can happen that small editorial changes are required to better fit the target. It is necessary to look for data outlining the perception of the artist about this matter. An artist and active user of TikTok, when discussing about the constant tension between art and commerce, outlined:

(As an artist) you have to examine your conscience: do you want to stick to the guidelines proposed by the industry so that you gain popularity or do you want to go on with your ideas, with what you are, hoping in a stroke of luck and that your consistency and talent will pay off? It is a choice. If they would propose me a song that I don't like but has the potential to go viral, I would not accept it because it is not me, I don't want people to know me for something that I am not, what would be the beauty of it?

There is not a generic rule when it comes to choose between following the demand or offering something that is less likely to reach a wide audience. It is a choice. Generically, the artist wants to keep its authenticity and artistic attitude as much as possible.

However, TikTok is asking the artist to compromise if they want to reach virality. In fact, data demonstrated that TikTok is affecting the making process of music in terms of whether to produce singles or albums:

Artists are focusing on releasing more singles as possible to keep up the attention. So, instead of focusing on a strategy that is accepted by everybody, focusing on releasing an album, and then lose the attention, we make more singles and we try to push them one after the other so

that the name of the artist keeps on going viral and the attention keeps high.

Focusing on singles is a way to gain a spotlight within the music industry and to try to keep it up as much as possible. However, promotional strategies for singles are more complicated than the ones for albums because of digitalization and budget constraints:

The album move different budgets, because you do less of them and, usually, there are things you can do with albums but you cannot do with singles such as signing sessions.

Furthermore, TikTok is entering the writing process:

I collaborated with an amazing author and I remember that we were in the studio and she said “you have to do it this way, just imagine that you are in a stadium, this should be the part that the audience screams out loud”. In this case, you do not distort your authenticity, you add elements, it is beautiful and brilliant to think about this... the right thing is to listen to yourself but also to the people that work in the industry. However, the final decision should be of the artist, otherwise it is wrong.

Music is an industry and, as such, it has some guidelines that artists should take under consideration; however, they should never change their nature in favor of them but they should find a balance. Therefore, as artists change a part of a song so that the audience at the stadium screams it out loud, they can add words or catch phrases to make it go viral on TikTok. It is part of facing the tension between art and commerce as the artist has to gain an economic profit to survive. The necessity to find a balance between these two polarities had been outlined also by a music teacher and active user of TikTok:

At my music school, we do a songwriting course with an author that wrote for very important artists as well as for young ones. Doing this course, I understood that today if you do an artistic choice, you can do whatever you want but you need to be aware that the risk of not going viral is very high, and then there is the discographic choice. I admire people that are able to compromise these two things... Obviously some in risking are more awarded, others

going to trivial end up losing something.

There are two choices when it comes to produce music: the artistic one and the discographic one. In order to succeed and not to lose authenticity, a compromise has to be found, knowing there is the risk that it is not what the market is asking for at that moment. It seems it is more appreciated to reach a compromise or to pursue an artistic direction in respect to a market one. For instance, the artist/author interviewed prefers to focus on concept albums (records in which all the tracks are necessary to understand what the artists aims at meaning through his/her project) rather than singles or albums, even if she knows that they are not congenial to the business model of TikTok:

From a conceptual point of view, I have an hip-hop vision like Kanye West that does not make records for TikTok but concept albums where all the tracks are necessary for the record. It is a way of conceiving writing that I like a lot but it is not congenial to the 30 seconds of TikTok.

Furthermore, she believes that TikTok is enhancing the discographic side rather than the artistic one. In fact, when asking about the impact that TikTok is having on the music industry, she replied:

It is devaluating the music side. You have no idea with how many TikTokers I work with in this period to make songs, objectively, of little value: when they come to the studio, they say they want to make a song with certain characteristics for TikTok where they have a good following and can monetize. It looks to me we are putting the effective use of music in the background. It is a shame as with all the social and technological advancements, we live in a period of time where to make music is possible from your room, it is accessible to everyone and all this accessibility is not valued in the sense that it would give a great sound diversity or a great experimentation that could be beautiful.

If by one side it is true that producing music is becoming democratic and accessible to everybody, on the other side, TikTok is limiting production to tracks with very similar characteristics that devalue music. In fact, the artist/author outlined, also, that, for her music, TikTok is not the right instrument

to use as she has a way of writing and producing music that is not right for it.

Music is losing authenticity. I think there are authentic artists and I think that the artists that are not, truly, have an authentic passion but it is difficult to make authentic music because editors, distributors, labels, prefer to bet on something certain... To have a great following on social media is more valuable: I did the selection for a music festival and the winner was a girl that had released only two songs, under 1000 streams, 33 monthly listeners but 13.000 followers on Instagram and TikTok. There is a change from looking at music to looking at the social media following, it is more difficult to make authentic music, it is discouraging.

According to her perspective, social media are taking over music and to be popular on them is more relevant than music itself. TikTok is detected as being part of this mechanism that leads singers to value more their external image and perception in respect to what they have to say through their songs and albums. As an artist, you end up feeling discouraged. Also, she outlined that pressures can emerge from record labels that can ask the artist to distort his/her authenticity in favor of economic results. However, both representatives of record labels, outlined their hope in not seeing the artistic side compromising too much in favor of the economic one. In fact, TikTok aims at being seen more as a tool to be used in promotion than as the reason why in producing music.

We do a pre-release of the sound, we try something, and then we see what happens organically and we adapt to what the users want. We don't care that much. We are sorry that, sometimes, there is not a connection between the song and what is happening, but I have never seen something unpleasant, TikTok is very careful on this.

Record labels are giving users the opportunity to set their own trend around a sound taken from a song. There is acknowledgement of the fact that they lack control when it comes to virality so it is better to set a pre-release on TikTok and to see what users do with the new track. However, there is the risk of seeing a track completely decontextualized in respect to the meaning that the artist wanted it to have for the audience. TikTok can be perceived by the artist as a threat to their art; according

to both the representatives of record labels, however, it is not dangerous if you find a compromise. You can be on TikTok maintaining your authentic way of communicating as in the case of Jovanotti, outlined when discussing about the changes within the discovery process of music. The representative of the big record label outlined, also, that when it comes to promote an artist and its music:

We try to search for something that is in line with the message of the artist. It is clear that if you are an emergent one, you need to try all the channels even if you do not appreciate TikTok, a way to be on the platform has to be found because it is fundamental, especially if you have a young target and you want to be streaming-friendly.

Especially for emergent artists, TikTok assumes a very relevant role, so important that the label searches for a way to be on the social media platform keeping in mind the intent and aim behind what the artists want to produce and communicate. It is also interesting to outline that, once again, TikTok is associated with the increase in streams on music streaming platforms. However, a balance is still needed because everything within music production seems to depend on TikTok that, instead, has to be seen only as a part of the strategy developed around a song or an artist, as outlined by a representative of a record label:

We reached an extreme that is wrong. It is not right to demonize TikTok as well as focusing on it. The discographic industry has survived years without TikTok and now, suddenly, it looks like everything goes around it. It is difficult to keep track on all the new releases, we are constantly subjected to new songs and this is because of music streaming platforms that have started a democratization in publishing music and being artists. This has brought to the fact that when you perceive a platform that can better help in launching in respect to another, the attention goes only on it and I am afraid we are losing lots of artists that simply do not have an interest in being there, in begging and participating because they have evaluated they do not want to reach that target, they want something else for their music and we are losing them because we focus only on TikTok and on a certain kind of artists.

There is consciousness about the disruptive effect of TikTok in making and producing music. It is entering the creative process as well as the promotional one. The main risk is that, in the moment in which an artist aims at reaching a different target in respect to the one that actively use TikTok, its popularity is damaged by the extreme focus on it that, at the moment, is considered the best tool to be used when launching a single or a career. This can cause a feeling of discouragement and fear in artists that can decide to beg to its rules so much that they lose their authenticity in music production, considered to be fundamental elements when making music, as explained by an artist when questioned about her creative process:

The fundamental element are the emotional part, the spontaneity and, surely, the sincerity, the fact of being authentic with what you feel and what you want to communicate with your songs.

8 The Discussion

The results achieved have to be discussed in respect to the literature review. The aim is to re-discuss it and to contribute. The discussion follows this structure: firstly, it is necessary to investigate what are the consequences of the changes TikTok brought to the table when it comes to the socio-cultural value of music. Secondly, the role of TikTok as part of the process of digitalization is outlined and, therefore, its impact on promotional culture and globalization that needs to be looked at considering, also, the process of commodification and its mutual relationship with democratization. Finally, the changes of the music market are discussed as TikTok is contributing to its disruption and rearrangement through its business model.

8.1 The social and cultural value of music

Music does not deliver a value that is unique but it can be divided into three different ones: social, cultural and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). It has the ability to position the individual within a certain networking and to make him/her feel a sense of belonging to a group of people. TikTok is one of the main tools through which people discover music. Therefore, it has an influence on music consumption that is skewed towards songs present on the platform. Also, the majority of interviewees highlighted that most of the songs on Spotify charts went viral on TikTok. In this sense, TikTok can be considered in the process of enhancing the social value of music as, while listening to music, there are more chances for people to recognize the same songs as they have similar patterns of discovery and consumption. If everyone knows and appreciates the same song or artist, there are more chances to bond with each other: in fact, it has been outlined that music can act as an *agent of empathy* between people (Clarke et al., 2015). Furthermore, TikTok, in creating trend that people replicate in the same form, set a scenario in which it is easier to mimic each other's expressions and preferences to affiliate with others. Music is able to lead to a deeper and stronger social attraction between people. It assumes a certain value in respect to a social group, that can be completely socially given, totally intrinsic and

autonomous or given socially but within objective limitations (Willis, 1973). According to what has been discussed, songs are losing their integrity in entering in contact with users on TikTok as the meaning of them is shaped by the visual content they are associated and shared with: it is not possible to state that the social group on TikTok is adapting to the song and its intrinsic value. As outlined by an emergent artist and active user of the platform: "when a famous song is banalized on TikTok, the perception changes in a negative way as there is a decontextualization of the lyrics". Therefore, on a social media platform like TikTok, the value can be considered to be completely socially given since users are accidentally exposed to a certain kind of music. Certainly, users of the social media platform are accidentally exposed to music, also because there is not a direct decision-making process involved. In fact, when discussing about the notion of passive listening, the latter was declined into two different forms when it comes to listening to music on TikTok: lack of decision-making process and music conveyed through a visual content. Users enters in contact by accident with a song that is related to a visual content. However, if the value is socially given, then, music has no intrinsic value that makes it more suitable for one group than another. So, why artists and record labels are stating that only a certain kind of music is done for TikTok and its target? In fact, when discussing about the changes within the making process of music, it has been outlined that record labels aim at reaching specific target through TikTok so the track has to be characterized in a certain way and aims at being heard by a certain audience. Also, the artist and author interviewed, highlighted that she does not believe her music style fits the need of TikTok users. Nevertheless, only a certain kind of music that fits the need of the social media platform, goes viral, even if there is not a specific formula and it is quite unpredictable to know what will be trending on the platform. In assuming this perspective, as music is supposed to be in a certain way, to fit a certain target to be on TikTok: therefore, it does have an intrinsic value and the value is not completely socially given in the way intended by Willis (1973). Consequently, should it be stated that the value is socially given but within objective limitations imposed internally by the art form? According to data collected through an interview with a

representative of an independent record label, it is not possible to control the way the art form adapts to the social context of TikTok: "when you interact with a platform where you as an artist are not anymore the only person that brings something to fans but they can also bring something to you, you are risking that fans understand wrongly or that extrapolate something different in respect of what you meant". On TikTok, music is in the hands of the consumers, other than the producers: for instance, they can take a part of a song and remix it with other artists or they can take a sentence that "usually goes from A to Z and cut it from A to M", changing its meaning: it can cause a decontextualization of the lyrics and, consequently, its intrinsic value could be damaged. The intrinsic value does not remain untouched and integral because of objective limits. This can cause a feeling of discouragement in the creator, as outlined by an artist interviewed when discussing about the decontextualization of songs on TikTok: "if something like this would happen to me, I don't know what I would do: by one side, I would feel like I am being teased as you are changing the meaning of what I wrote and, on the other side, I would try to do something about it, I would never accept something like this, because you are decontextualizing the lyrics and you are creating a completely different meaning". There is a sense of frustration and a need of doing something to try to avoid a decontextualization of the track and its meaning. She explained that, being in the role of producer, she would participate in the conversation about the meaning and this is leading us towards another theory when it comes to define and understand the socio-cultural value of music, at the moment.

In fact, being outlined that music is in the hands of more actors, the value delivered by a track can be looked at as the result of a *discourse* so its shared understanding and desirability (Khaire, 2017), both from a social and cultural point of view (Figure 8). Therefore, the value given to a song is affected by the discourse that is generated around it by *producers* and *intermediaries* in a certain setting and TikTok is having a consistent saying on it, as it has been detected during the interviews when the sample outlined TikTok as a major actor in changes within music discovery, listening and producing.

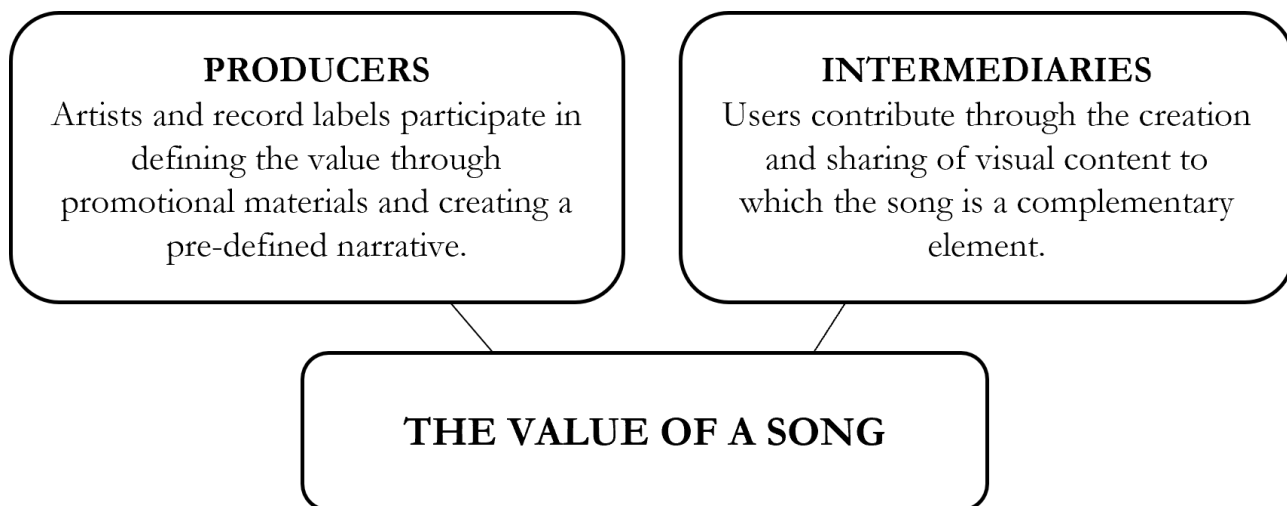


Figure 8: The value of music is defined through a *discourse* (Khaire, 2017).

On the social media platform, the main actors involved in the process are artists/record labels (*producers*) and users (*intermediaries*). In particular, artists participate in the discourse about the value of a song, using promotional materials and creating a narrative around what they have produced, generically with the support of record labels that identify the target of a track and, consequently, the proper channels to boost it. In fact, when discussing about the changes within the making process of music, record labels outlined the importance that TikTok is assuming on promotional strategies. On the other side, users support its understanding and help in defining its value through the creation and sharing of visual content. The fact of not having an economic return from its success, make them more reliable and trustworthy for the consumers. Users are intermediaries while interacting with the track on the social media platform but they are, also, consumers on music streaming platforms so their influence goes further TikTok: charts are affected. Music has a link with the private self as well as being the basis of collective and public experiences: it is shareable and that is why relate it to a visual content on TikTok is effective in designing its value and make it commonly accepted and desirable. The elements brought in the discourse by intermediaries need to be accepted by producers: previously, a representative of a record label explained that they need to adapt to what the users want as they cannot control the strategy on a social media platform like TikTok.

In building a discourse about the value of a song, a creative product, on a TikTok, some issues emerge:

1. The role of the *producers* is limited: they are not always able to participate to the value construction of the product they have manufactured. Representatives of record labels, especially, outlined that they try to set the strategy in a certain direction but, on TikTok, users, through their visual content, highly affect the value given to a song. There is an acceptance and awareness of the role of the users and their power. In fact, it has been outlined how representatives from record labels define strategies of pre-releasing on the platform as well as they adapt to what the users organically create with a sound coming from one of the track of their artists;
2. Virality and fast-delivered content reduced the span of attention given in defining the value of a track by *intermediaries*. Being TikTok a democratic tool that allows everyone to share, a huge quantity of content is delivered, but the algorithm makes it possible for users to see only a part of it for a limited amount of time. Individuals are not used anymore to take their time in understanding the value of something: the visual content created is usually an imitation more than an original. Also, an artist and active users of TikTok outlined a need of consuming quickly: "I was a huge fan of YouTube but now only looking at a video of 10 minutes is heavy to me. Once, for me, a video of 10 minutes was very short...TikTok brought many positive things concerning music but, according to me, one of the biggest and most negative ones is that now everything goes too fast". As new technologies are developing and making it all easier to produce and consume: TikTok is contributing and has a responsibility in reducing the span of attention as it provides lots of content in an easy way and within a short amount of time. Also it is affecting the making of music to which people are dedicating less time and energy: "when I open TikTok, I notice thousands of different songs by thousand of different people and I understand that we are losing the idea of having a music career, of making music". Quantity is taking over quality and consumers are losing track of what is present on the market. Certainly, it is also fault of consumers that do not actively search for more of what is offered them by the algorithm

of TikTok. As outlined by the music teacher and active user on TikTok: "there is ignorance because there is a turn off of the brain, we are less used to think and use our creativity".

In conclusion, the *discourse*, in a scenario like TikTok in order to build and set the value of a musical product, seems to be valid but highly risky for the producers, due to the increase in the power of consumers/intermediaries or for their lack of attention and time in defining the value. The main risk is that the creative product is associated with a value that is far away from what was intended by those who produced it. However, it comes naturally to ask whether cultural products are actually meant to be perceived by consumers in a very personal way. The notion of *cultural re-assessment* is considered. In fact, on the social media platform, users are defining the value of songs and artists re-assessing and re-framing them, as music, being a creative product, is supposed to be constantly re-evaluated in several contexts that generate other types of values (Negus, 1995). It is at the core of the business model of TikTok to take something as a sound and to associate it with a visual content, reassessing and reframing it into a different narrative. Also, affecting the value of a song through a visual content is not something completely new: it is not a case that some of the interviewees mentioned the case of *Running Up The Hill* by Kate Bush, used in the soundtrack of the last season of *Stranger Things*. In fact, also in this case, the song was passively consumed in the sense that consumers were lacking decision-making process and it was conveyed through a visual content. However, the attention, and therefore the value, that the consumers give to the music is different. When it comes to movies or TV series, music is usually complementary to dialogues on which the consumers focus and it is not consistently repeated. The song *Running Up The Hill* seems to be an exception: it gained popularity because it was combined with a visually high-emotional moment and it was lacking dialogue so that the focus was all on the music, just like a video on TikTok. Furthermore, its popularity was certainly influenced by TikTok whose algorithm has repeatedly pushed lots of content related to the song of Kate Bush: almost 3 million of videos have been uploaded by users.

Moreover, the music teacher outlined how music has the aim of communicating something that it is not

necessarily what the producer wanted to transmit: "...in my opinion, music is born to reach someone, in every possible way. Even if these tracks may be poor and of low quality, they arrive to a certain audience, so they reached their objective as music is meant to communicate and to get to someone". It is intrinsic in the nature of arts to be taken and translated into something else, even if in the process the intended meaning is destroyed: it is a calculated risk. Music is perceived and re-framed by listeners according to their subjectivity as all the other forms of art. Furthermore, as outlined in the literature review, it is quite common to use music and to relate it to events or causes that people want to promote or remember (remember the example of the musical *Hamilton*, discussed in the literature review, as its music had been used during protests against racism). Therefore, what TikTok is promoting is not something completely out of what people were already used to when defining the value of a song or an artist. Music has the power to influence and reflect the social and cultural setting in which individuals live and grow up: music reflects an historical period and a necessity for individuals and collectivities. In fact, an artist outlined:

Music can have several meanings but the first one that I give to it, that is very important in our social context, is that it is one of the strongest way of communicating between people and society, especially because it allows to create a connection or an empathy that, speaking as an artist, is unavoidable.

8.2 Digitalization and globalization: music is commodified or not?

TikTok can be approached as a further step in the process of digitalization that ended up in enhancing globalization. As being part of the process of digitalization, TikTok is looked at both in a dystopian and an utopian way. The former means that TikTok is approached as the latest step in the decline of human culture while the latter addresses TikTok as a way to increase socio-cultural wellbeing. From the analysis, it has emerged that these two points of view coexist in the mind of the actors involved in the music market, they are not necessarily considered as extremes. In particular TikTok has been both

highly celebrated and criticized: by one side, it gives the chance to discover music in an easier way and it makes the music market more democratic, implementing the chances for people to socially bond over its content, but, on the other side, its easiness and accessibility has been criticized as it causes the loss of relevant artists as well as the standardization of consumption and production, making consumers highly passive and implementing the chances for music to be commodified.

Therefore, by looking at TikTok as a development in the digitalization process, benefits and drawbacks are outlined. TikTok is impacting the social dimension of our reality and it is enhancing a *social contagion process*: tastes and preferences are shaped by the continuous interaction on the social media platform (Figure 9).

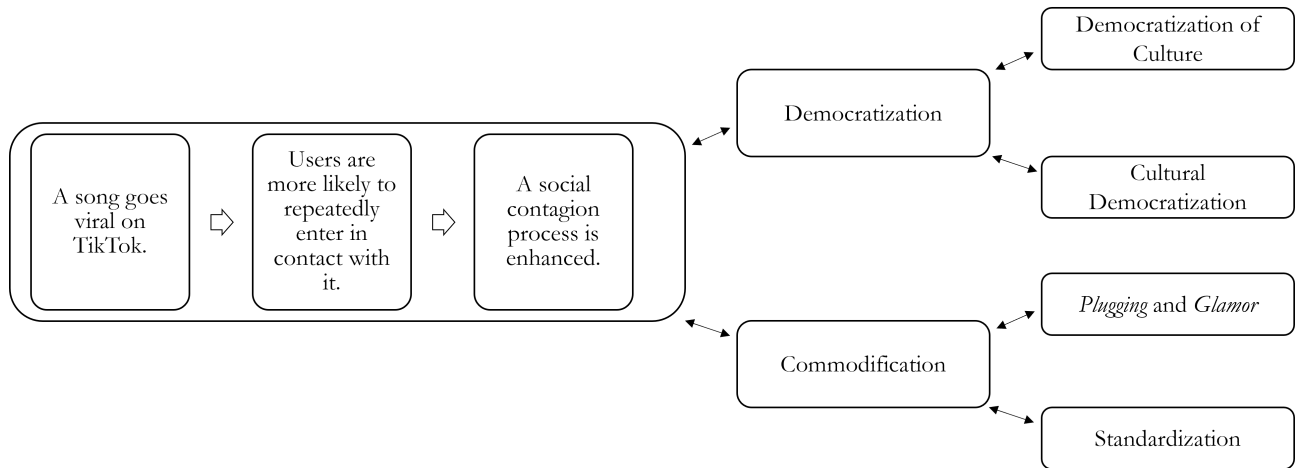


Figure 9: The causes and consequences of the *social contagion process* on TikTok.

Individuals tend to produce and consume the same musical products. Adopting an utopian perspective, TikTok is contributing to increase our socio-cultural wellbeing as music is being employed as a way of expressing ourselves, through visual content, and as a way of implementing relationships with the others. However, the more people influences each other, the more there is the risk of *demand reversal*: the musical products involved in this process ceases to be attractive and becomes mainstream. TikTok is a worldwide social media platform, everybody uses it: the social contagion process can be unlimited and can lead to the standardization of music production and consumption on a global scale and, consequently, to the loss of cultural differences and peculiarities. It is a risky homogenizing process.

To sum up, music can lose its exclusivity and cultural roots and this leads to the consideration and discussion of other two elements: *commodification* and the dichotomy *democratization of culture vs cultural democratization*.

8.2.1 The connection between commodification and democratization

Once reached the conclusion that music and society have a mutual relationship and that TikTok is enhancing this relationship while risking a global standardization in music production and consumption, it is interesting to investigate whether music is going towards *commodification*, as defined by Adorno. This point of reflection is relevant to be discussed as units within the sample have different opinions when it comes to this subject and the influence of TikTok on it. In the literature review, it has been outlined that the main issue is that the more music is commodified, the more individuals lose the critical capacity and understanding of what they are listening to. In particular, Adorno defines the *plugging* phenomenon: excessive repetition or imitation that leads listeners to become attracted by the same things, in relation to the notion of *glamor*. To sum up, he believes that popular music is appreciated only because listeners are subjected to its repetition: the more they listen to the same music, the more they recognize similar tracks to be successful when they are just a copy of previous ones. Some interviewees questioned whether their preferences are affected by the fact that they repeatedly listen to a certain artist, song or genre, as a consequence of them going viral. On TikTok, therefore, it seems the critic of Adorno is not completely out of context. However, considering his critic as right, is equal to state that the music produced nowadays is all the same for lack of creativity or critical capacity and that consumers are not able to choose. On the contrary, present tracks have similar characteristics because they reflect a certain society and a certain culture, not because they simply want to be sure of reaching a commercial success, as outlined by the music teacher: "music undergoes the social pressures, but music is also this: it is the result of sociability and the society in which we live". The influence of the context is an element that is missing within the analysis of Adorno. Musicians are directly and

indirectly influenced by the environment in which they produce and distribute their music, they can release music for economic success or for art purposes but the majority of them is trying to reach a balance between these two extremes.

In this scenario, consumers discover, listen and appreciate tracks in similar ways as they reflect their environment and culture, but they assess it in different ways: especially with TikTok, the same track is perceived and associated with different visual contents. Consumers can appreciate the same music but they still own, partially, the critical capacity to relate it to something personal: if, by one side, users create original content, TikTok enhances trends that leads to the imitation of content. At the same time, in becoming one of the major tools to be used in discovering music, TikTok is skewing the consumption towards certain tracks in respect to others and it is enhancing the laziness of individuals in searching for more content, as outlined by a representative of the record label: "it is not anymore I open Google and I search which are the most interesting albums of the last year, I just look what goes online and I decide what to listen to".

In promoting a certain kind of music, some of the interviewees put under discussion their quality. In particular, the music teacher and the artist/author promoted a balance between the artistic and discographic dimensions: the best solution to gain a positioning while keep on being authentic within the music market. Otherwise, the only alternative accepted is the artistic one: if an artist chooses to follow more the economic need than the artistic one, it is automatically classified as a non-artist or as bad quality. It is an elitist view of music: by one side we promote a democratization of culture but on the other we do not embrace all the forms in which it is declined, including the form it adopts to fit a social media platform like TikTok.

In the literature review, when discussing about dichotomies created by the advent of digitalization, a distinction between democratization of culture and cultural democratization has been made. TikTok has enhanced the democratization of culture in the sense that now everyone has equal opportunities to produce and consume, more than the cultural democratization, so the creation of social groups and

decentralized communities due to the fact that people are free in choosing which culture embrace and what to consume to represent themselves.

Democratization of culture: TikTok provides everyone with equal opportunities in consuming and producing music. Also, artists have more control on their image and identity as they do not feel the pressure of record labels. The major drawback is that, then, the music produced tends towards a certain genre or style and, therefore, the consumption. The artist can end up sacrificing the artistic side for an economic purpose, answering the demand of the market or, in this case, of TikTok. In fact, the artist/author interviewed has declared to perceive democratization as a great, but unexploited, opportunity: "it is a shame as with all the social and technological advancements, we live in a period of time where to make music is possible from your room, it is accessible to everyone and all this accessibility is not valued in the sense that it would give a great sound diversity or a great experimentation that could be beautiful. If everyone has a computer and a keyboard and can make the music they want and then they make only music that could trend on TikTok, it is a limit and it limits the potentialities of this period of time for musicians".

Cultural democratization: TikTok is promoting a certain kind of music that is quite different to define but that has certain characteristics that makes it go viral. It is not about genre or music style, there is not a specific formula when it comes to virality. However, consumers do not own the decision-making process when engaging with music on TikTok, as outlined when discussing about the difference between active and passive listening. Also, TikTok has been identified by the majority of the interviewees as the main tool, together with Spotify, when discovering and looking for music. Therefore, consumers are subjected to a certain type of music that is limited and constantly repeated: this can limit their ability to choose freely what to embrace to represent themselves and it is not a case that some of the interviewees questioned if their preferences would be different in case they would not be subjected to the repetition of the same tracks and artists. TikTok is a social media platform used on a worldwide scale and it contributes to the globalization process. It is not in the process of

enhancing a cultural democratization because it is pushing music production and consumption in a certain direction that does not make differences when it comes to cultures. Generically, trends that emerge on the platform are not limited only to a country or a certain kind of audience, but they are global. Certainly, a benefit can also emerge from this that is a major sense of feeling a citizen of the world and have more common grounds to be used when meeting new people and approaching new realities.

To sum up, Adorno would define the music discovered and heard through TikTok as commodified. However, there are too many social and cultural variables to be considered before generically defined it as a commodity more than an artistic output. TikTok is enhancing democratization of culture giving everyone the opportunity to produce and consume every kind of music, but it is not exploiting its influence on the music industry at its best, as it only promotes a certain kind of music and it is complying the laziness that characterize our society and that is due to the constant development of new social media and technologies. Therefore, it can be stated that the fault is not all on the medium, but also on the way consumers and producers are approaching it, as outlined by the music teacher interviewed: "TikTok is a part of the music, it's up to us, as consumers, to listen to older albums or artists that are not considered that much anymore on a social level but that does not mean that there is not quality and thickness in present artists. In my opinion, the fault becomes ours in depending only on what goes viral on TikTok. What goes viral, we are passively subjected to it".

The actors within the music industry have to be more curious and to become more active in discovering, listening and making music as, at the moment, they are passively accepting something that does not represent the totality of the music environment. It is a key element to avoid the commodification of music in the long run. TikTok is only a part of the music scenario, but everyone is approaching it as the rule instead of integrating it in the way the consume, produce and promote music. It is necessary to find a balance so to be sure that, while representing our culture and society, music keeps on providing us with the opportunity of evolving and changing towards new forms of art and, therefore, to better

understand who we are and who we want to be.

8.3 The music market and its new balances

The spread of TikTok is changing the music market that has to find new balances and to adapt to the new dynamics that are emerging.

The music market emerges from the relationship between four different dimensions (Khaire, 2017): consumption, commerce, culture and commentary (Figure 10).

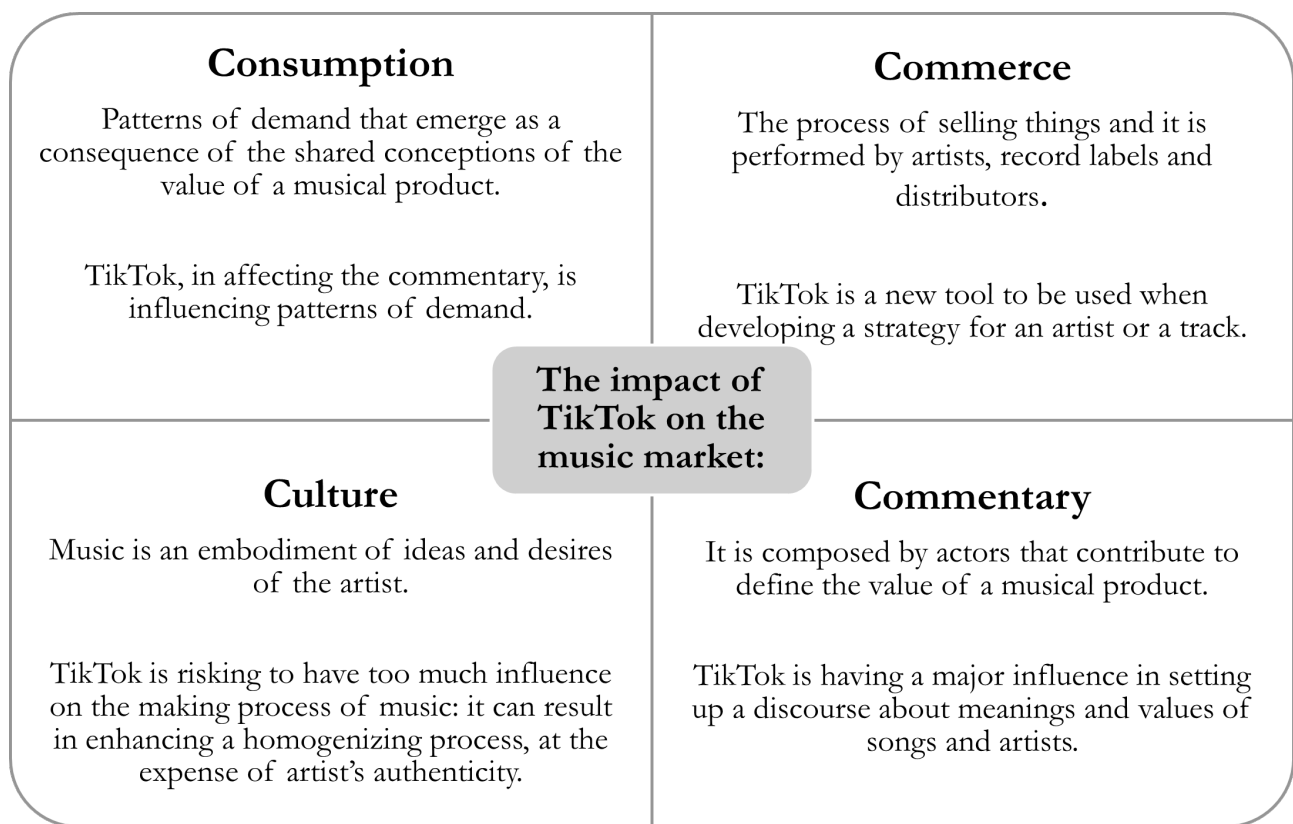


Figure 10: The changes within the four dimensions of the music market due to the spread of TikTok.

TikTok is changing, especially, the culture and the commentary in the music industry. In fact, the *commentary* dimension contributes in defining the value of a musical product and, because of digitalization, TikTok is having an influence on the way individuals are making a discourse about meanings and values of songs and artists. It is not only in the hands of critics or awards that are becoming less reliable, as they follow a top-down structure, while TikTok is promoting an horizontal and democratic

structure: it is more reliable to the eye of consumers. As it contributes in defining the shared conception of value of a musical product, TikTok is indirectly affecting, also, the *consumption* dimension, where patterns of demand emerge. The dimension of *culture*, instead, refers to the fact that music is an embodiment of ideas and desires of the artist. TikTok is risking to have too much influence on the making process of music and can end up in enhancing the releasing of homogenized music so to guarantee popularity on the platform and, consequently, an increase in streams and top positions in charts. It is affecting the *commerce* dimension as it is changing the strategic thinking behind the processes of distributing and promoting music. In conclusion, TikTok is adding new variables so the music market requires new balances within its five polarities (Lampel et al., 2000):

- Virality on TikTok has to be considered to secure an economic success as it increases the streams of a track: the artist needs to find a new compromise between artistic and discographic needs (*artistic values vs economic of mass entertainment*);
- TikTok promotes a certain kind of music so artists/record labels have to be original while keeping some familiar elements to secure popularity on the platform (*product differentiation vs market innovation*);
- On one hand, TikTok is making the demand uncertain as it does not promote a specific genre or style, on the other, it is a transparent tool that gatekeepers can use to understand users' preferences (*demand analysis vs market constructions*);
- Artists have the opportunity of producing and releasing music autonomously (*vertical integration vs flexible specialization*);
- TikTok is risking not to promote meritocracy through its algorithm (*creative systems without suppressing individual talent*).

9 Conclusions

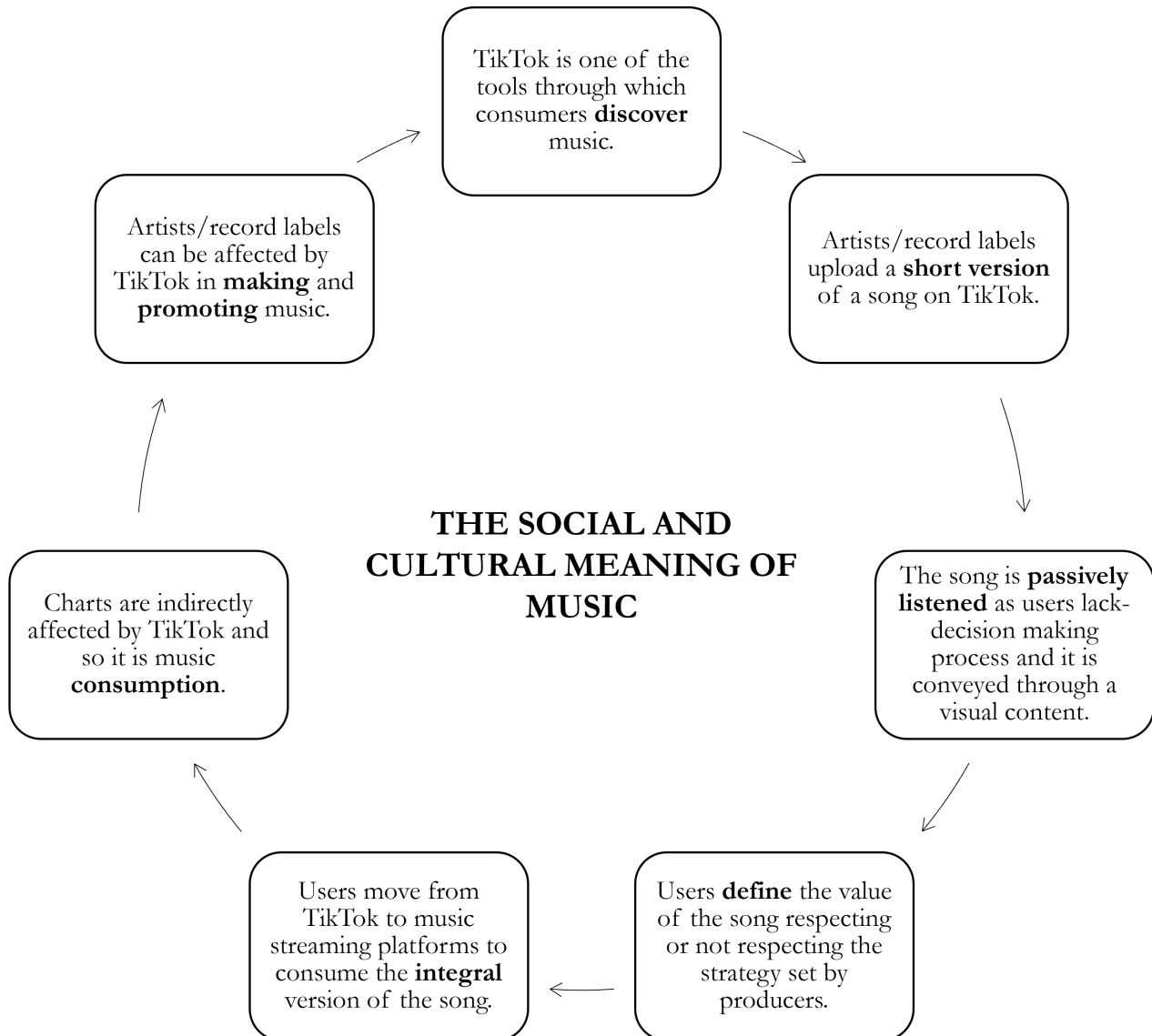


Figure 11: The social and cultural meaning of music in relation with the processes created by TikTok.

The research question aimed at detecting the changes in the social and cultural meaning of music due to the spread of TikTok. Through the analysis and the discussion, I have outlined that TikTok is changing the social and cultural value of music through its influence on three main processes of the music industry: discovery, listening and making (Figure 11). Users can discover new music and artists can be discovered without the support of record labels. Also, the latter can leverage more on their resurgent tracks. There are two main controversies: first, the perception that people have of songs

and artists they discover on TikTok, as the artistic weight can collapse, be reduced or undervalued through a visual content and, second, whether TikTok has to be perceived as a democratic tool or not, as it is true that it gives more opportunities to be discovered but, at the same time, the algorithm pushes only a certain kind of music. This has repercussions both on music consumption, as virality is shaping somehow what consumers are listening to, and on strategies implemented by gatekeepers that, in assuming people use TikTok more than any other instrument to discover new actors within the music industry, risk ignoring or promoting only certain artists, causing the loss of relevant ones. Also, I have highlighted that TikTok promotes two ways of passive listening while slightly promoting an engagement in music consumption. People are passively listening to music as they lack decision-making and consume it as a complementary activity in respect to a visual content. Also, being viral is equal to gain a position on Spotify charts as TikTok is able to increase the number of streams: therefore, people actively engage with songs they discover on TikTok when searching for their integral version. The fact that a small part of a song is passively conveyed through a visual content is risking to affect the perception of individuals: the relationship with the song can be too much influenced by the content or by a trend that asks to users more to imitate than to personally re-assess. However, even if music is approached as a background element, it is still able to enhance feelings and emotions in listeners as the visual content provides the song with a representational structure. Finally, I have outlined that artists can make music without being necessarily under record labels that are facing a decrease of their influence on the market due to the spread of TikTok. However, instead of approaching it as a threat, they exploit its marketing potentialities to promote the artists that aim at reaching a certain target. In doing so, they also accept that the users of the platform create a different visual content for their products, in respect to what they have defined through their strategies. Also, TikTok is becoming an element to evaluate when creating new songs: artists tend to think about how to structure certain parts or which keywords to use in order to increase the chances of going viral on the platform. The risk is damaging authenticity in favor of economic success enhancing homogenization and a feeling of

discouragement in the artist.

All these changes affect the social and cultural meaning of music that, at the moment, is defined not only by the artists that produce music but also by the users/consumers. Music assumes meanings that can be close or far away from the artistic intention behind the production of a certain track and that are a result of a dialogue between several actors: I have demonstrated that the theory of Khaire (2017) is effective while I have challenged the theory of Willis (1973) outlining its non-validity in such a democratic and global environment that promotes heterogeneity and fluidity in producing, consuming and assessing the value of a musical product. TikTok is breaking down all the barriers when it comes to understanding music: producers are accepting that the majority of the power in defining the meaning of a track belongs to users even if there is the risk that, being their span of attention shorter as they are subjected to lots of content, the artistic product is misunderstood or devaluated. In other words, the social media platform is pushing the always-present cultural reassessment phenomenon introduced by Negus (1995) to its extreme. In fact, I have demonstrated that the value of music is affected by the way users reassess a track together with a visual content: the song contributes in building a narrative and I have furtherly challenged the theory of Nussbaum (2003) as current music is characterized by a representational structure that is able to arouse emotions and memories.

The main problem I have detected is that TikTok is perceived as the only tool to be used when being in the process of discovering, producing and distributing music, while it should be integrated together with other medium so to keep on promoting a music style that is heterogeneous and original: I have demonstrated that it is a great tool when it comes to promote and enhance a democratic accessibility to music, but it is a risky one when it comes to maintain and provide cultural democratization. In fact, if volumes keep on increasing and songs become strictly connected to TikTok, I have outlined the risk that music complies into schemes and themes that would make it homogeneous and poorly differentiated, leading to the commodification of music as defined by Adorno and Simpson (1941). I have challenged them outlining that the relevancy of the historical period and the socio-cultural

environment in which music is produced/consumed has to be considered when it comes to assess the value provided by a musical product. However, if TikTok will become the only tool to be considered when it comes to produce and distribute music, there is the risk of standardization not in favor of a heterogeneous representation of society, but in favor of virality and the secure economic success it provides: individuals might lose their critical capacity in defining their tastes and preferences, as criticized by Adorno.

To sum up, it's up to us as, at the moment, our laziness is enhanced by the fact that we are being provided with all the technologies and all the instruments to have everything immediately. Thanks to a medium like TikTok, we have the opportunity to promote diversity and constantly create something innovative and yet, we are risking to turn an instrument of growth and novelty into an instrument of homologation, causing the loss of originality in the music industry.

9.1 *Insights for further research*

The data collected provided, also, interesting insights for further research. TikTok is affecting the music industry: what would happen if it starts to develop its own label? Also, what if it decides to enter into the music streaming platform markets? Apparently, the owner of TikTok is considering to launch a music streaming service in the USA. Moreover, noticing its importance in the discovery process of artists, it would be interesting to analyze whether it is turning into a competitor of talent shows. In conclusion, TikTok is showing to have an influence not only on the music industry but also on the consumption of other forms of entertainment; therefore, it would be interesting to investigate the changes it is bringing within, for instance, the movie and TV series industry.

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