THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK:
PROMOTION TRENDS IN MAINSTREAM POP MUSIC

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Lexie Jorgenson

Spring 2022
I, THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE,

HAVE APPROVED THIS PROSPECTUS

THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK:
PROMOTION TRENDS IN MAINSTREAM POP MUSIC

BY

Lexie Jorgenson

Kierstin Stickney (Thesis Advisor)  Department

California State University, Long Beach

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ABSTRACT

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TikTok, the social media powerhouse, has been taking the digital world by storm and serving as a catalyst for the rebirth of music marketing as we know it. The purpose of this study is to examine how music artists and labels can take advantage of TikTok as a music promotion tool. Since TikTok is a relatively new app, there is a lot to discover about the different ways artists can advertise on the platform. To complete my research, I will compare the metrics of five of the top ten songs on the Billboard 2021 Year-End Hot 100 chart versus TikTok, analyze pop artist Megan Thee Stallion’s evolution of dance challenges on TikTok, and provide research on how TikTok is making strategic business moves in the marketing industry. This research will showcase how TikTok is becoming a major contender in the marketing industry when it comes to both marketing and promotion of music. TikTok offers a unique marketing experience for their users, and by analyzing previous music marketing tactics to modern day methods, it will be clear to see how beneficial these new and improved techniques are to music artists around the world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to thank the University Honors Program and the President’s Scholars Society at California State University, Long Beach. I have grown so much in the past four years because of everything these programs have provided for me.

Thank you to my parents and the rest of my family for always pushing me to succeed both academically and personally. My parents have always been my biggest supporters, and I could not have achieved this without them. I thank my mom for motivating me and for always being my biggest cheerleader, and I thank my dad for inspiring my music taste from a very young age. Without his love for ‘70s music, I may not have been inspired to focus my thesis on the music industry today.

Lastly, I would like to thank TikTok for being both the focus of my thesis and the source of my procrastination. It has been fascinating to research and important to study as it is creating more and more cultural sensations every day.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

TikTok has generated a modern and unique music marketing and production process for artists around the world. According to Kristen Bender, SVP of digital strategy and business development at Universal Music Group, “TikTok has really become a critical part of artist storytelling” (Whateley, 2021). The music industry has been paying close attention to the immense influence TikTok has been having on songs in charts like the Billboard 100 and Spotify Viral 50. According to a study by MRC Data, “67% of the app’s users are more likely to seek out songs on music-streaming services after hearing them on TikTok” (Whateley, 2021).

Some songs have taken off on TikTok accidentally. For example, many people might remember Fleetwood Mac’s song, “Dreams”, gaining major popularity back in 2020. Nathan Apodaca, TikTok user @420doggface208, posted a video skateboarding to “Dreams” and drinking Ocean Spray Cran-Raspberry juice after his truck had broken down on his way to work. Within the first hour after being posted, the video had already reached 100,000 views (Allyn, 2020). The video, posted in early October, led to “Dreams” earning 16.1 million streams in the United States in the week ending October 15th (Garvey, 2020). While there has been a revival of classic songs through the app, artists are now formulating their new songs with the intent that they will go viral on TikTok. Artists are also using TikTok as a promotional tool to start campaigns for their new albums in fun, creative ways that will appeal to users of the platform.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The History

The way in which music has been created and distributed throughout the past 30 years has changed dramatically compared to traditional methods. A major contributor to this change is the creation of the Internet in the 1990s. Historically, the music marketing and creation process relied heavily on traditional record labels. According to Forbes, “Both creators and consumers were completely at the mercy of the labels, and music preferences were heavily influenced by whatever happened to be in circulation” (Fountain, 2021). The record label was in total control of the artist’s career including making decisions on elements such as marketing budgets and tour dates. Many people even say that artists’ creative expressions were limited by the label, and they were only to express what was seen as marketable.

As mobile phones and computers were developed and adopted in the early 2000s, music streaming sites started generating. These sites allowed access to music in an outlet different from physical record stores. This is where music consumption and creation became less censored. Music streaming sites gave listeners more freedom and power to choose what types of music they wanted to stream. However, artists were still mainly interacting with their fans only at meet-and-greets and shows (Fountain, 2021).

Once the 2010s hit, social media was evolving and showcasing a world of hope and possibilities to potential creators and listeners. This evolution broke down a barrier between the
artist and their fans. Different platforms, such as Myspace and Friendster, started developing unique features to vie for people’s attention and keep them entertained (Fountain, 2021). Myspace offered a new way for artists and fans to find each other, while also giving record labels a platform to find upcoming artists. Major artists like Panic! At the Disco, Colbie Caillat, Soulja Boy, and Arctic Monkeys gained popularity from their presence on the site. As the music marketing process has evolved, it is clear to see that it has become more personal. Music marketing has shifted from one-sided, traditional promotion. This shift has allowed consumers to participate in the conversation, and the push for authentic marketing has spawned digital communities like TikTok where consumers have the power. As artists create promotional campaigns for their new music, they are able to connect with their fans on a deeper level than ever before.

The App

The origin of TikTok stems from three separate apps. In Shanghai in 2014, the app Music.ly was launched with strong business links and a steady market in the United States (Tidy, 2020). Music.ly targeted a young audience and consisted primarily of lip-syncing and dancing. Two years later, in 2016, ByteDance, a powerful Chinese tech company, launched a similar app in China called Douyin. Within a year, this app attracted over 100 million users in China and Thailand. Due to this rapid success, ByteDance decided to expand by purchasing Music.ly in 2018, combining it with Douyin, and creating the worldwide sensation that we now know as TikTok (Tidy, 2020).

TikTok involves making and sharing short videos that can range from 15 seconds to 3 minutes long. Users can utilize different tools to make their videos, such as fun filters to amplify their visual content or music sounds to accompany their posts. Users are “strongly encouraged to
engage with other users, through ‘response’ videos or by means of ‘duets’ — users can duplicate videos and add themselves alongside” (Herrman, 2019). Hashtags also play a large role on TikTok, but they are different from hashtags on apps like Instagram or Twitter. On TikTok, hashtags provide an organizational element for trending challenges, formats, or other forms of activity. The types of videos one can make on TikTok are endless; the videos can be dances, challenges, jokes, or more.

Many people assume that TikTok users are all a part of Generation Z. However, as of September 2021, only 25% of TikTok’s active user accounts in the United States are teens. 22.4% of users are in their 20s, 21.7% of users are in their 30s, 20.3% of users are in their 40s, and 11% of users are in their 50s or above (Statista Research Department, 2022). TikTok reached 65.9 million users in the United States in 2020. The number is projected to increase by 22% each year and by 2024, TikTok is expected to have 88.7 million users in the United States alone (eMarketer, 2020). The app is growing at an extremely rapid rate, which is why it is demanding attention from many marketers. As of 2021, 61% of TikTok users in the United States are female, and 39% are male (App Ape, 2021). Another important statistic to highlight is that the most popular content category on TikTok worldwide is “Entertainment” with 535 billion hashtag views. In second place is “Dance” with 181 billion hashtag views (Mediakix, 2020). The “Entertainment” category on TikTok is by far the most popular among users, which shows how TikTok is seen as an entertainment app and attracts users interested in that category.

The Algorithm

One of the major differentiating factors between TikTok and other social media apps is its structure. While TikTok does contain the elements of following friends and commenting on posts, the app leads its users directly to the “For You” page. Other social media apps show users
their friends’ posts in their feed, but TikTok leads users straight to an algorithmic feed tailored to their interests. This core difference leads to the fact that “TikTok is more machine than man” (Herrman, 2019). TikTok’s parent company, ByteDance, is billed as an artificial intelligence company. Therefore, TikTok’s algorithm is extremely powerful. The “For You” page never runs out of material, and it is full of videos that users have demonstrated that they would like to watch, but not what they have explicitly stated they would want to watch.

The algorithm anticipates what users would enjoy watching based on previous content they have engaged with. According to Hannah Towey from Business Insider, “TikTok said the three main factors fueling its recommendation system are user interactions, video information, and device and account settings” (2021). However, the major contributor to the algorithm is when TikTok tracks how long a user hovers over certain videos and knows when they watch something twice — even if they don’t directly interact with the content (Towey, 2021). Every time a user hesitates or rewatches a video, the app tracks it and understands the user’s hidden interests and emotions. Then, the algorithm will drive the user down a rabbit hole of content that is hard to escape (Wall Street Journal, 2021). When a new user joins the platform, TikTok will use their location to help formulate what videos it will show. The algorithm will typically show an array of very popular videos with millions of views and likes. After seeing what types of videos the new user spends the most time watching and rewatching, TikTok starts to personalize the content to fit the user’s interests more and more (Wall Street Journal, 2021).

The “For You” page also shows content that the app thinks can go viral; this portrays the idea that no matter the following of the creator, good content has the potential to go viral (Tidy and Smith Galer, 2020). The secret to TikTok “lies in its use of music and an extraordinarily powerful algorithm, which learns what content users like to see far faster than many other apps”
TikTok also goes “beyond real-life social graphs to algorithmically match different sounds to targeted audiences based on aggregated listener data (Yao, 2020). TikTok’s algorithm is extremely complex and dynamic. There are so many factors that tailor to curating the user’s experience in the app, which makes it easy to understand why TikTok is such an influential promotional tool in the music industry.

The Production

TikTok moves at such a rapid pace and enables a video to go viral practically overnight. Since music is at the core of almost every single TikTok that is posted, artists must understand how to produce their songs so that they have the potential to go viral on TikTok. Craig Marks, co-author from MTV and former Billboard editor states that “instead of major artists getting guaranteed airplay, the stars on TikTok aren’t the artists themselves — who are largely absent from the clips that make their songs successful — but rather influencers like Addison Rae and Charli D’Amelio... who spark the songs’ virality with their popular dance videos (Unterberger, 2020). For their song to organically gain exposure, musicians are inclined to create songs for popular TikTok influencers to create dances to. When influencers, like Charli D’Amelio, who have enormous followings dance to a song, the awareness of the song increases incredulously.

Savvy artists have started to pay attention to this trend and attempt to capitalize on it by inputting music cues or TikTok-friendly dances into their songs and videos (Yao, 2020). Even though this does not ensure that the song will become an overnight success, it definitely increases its chances. Many artists, especially rappers, have written lyrics that reference popular TikTok trends with the hope that it will help the song gain steam on the app (Whateley, 2021). To exemplify, a rapper named The Kid LAROI titled one of his songs “Addison Rae” to reference
the popular TikToker. The song went viral on TikTok as Addison Rae created content to the sound, and it gained appreciation from her dedicated followers.

A few key elements to songs that have gained traction on TikTok are memorable lyrics, danceable beats, and bass drops (Monroy Yglesias, 2019). Since the audio content of TikToks are typically the songs themselves rather than the user singing or talking over it, songs that contain clever or quotable lyrics tend to be the most successful. In order for their songs to become a hit, it is also important for artists to incorporate catchy bars that “hook people in and allow them to use their bodies and facial expressions—from dance moves, costume changes, creative makeup and more—to put themselves in the song” (Monroy Yglesias, 2019).

It is important to note that the greatest songwriters from previous generations used their songs to make an impact on culture and society with elaborate storytelling. Now, most users seek out “4-16 bars that make an immediate impression on listeners” (Monroy Yglesias, 2019). So-called “random” songs are now able to become hits on TikTok. For example, “oddball pop songs like BENEE’s ‘Supalonely’ to nontraditional rap tracks like Sada Baby’s electro-fied ‘Whole Lotta Choppas’ have been able to take the TikTok world by storm” (Unterberger, 2020). Artists are now strongly urged to use their creative minds to implement unique elements to their songs that will help them stand out among other songs on the app.

The Promotion

While many songs do have the potential to go viral on their own, many songs that may seem to blow up out of nowhere are actually backed by carefully curated marketing strategies. TikTok offers “a unique platform for music to live while enabling artists to promote their music to a global audience, build a strong fanbase and potentially break a song” (Paine, 2019). There has never been an app structured like TikTok before. TikTok plays a huge role in affecting the
music society listens to today. Since TikTok fans and users play such a vital role in determining which songs gain popularity on the app, the way labels and artists are marketing their music has changed dramatically. The fans choose what songs they like, and the labels must react to that (Unterberger, 2020). Promoting albums is less premeditated than it ever has been before, because artists do not know which song from their album will go viral first, or when. According to Corey Sheridan, TikTok’s head of music partnerships and content operations, “With the way the internet works, you can create a video and be famous within two hours if it pops off” (Unterberger, 2020). This has made music marketing much more challenging due to the fact that these moments of viral success happen significantly quicker than they ever have before.

These out-of-the-blue viral songs may actually occur less often than premeditated music marketing campaigns do. According to Bloomberg, “Company executives help determine which videos go viral, which clips appear on the pages of personalized recommendations, and which trends spill out from the app to flood the rest of the world” (Banjo, 2021). TikTok is more than a social media app, it withhelds a carefully curated algorithm. Bloomberg also notes that “TikTok regularly advises popular creators on which hashtags and features are important to the app and its advertisers, who are often guaranteed a minimum number of views per campaign” (Banjo, 2021). Major users receive emails from TikTok instructing them which videos they should make in order to increase their exposure. The app connects their popular creators with brands or musicians who they fit into the target market of, and this generally results in paid partnerships (Banjo, 2021). Many users are naive to this business side of TikTok, and they do not realize how calculated different flourishing trends, songs, and dances actually are.

Influencers play an essential part in many music marketing campaigns that occur on TikTok. Advertising Age states, “A major component of TikTok is the slew of creators who
quickly amassed followings. Most brands that have launched hashtag challenges have also paid influencers to get the ball rolling” (Liffreing, 2020). Many TikTok users have millions of followers who religiously watch every move of the creator. These users are highly influential, and they are valuable assets to whatever brand they work with. On TikTok, “instead of posting comments, people will see a video, and they will emulate that video with their own personal style or twist” (Liffreing, 2020). This unique feature is great for starting music campaigns on the app. Since TikTok is used as a dance platform for many of their users, making sure artists’ songs are the backbone of these trending dances can be extremely beneficial for song recognition. The different ways that music can be promoted through TikTok are endless, and this phenomenon is only beginning.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Steps

In order to comprehend how TikTok is influencing promotion trends in mainstream pop music, the first step in my analysis is to compile a list of relevant literature addressing the workings of TikTok, the marketing of music within the app, and the success of past artists on the platform. After gathering credible literature pieces, the next step is to study artists’ success on TikTok and how they have marketed themselves, and their music, to their fans. Artists’ success in the music industry will be measured as a whole and within TikTok itself. First, I will make a table that studies 5 of the top 10 songs from the Billboard 2021 Year-End Hot 100 Chart. The *Billboard* chart uses MRC Data to formulate its rankings. MRC Data is a provider of music sales data to the music business and consumers. I will analyze how these songs performed on the chart, in Spotify, and within TikTok itself. The goal is to see whether there is a correlation between a song’s TikTok performance and its overall rankings in the music industry. The songs I will analyze are Dua Lipa’s “Levitating,” The Weeknd’s “Blinding Lights,” Olivia Rodrigo’s “Good 4 U,” Doja Cat featuring SZA’s “Kiss Me More,” and Silk Sonic’s “Leave the Door Open.” In order to provide as accurate numbers as possible, I am choosing songs that were all on *Billboard’s* chart in 2021 and used on TikTok. The table I will be using follows.
Table 2: Correlation Between TikTok and The Music Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Billboard 2021 Year-End Hot 100 Ranking</th>
<th>Spotify Monthly Listeners</th>
<th>Spotify Streams</th>
<th>TikTok Sound Uses</th>
<th>TikTok Hashtag Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia Rodrigo, “Good 4 U”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doja Cat Featuring SZA, “Kiss Me More”</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk Sonic, “Leave the Door Open”</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, I will look at three different TikTok dance challenges utilizing songs from Megan Thee Stallion. I will explore how these challenges evolved over time and how they were formulated. Lastly, I will be analyzing TikTok’s in-house music team and studying the strategic business moves the company has made. The goal is to measure how TikTok is growing as a promotional tool in the music industry.

Sources & Database Review

I am utilizing library databases such as Business Source Premier, Statista, Global Newstream, Academic Search Complete, and ABI/Inform. These databases provide up-to-date, scholarly information about TikTok. The database, Global Newstream, allows access to articles from *The Rolling Stone* and the database, ABI/Inform, contains articles from *Business Insider*. 
Credible and educational sources on TikTok can be difficult to find since it is such a new and evolving platform. I am utilizing many scholarly articles from *The Rolling Stone, Billboard,* and *Business Insider,* because they contain reliable information from trustworthy journalists and authors. As another source, I will also be researching the analytics of specific TikTok statistics related to the campaigns I am studying.

**Secondary Research Review**

I will be using secondary research for this study. Secondary research is research involving the analysis and synthesis of data that has previously been collected through primary research. Due to this, secondary research can often be completed more quickly and at a lesser cost. However, it may be more difficult to find relevant scholarly articles that will help answer my research question. In secondary research, a researcher may often come across outdated sources, lack of quality data, and incomplete information. This may be a problem in my study since TikTok is a new platform that is developing and changing at such a rapid pace.

**Primary Research Considerations**

If I were to continue my thesis beyond graduation, I would utilize primary research methods such as interviews and surveys. I think it would be beneficial to interview professionals in the music industry in order to understand how they view TikTok as a promotional platform and what their strategies are when promoting new music. These professionals could include artists, executives at labels, and TikTok employees. I would also like to create a survey to send out to a variety of individuals. The survey would aim to understand the consumption patterns of TikTok users. The questions would attempt to recognize how users view music marketing campaigns on the app and which methods are the most effective.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The Rankings

*Billboard*, an eight-page magazine, dates back to 1894 in which it was “devoted to the interests of advertisers, poster printers, bill posters, advertising agents & secretaries of fairs” (Trust, 2019). Over time, *Billboard* evolved as the entertainment business progressed from circuses and carnivals to recorded music consumption. *Billboard’s* first top 10 singles chart was created on July 27, 1940. As time went on, *Billboard* created various types of charts and continued to update their methodology so that song rankings incorporated all elements of music consumption (Trust, 2019). *Billboard’s* goal with releasing their charts has consistently been to reflect the most popular music in the United States.

The Billboard Hot 100 is a mixed-data chart. Therefore, it combines sales, airplay, and streaming data to properly rank the top 100 songs. Sales information compiles “MRC Data from a universe of retailers that represents more than 90% of the U.S. music retail market” (*Billboard*, 2021). The sample includes music stores, music departments at electronics and department stores, direct-to-consumer transactions, and Internet sales. Internet sales include ones bought via digital downloads as well as physical albums bought via the Internet. According to *Billboard*, “The MRC Data system utilizes that same point-of-sale that music merchants use to track their inventory, so an itemized receipt from one’s last visit to a music retailer essentially doubles as a ballot cast for our charts” (2021).
When it comes to airplay, MRC Data is also used to track over 140 different radio stations spanning the United States. *Billboard* notes that the “MRC Data system looks for an audio fingerprint, i.e. a characteristic that differentiates a song from all of the other ones that it tracks” (2021). Airplay charts can either be based on the number of times a song is played in a given format or based on audience impressions. The audience charts “cross-reference MRC Data information with listener information compiled by the Nielsen Audio ratings system to determine the approximate number of audience impressions made for each play” (*Billboard*, 2021). For example, a song that is played at two in the morning does not count as much as a song that is played at two in the afternoon. Also, a popular radio station with many listeners has more influence on the charts than a station with a smaller audience.

Streaming data comes from highly-streamed songs on the radio and on-demand songs and videos that stream on leading online music services. *Billboard’s* chart legend notes, “On-Demand Songs ranks the top on-demand play requests and plays from listener-controlled radio channels on leading music subscription services” (2021). Examples of these leading music subscription services would be Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora, Tidal, SiriusXM, and more. For the Billboard Hot 100 chart, *Billboard* uses “these three pools of data because while the consumer’s decision to purchase or stream is a significant vote of popularity, singles have a job that extends beyond being a sales vehicle: to capture radio play and streams and, hopefully, stimulate album sales” (2021). The Billboard Hot 100 chart offers a holistic view of the most successful songs of the year. Its rankings are backed by extensive research and data to provide an accurate understanding of the most popular singles.

In 2020, 90 songs that trended on TikTok were in the Billboard Hot 100 chart. TikTok reported that 176 songs exceeded a billion views in 2020. Drake’s “Tootsie Slide” was the
quickest to reach a billion views on the platform; it only took three days. “WAP” was the second fastest song to reach a billion views, and it took two weeks. According to *The Rolling Stone*, “The top 10 songs in TikTok’s year-end roundup accounted for a combined 50 billion views across 125 million videos” (Millman, 2020). These songs performed well off of TikTok as well. It is clear to see that there is a correlation between trending TikTok songs and rankings on the music industry’s standard record charts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Billboard 2021 Year-End Hot 100 Ranking</th>
<th>Spotify Monthly Listeners</th>
<th>Spotify Streams</th>
<th>TikTok Sound Uses</th>
<th>TikTok Hashtag Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dua Lipa, “Levitating”</td>
<td>#1</td>
<td>66,407,679</td>
<td>449,857,094</td>
<td>1.2M</td>
<td>5.3B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Weeknd, “Blinding Lights”</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>79,215,429</td>
<td>2,830,051,758</td>
<td>1.6M</td>
<td>4.1B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia Rodrigo, “Good 4 U”</td>
<td>#5</td>
<td>42,504,637</td>
<td>1,292,759,789</td>
<td>2.2M</td>
<td>3.4B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doja Cat Featuring SZA, “Kiss Me More”</td>
<td>#6</td>
<td>55,960,158</td>
<td>1,069,240,599</td>
<td>2.3M</td>
<td>670.0M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk Sonic, “Leave the Door Open”</td>
<td>#7</td>
<td>20,446,797</td>
<td>751,886,059</td>
<td>1.6M</td>
<td>822.5M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This figure examines the correlation between chart rankings, streaming numbers, and TikTok data of five of the top ten songs in the Billboard 2021 Year-End Hot 100 chart. All five
of these songs have extremely high TikTok sound uses and hashtag views. The number of hashtag views correspond to the song’s ranking on the Billboard Top 100 chart. These five songs also have a high number of streams on the music-streaming app, Spotify. All five artists have millions of monthly listeners on Spotify.

Dua Lipa’s “Levitating” triumphed as the number 1 hit on Billboard’s 2021 Year-End Hot 100 Songs chart. The hashtag had over five billion views on the TikTok platform. “Levitating” was originally released in March of 2020 and a remix of the song featuring DaBaby was released in October of 2020. Please note that some statistics may not be representative of “Levitating” because the sound, “Levitating (feat. DaBaby),” has 590.3K sound uses. The original and remixed versions are often used interchangeably.

Even though both versions of the song were released in 2020, its success on the Billboard charts was fueled by a resurgence on TikTok due to her Grammys performance and a new meme on the platform (Reimann, 2021). Dua performed “Levitating” with DaBaby at the Grammys on March 14, 2021. TikTok stated that “a new trend emerged in April where users created memes using a clip of the song with the lyrics: ‘You Want Me, I Want You Baby’” (Reimann, 2021). Dua Lipa took advantage of this trend by participating in it herself when she posted a video after her glamorous performance at the 2021 Brit Awards. Her participation in the trend only accelerated the growth of her song on the platform. Even though these memes gained seemingly random success, “Dua Lipa partnered with TikTok on promoting ‘Levitating,’ including a music video released in December solely based on TikTok videos, with ‘thousands of TikTok creators from around the world’ auditioning to appear in it” (Reimann, 2021). The TikTok app also launched the #LevitatingChallenge to encourage users to show off their own dance moves to the
song. #LevitatingChallenge currently has 46.6 million views on TikTok. Dua and her label took advantage of using TikTok as an advertising platform to gain viral success and awareness.

The Weeknd’s “Blinding Lights” had a dance challenge randomly created for the song that then went viral on TikTok. Users across the app were trying out the dance for themselves, and #BlindingLightsChallenge currently has 516.5 million views on the platform. The remaining three songs have been heavily used on the app. These numbers show TikTok popularity is a major influence on the overall performance of a song when it comes to sales, airplay, and streaming.

The Artist

While many music artists have found success on the platform, Megan Thee Stallion is a modern-day hip hop sensation who knows how to use TikTok to her advantage. The Houston native has released six albums in the past five years, and she has quickly risen to fame with the help of three viral TikTok challenges centered around the songs “Savage,” “WAP,” and “Body.” Her song “Savage” seemed to rise to fame spontaneously on TikTok. However, this virality was actually backed by a savvy marketing campaign curated by Megan’s label and TikTok’s management team.

TikTok is a very controlled app in comparison to other social media platforms, and Megan Thee Stallion’s label planned their promotion strategy. According to Shelly Banjo, “Company executives help determine which videos go viral, which clips appear on the pages of personalized recommendations, and which trends spill out from the app to flood the rest of the world” (2021). Initially, Megan’s label chose her song “Captain Hook” to be the focus of their campaign, but TikTok urged the label to test the metrics of five different songs on the platform prior to deciding. TikTok users instantly took to her song “Savage” instead and started saving the
song to their private “sounds” folder (Banjo, 2021). When users save a sound to their private folder, they intend to use the sound later to make their own TikTok video with it. Isabel Quinteros Annous, the head of TikTok’s music partnerships, stated that “TikTok deliberately let the song ‘simmer’ on the app for a number of days before placing it in the all-important playlists and banner ads at the top of its search page and sound library, where users select music for videos” (Banjo, 2021). The sudden virality of the song may have seemed coincidental to users, but it was actually quite the opposite.

In fact, Banjo writes, “TikTok regularly advises popular creators on which hashtags and features are important to the app and its advertisers, who are often guaranteed a minimum number of views per campaign” (2021). Popular TikTok creators, such as Charli D’Amelio and Addison Rae, are given a heads up about what types of videos they should be making in order to be successful. TikTok even connects their popular creators with different brands or musicians, and these collaborations will often become paid partnerships.

Megan Thee Stallion released her song “Savage” on March 6, 2020 along with her EP “Suga.” Within its first week on the market, the song had already accumulated millions of streams. Just four days after its release, an unplanned promotion fell into Megan’s lap when TikTok user @keke.janajah furthered the song’s success by choreographing a personalized dance to it. She continued to upload dance videos for five more days with #SavageChallenge in the captions. Quickly, the challenge blew up and became a viral sensation. Just one month later, Megan released a remix of the song featuring Beyoncé. TikToker, @keke.janajah, created another dance to earn millions of people’s attention (Appello, 2020). Currently, #SavageChallenge has 1.7 billion views on TikTok.
On August 7, 2020, “WAP” was released by American rapper Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion. “WAP” broke several records “including the highest streaming first week by a female artist and top 3 hip-hop streaming debuts of all time” (Appello, 2020). “WAP” debuted as No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and hit a billion views across TikTok in just two weeks. The song’s virality was accelerated due to the platform. According to Business Insider Australia, “rapper Megan Thee Stallion has perhaps the most memorable verse -- at least, it seems that way given the sheer number of TikTok mashups including her vocals” (Haasch, 2020). The song quickly became a cultural phenomenon, especially on TikTok. Megan’s verse stands out because “it’s fast-paced, falls directly on beat, and moves with a confidence that makes it incredibly catchy” (Haasch, 2020). Its catchy beat and verse makes it easy for people to choreograph dances to. A young YouTube choreographer, Brian Esperon, crafted an iconic dance routine to the song just a few hours after the song dropped, and the choreography went viral overnight (Appello, 2020). Top celebrities and influencers started posting themselves performing the choreography with #WAP and #WAPChallenge in the captions. Currently, #WAPChallenge has 4 billion views. Both “Savage” and “WAP” ranked in the top 25 songs on Billboard’s 2020 Year-End Hot 100 Songs chart.

After successful dance challenges in the past, Megan Thee Stallion took matters into her own hands when creating the music video for her song “Body.” On November 20, 2020, Meg Thee Stallion released her new music video along with her album “Good News.” According to Appello, “With her latest album release, “Good News,” Megan has acquired a third viral dance challenge all on her own accord. Upon releasing her music video for the album’s lead single, “Body,” Megan incorporated her own eye-grabbing choreography into the video, and millions of fans had to try it out for themselves” (2020). By this time, Megan knew that there were tactics
she could use to appeal to her fans on TikTok, and that was largely through dance. After fans of her songs unintentionally created viral dance challenges, Megan created one for herself. The #BodyChallenge and #BodyodyChallenge acquired rapid success on the platform. The challenges have acquired 1.4 billion and 508.1 million views, respectively. “Body” ranked as No. 54 in Billboard’s 2021 Year-End Hot 100 Songs chart.

According to TikTok, they stated that they “operate best when we are both proactive and reactive in marketing both artists and content” (Millman, 2020). TikTok is able to combine organic and paid campaigns in order to catapult an artist’s success. This can be seen through Megan Thee Stallion’s viral singles on the app including “Savage,” “WAP,” and “Body.” According to The Rolling Stones, “TikTok’s music team prides itself on fanning the flames on potential hits and helping turn songs into cultural moments” (Millman, 2020). While Meg The Stallion’s catchy lyrics and stand-out beats did help her gain traction, the organic, paid, and algorithmic aspects of TikTok did the rest. Meghan Thee Stallion was the most listened-to artist in 2020, and a lot of that credit stems from TikTok.

The In-House Music Team

It is no question that music is an integral part of TikTok videos. TikTok has created their own in-house music team to monitor the success of songs. Business Insider notes, “TikTok also has an internal music division dedicated to monitoring music trends on the app. The team has a series of "promo levers" it uses to boost the popularity of songs. The company can add new tracks to playlists in the "Sounds" section of its app and apply keywords on the back end to optimize song discoverability in the app's search interface” (Whateley, 2022). The calculated processes behind a “viral” challenge or dance is all due to the in-house team. They analyze data
to discover which songs should blow up. Business Insider attributes the company’s music operations and artist- and label-relations employees as “industry tastemakers.”

The platform also takes into consideration the priorities of record labels and artists. Many labels have taken advantage of using influencer marketing and advertising campaigns on the app. Corey Sheridan, TikTok's head of music-content operations for North America, told Business Insider, “We have dedicated points of contact for all of the labels, and we work very closely with them to understand what their priorities are” (Whateley, 2020). TikTok monitors patterns in their users’ videos to track songs that are gaining popularity and therefore, should receive more in-app exposure. Sheridan also notes that songs that receive viral status are the ones that resonate with the TikTok community. For example, Megan Thee Stallion’s single, “Savage,” took off on the platform, despite her label’s initial plans to promote a different song on her album, “Captain Hook.” Isabel Quinteros, TikTok's senior manager of music partnerships and artist relations advised Megan’s label by saying, “Let's see what our community is really gravitating towards, and then let's pull our levers against that particular track,' which in fact came to be 'Savage'” (Whateley, 2020). TikTok’s in-house music team works with labels to ensure that their artists find success on the promotional platform.

Not only has the app created full-time positions dedicated to music, but they have also entered into licensing deals with major record labels including Sony, Warner, and Universal. TikTok entered into a licensing deal with Sony Music in 2020. Ole Oberman, TikTok’s global head of music, stated, “Especially during this time when the artist community is challenged to find new ways to reach fans with their music, we are committed to working together to do just that” (Millman, 2020). TikTok has entered into these deals in order to work together with the rosters of these large labels and connect them to global audiences. Sony Music’s president of
global digital business and U.S. sales said, “Short form video clips have developed into an exciting new part of the music ecosystem that contribute to the overall growth of music and the way fans experience it” (Millman, 2020). Large record labels, like Sony, have started to catch on to the trends stemming from TikTok. By partnering with TikTok, labels will be able to support their roster of artists, diversify their music marketing strategies, and drive music discovery. Some major artists on Sony’s roster are Beyoncé, Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys, and OutKast.

TikTok entered into a new pact with Warner Music Group in early 2021. The licensing deal encompassed both its recorded music division and Warner Chappell publishing division. The agreement “will increase WMG’s fees for song rights and ramp up the company’s collaborations with the booming social app” (Eggertsen, 2021). Warner Music Group’s artist roster includes Dua Lipa, Lizzo, Ed Sheeran, Cardi B, and Coldplay. Many of these artists are already utilizing TikTok to brand themselves on a more personal level with their fans. The record label made a strategic marketing move by creating this deal with TikTok.

In 2021, TikTok also announced a new deal with Universal Music Group. They released a statement which said, “TikTok users will be more empowered than ever to express themselves through music, soundtrack their video creations with songs about which they are passionate and build communities around artists and music-centered culture” (Hutchinson, 2021). TikTok’s guarantee to record labels is that they will turn the record’s artists into someone to talk about. TikTok will use its algorithm in the artists’ favor in order to ensure success and virality. The company’s statement also noted, “TikTok users will now be able to incorporate clips from UMG’s full catalog of music, spanning the company’s iconic labels, songwriters and global territories” (Hutchinson, 2021). The licensing deals enable TikTok users the freedom to use
whatever songs they want in their videos. Universal Music Group’s roster includes Kanye West, Lady Gaga, and Rihanna.

Labels have seen how quickly one viral clip can turn a song into a worldwide phenomenon. Due to this, they are motivated to get their artists’ music on TikTok, the newest music promotion app. TikTok will benefit from these partnerships because they will be able to create a direct relationship with large music companies and their artists. Their move to make licensing deals with the top record labels shows their determination to partner with each group in order to enrich the overall value they can provide to their catalog of artists.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

From these results, it is clear to see that there is a large correlation between an artist’s success in the music industry based on their success within TikTok itself. The TikTok app has capitalized on this obvious correlation by creating their own in-house music division that advises how record labels and artists should promote their music based on metrics within the app. The team strategically partnered the app with major record labels as TikTok’s effectiveness in the music industry has become more notable. Artists, such as Megan Thee Stallion, have worked with the TikTok music division to effectively promote their music on the app and gain awareness. These artists have learned ways to hack the TikTok algorithm by crafting songs and music videos with catchy beats and iconic moves.

Since artists’ songs that do well on TikTok also do well on Billboard charts, artists should start designing their music with TikTok in mind if they want to create a hit. TikTok has created an interactive community between users and artists, so it is imperative that artists get their music on the app in seemingly organic ways. The platform has created a participatory culture that inspires user-generated content. This content, such as dances, music covers, and more, drives further sales, engagement, and streams for music artists. Social media is no longer a medium for one-way communication. TikTok has blazed the trail for a new social media experience in which users can consume and enjoy music in a whole new way.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

With “Entertainment” and “Dance” as the two most popular content categories on the app, music is the backbone of almost every single TikTok video that is made. The music marketing process has shifted from a traditional, proactive approach to a more modern, reactive approach. Instead of record labels pushing out an album, the TikTok music team advises record labels to react to the songs to which users have the most favorable response. The unique algorithm belonging to the app showcases the “For You” page as the first thing a user sees upon opening the app. This rabbit hole of videos curated to users’ likings encourages people to discover new things and therefore, music.

There are strong linkages between artists’ performance on TikTok and their performance in music charts and streaming sites. TikTok has created their own in-house music team to garner deals with major record labels. These partnerships were put in place to develop new music experiences and expand opportunities for artists. The app has been aware of the cultural phenomenon they have made on the music industry, so they are doing everything they can to keep this success evolving.

TikTok has spearheaded a new form of music marketing and promotion. The structure of the app allows for overnight viral success, while also allowing for carefully curated promotions to take place behind the scenes. To further this study, I would recommend surveying TikTok users to better understand their consumption habits on the app. TikTok’s unique music marketing
process has created a new and exciting way for artists and fans to connect from all corners of the world, and artists must react to this shift if they want their music to succeed.
REFERENCES


