

How Does TikTok Afford Success to Niche Songs?

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Abstract

We were curious as to why certain songs with specific, non-mainstream followings (“niche” songs) were gaining sudden popularity on TikTok, and wanted to know by what means the app was able to grant such songs their popularity. After scouting out some press articles, we determined that this topic area was popular, with frequent debates and observations being made regarding small-time artists finding new success, licensing and copyright gray areas that TikTok operates within, and the impact of the app on the music industry. However, despite the popular press interest, we found that very little formal research existed on TikTok and its effects. A thorough perusal of current and older literature revealed the theoretical framework on which we based our research: affordance theory. Basing our approach off of different techniques from other studies, we conducted a textual analysis of six songs that became popular on TikTok, scrutinizing the songs themselves, the memes and trends with which they were associated, the design of TikTok itself and its influence on the songs, and the reactions of TikTok commenters and YouTube commenters to the songs’ popularity. We uncovered many design-based affordances within TikTok itself that we concluded to be contributors to the popularity of the songs. In addition, we uncovered strong tonal undercurrents among YouTube and TikTok comments, the former being riddled with caustic bitterness while the latter was more neutral-positive in tone. We also revealed that many of the niche songs were rather strongly linked to memes and trends thanks to TikTok, causing the songs and memes to become almost exclusively associated with one another. In our conclusion, we acknowledge that conducting a textual analysis of this sort provides a good broad view of the area, but further research should involve in-depth interviews for more detailed analysis. In addition, we conclude that these are not the only affordances that TikTok grants, and that the popularity of these songs cannot be determined by affordances alone.

Introduction

In a 2021 interview with Paste Magazine, the band “Life Without Buildings” expressed everything from confusion, to surprise, to elation and gratitude over their unexpected pop cultural reemergence facilitated by TikTok (Martin 2021). Their single “The Leanover,” released in 2000, became one of a multitude of alternative pop and rock songs to be discovered by the TikTok user base, and quickly found new life as the soundtrack to memes, dance videos, makeup tutorials, and other forms of TikTok content. While the band themselves may have been pleasantly surprised and “gratified” by their newfound popularity, the author of the article presents the phenomenon of a late-stage indie hit on TikTok as unsurprising, given its “well-established” track record of breathing new life into older songs (Martin 2021). It is with this sentiment that we decided to more closely examine the way TikTok propels songs into popularity.

Ever since (and even before) Montero Hill broke Billboard chart records under the name Lil’ Nas X with his TikTok-popular novelty song, “Old Town Road,” the app has been a central focus among musicians, fans, producers, and media outlets alike (Leight 2019). While the story of “Old Town Road ” is undoubtedly the most well-known, cases like that of Life Without Buildings prove that TikTok’s reach can affect artists of any genre and time period. Such songs can go from relatively unknown to “omnipresent smashes” so long as they possess the appropriate qualities for use in content creation (e.g., “Old Town Road” owed much of its success to the “Yee-Haw Challenge,” a TikTok meme trending at the time of its release) (Chow 2019; Leight 2019). Once a song gains a boost from TikTok, the repercussions can be seen, heard, and felt throughout the rest of the internet, as evidenced by artists like Bring Me The

Horizon remixing their recently-rediscovered track “Can You Feel My Heart?” under the justification that TikTok “made [them] do it” (Bring Me The Horizon, 2021).

These memes stay fresh in the minds (and feeds) of TikTok’s user base thanks to an oft-credited technical element in TikTok’s programming that allows for songs to spike in popularity: its unique algorithm (Leight 2019). Unlike YouTube’s algorithm, which promotes videos by popular content creators, TikTok focuses on highlighting new content by creators of varying size. It promotes videos based on how much time users spend watching them, and recommends videos to the friends of anyone who watches a video multiple times (Leight 2019). How big a hand this algorithm plays in the popularization of certain songs is still unclear; however, understanding its function and role is essential in figuring out how TikTok popularizes songs, even if it is only part of the equation.

It must also be noted that this phenomenon is not without its controversy. Cases such as Life Without Buildings’ represent the positive side of TikTok success; however, there are plenty of cases in which smaller artists are not given appropriate credit for the success their music has earned (Chow 2019). Combined with the legal contention surrounding TikTok’s questionable licensing and royalties practices, it becomes apparent that not every story of song popularity is a positive one (Chow 2019). This is also reflected in the mixed-to-negative reactions of general users regarding the use of specific songs on TikTok. Top comments on a lyric video for the recently TikTok-famous Boa song “Duvet” fume with rage at its discovery by younger internet users who, according to the song’s older fans, do not understand the meaning of the song (Matrix Sound, 2021). This is one of many examples of such reactions, and the variety of these responses works in tandem with the eclectic and seemingly random nature of the popularization of songs to spark our interest in this situation. Digging deeper into scholarly literature on TikTok, music in

the digital age, and social media in general will help inform research into the ways that songs find new popularity on the platform. In doing so, we may even learn more about why fans across platforms react in varying ways, and if said reactions have any influence on the popularity of the song.

Literature Review

What became immediately apparent upon beginning the research process was the staggering lack of existing research on our topic. We somewhat expected this, as TikTok is still a relatively new force in social media (albeit a strong one, given the rampant press buzz), but were nonetheless left searching for the closest possible comparisons to our goals. As we scanned databases, we began to notice trends among broad article topics - many entries focused on how social media affects the way music is marketed, while many others studied social media's impact on cross-cultural music popularity (e.g. the surge in K-Pop fans in the west). Eventually, we came to the realization that the most useful articles were those analyzing specific social media services - Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. - and their impact on how people produce and listen to music, as this closely reflects our plan to analyze TikTok's effect on song popularity. As we narrowed down our choices, we also discovered a potential theoretical framework for our research: the theory of affordances. Our discoveries about this theory, along with our potential application of it to our research, will be outlined further along in this proposal.

Theory

According to Ellis Jones' 2020 article concerning how independent (or "DIY," as he phrases it) musicians use Facebook Pages, the theory of affordances has a practical and important application in understanding how users interact with internet media (Jones 2020). However, he makes it clear that his interpretation of affordances is starkly different from the original

definition provided by the theory's progenitor, James Gibson (2020, p. 280). Originally proposed in Gibson's 1979 book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, "affordances" are defined as "what [an environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson 1979, p. 127). Specifically, Gibson identifies affordances as being wholly relative to the animal and its perception (e.g. a knee-high chair can "afford" sitting to an adult, but may be too high for a child to sit on, and thus does not provide the same affordance) (Gibson 1979, p. 127-128). Furthermore, "sets of affordances" offered by a particular environment can be classified as a "niche," thus providing an animal with an appropriate place to operate and navigate the world (Gibson 1979, p. 128-129). It should be noted that Gibson's terminology relates specifically to ecology, but the underlying meaning of his theories is wholly applicable to other contexts, including but not limited to communication studies. Jones demonstrates this throughout his article, continually transposing elements of Gibson's theory to his own work with Facebook Pages. For instance, he labels the digital world of Facebook Pages as the "environment" and the independent musicians who engage with the platform as the "organisms" (Jones 2020).

In addition, the central theme of Jones' paper is that of redefining affordance theory into what he calls "sites of contestation," such that they may more accurately represent behaviors in the digital world (2020, p. 280). He further subdivides this approach into three main points: "[emphasizing] specific users...[understanding platforms] as both material and textual...and [acknowledging] power imbalances between platforms and users" (2020, p. 280). Notably, the first two of these points correspond to elements of Gibson's work; the study of "specific" user groups - in Jones' case, the musicians - is reminiscent of Gibson's concept of the environmental "niche," though this examines it more from the organism's perspective than the set of

affordances offered by the environment (2020, p. 281). Furthermore, Jones elaborates on the supposed dual nature of social media platforms being material and textual, highlighting the fact that while the internet is indeed interactive and “physical” in a sense (material), it is also capable of being “[consumed] and [interpreted]” as a text, just like a book, film, or other media text (2020, p. 282). This notion crosses paths with Gibson’s idea that affordances are simultaneously physical offerings of a “real” environment and “psychical” perceptions based on what the observer/organism is looking for and how their experience relates to what the environment offers (Gibson 1979, p. 3). Essentially, these points can be taken together to understand that both an environment (specifically a social media environment) and a given affordance can be objective and physical, while simultaneously being influenced by the observer’s subjective experience (as Jones puts it, affordances in social media environments are “shaped by specific users textual ‘readings’”) (2020, p. 282). In the context of our research into TikTok, we could seek to understand what the service actually affords its users (material) and how individual users’ perception (or “textual readings,” as Jones puts it) of those affordances changes their nature.

Jones’ third and final principle of contestation involves recognizing power imbalances between platforms and users. To make this point, he refers to a different interpretation of affordances, posited in 1988 by Don Norman. Rather than focus on ecological interpretations, Norman applied the fundamentals of affordance theory to the realm of product design. In his version, the “animals” are end users of a product, while the “environment” is the product itself; its features are thus the “affordances” (Norman 2018). In addition, Jones references Norman’s idea of “perceived affordances,” - that is, an affordance the user believes to be there, even if it may not be - as the means by which platforms maintain power imbalances (Norman 2018; Jones 2020, p. 283). According to Jones, platforms can offer certain affordances that keep themselves

in power, while allowing “perceived affordances” to convince the users that such an imbalance does not exist (e.g. Facebook affording greater exposure to those who pay for ads while also affording users the option to opt out of paid sponsorships) (Jones 2020, p. 283, 289).

The final source we explored had less to do with affordance theory and more to do with how internet users absorb music in the digital age. Focusing mostly on Spotify, author Craig Hamilton explores the ways in which “music reception” (which includes anything from streaming songs, to buying concert tickets, to debating songs on forums) have changed and evolved with the pace of social media and streaming technology (Hamilton 2019). To do this, he examined a swath of responses from “The Harkive Project,” is an ongoing annual research project that encourages respondents to provide a descriptive view on their opinion on music and how they listen to it (Hamilton 2019, p. 229). The purpose of Hamilton’s research is to explore how Harkive project respondents are incorporating streaming services and automated recommendation systems into their daily life.

The article touches base on certain music streaming apps and how they have to do with music reception. The article provided a lot of information on the music streaming app Spotify. The article talked about how Spotify creates a “Discover Weekly” for its users which is basically a playlist that every Spotify user gets every week that is tailored to their music taste. This playlist includes new songs from artists they like as well as songs from artists they have not heard of before. Spotify’s Discover weekly is a perfect example of a music algorithm reception. Music algorithm reception is when a group of songs are usually played together from a playlist and then once in a while a new song by a new artist is shoved in the algorithm. Algorithm is a key word especially when talking about Tiktok. Users have a “For You Page” that is fine tuned and created just for them but has an algorithm. With this algorithm of the for you page, users tend to see

dances and hear songs they know, and every once in a while there will be a new song thrown in the algorithm that the user has not heard before. This is how users are exploring and hearing new songs on Spotify.

The term “music reception” comes up quite often in this article. Music reception has somewhat of a broad definition; it can be really anything such as listening to music online, buying concert tickets and seeing a band live, or buying a band's merchandise (Hamilton 2019). Although music reception does have such a broad definition, this is why niche songs are growing popular through apps like TikTok. These niche songs are able to get noticed because of the fact there are many music streaming platforms such as TikTok and Spotify. With an app like TikTok, independent artists and musicians have a better chance of having their song gain popularity due to the algorithm, which are referred to as “subjective decision makers” that are “fuelled by consumer activity data and cultural content metadata,” according to Hamilton (2019, p. 228). This relates to TikTok’s unique algorithm as TikTok bases its unique algorithm on data making niche songs known to a wider audience. With these algorithms on TikTok and Spotify it is hard for media gatekeeping to exist, as the promoted content is always new and fresh (Hamilton 2019, p. 228).

The article shows that participants that were a part of the study showed that people were finding music through technology or “socially derived recommendations” (Hamilton 2019, p. 231). This is something that is seen a lot, especially now, many people are finding different ways to explore music whether it be through recommendation or through technology. Thus, the difference between algorithmic music recommendation and social recommendation (YouTube comments, sharing of songs digitally, etc) may be worth looking into when examining TikTok.

Perhaps most importantly, Hamilton observes that music reception is dictated by a combination of routine, use, and affordance; that is, listeners' existing reception habits, the way they engage with social media, and what "route[s] to discovery" are afforded to them by social media itself (Hamilton 2019, p. 235). While there is no deeper dive into affordance theory than this observation, it is a useful link between articles. It suggests that we can examine TikTok song popularity by way of affordance theory; we can look at what the app "affords" songs in terms of success, exposure, etc, in a way not too dissimilar from Hamilton's research. However, we will not be looking at an existing data set, but rather generating one of our own through textual analysis. With this method, we hope to answer the question: How does TikTok influence and expand the popularity of otherwise niche songs through affordances?

Methods

After weighing the pros and cons of which method we should do, we decided on doing a textual analysis on our project. We did also have the idea of a focus group for our method but ultimately decided that textual analysis would be best relating to our topic. By choosing textual analysis, we were able to consider the social practices and social representations pertaining to our topic. Textual analysis is all about understanding and learning what a text means, that is, "understanding language, what it represents, and how we use it to make sense of our lives" (Brennen 2017, p. 192). Including textual analysis in our project as our method allowed us to gain a social and visual understanding. Brennen further elaborates that "texts are things we use to make meaning from," and can include anything from books, films, songs, newspapers, radio broadcasts, theatrical productions, etc. (Brennen 2017, p. 193). In our specific case, we examined TikTok videos, the songs and visuals used within them, TikTok comments, video descriptions, analytics (such as likes, views, and number of comments), press coverage, inter-app reposts

(specifically to YouTube), and comments from YouTube as “texts.” To explore our textual analysis we have found six videos on famous TikTok dances, memes, trends, and songs.

Watching them helped us gain a better understanding on what they represent and how they became so popular through this app.

We opted for purposive sampling in this study, selecting a sample size of six videos of TikTok trends that use a song that has become popular through the app. These videos are found off YouTube but have originated from the Tiktok app, most of the dances include a fifteen second video or a compilation of numerous videos and or users doing the trend. We selected six videos because we felt this was a manageable sample size that allowed for maximum depth and breadth of our analysis without becoming overwhelming. The rationale behind our song selections boils down to a combination of personal experience (i.e. hearing these songs pop up “naturally” on our own personal social media feeds at frequent rates) and press coverage of specific songs and their relations to trends (e.g. the Life Without Buildings story). While there are certainly more examples than the ones we selected, we decided it was best to use our own judgement and personal perceptions of the songs to guide our sample choices. The six songs we examined are: “Can You Feel My Heart?” by Bring Me the Horizon, “Remember (Walking In The Sand)” by the Shangri-Las, “Little Dark Age” by MGMT, “The Leanover” by Life Without Buildings, “Duvet” by Boa, and “Sweet but Psycho” by Ava Max. All of these songs fit within our conceptual definitions of “niche” and “popular” (defined below), and are thus fit for study.

The videos we explored along with the top comments, reactions, possible press, and inter-app cross over have some terms that are broad. The “audience” within the videos we analyzed are the TikTok user base. There are terms that we will be stating within our research that we have defined to help the audience gain a better understanding of the text. Another term

that we are defining that we noticed was said a lot in the comments or even the titles of the songs we viewed was “TikTok song”. We define this as a song that has likely been released for quite some time now but now that a TikTok user has made up a dance to it and it has become popular many people use this term because they found the song through the app. “Popular” is also another term that pops up in our research quite a lot. We define “popular” as something that is suitably well-known by the general public; this could be represented by view count, stream count, amount of press coverage, presence on other apps, or presence in compilations. Another important term in our research is “niche,” which we define as a song that, prior to TikTok's launch in 2018, remained spoken about only among its more dedicated fans and target audiences than after its use on TikTok. These songs can have a “popularity” of their own, being well-known among a specific group of people, but not the general mainstream population.

When examining the texts, we focused our analysis specifically on TikTok and YouTube. We did so for the sake of manageability, and because these apps were the most straightforward to search for content. On each app, we examined the tone of reception in the comments (positive/negative), the amount of inter-app spread a particular song has (i.e. the presence of the song on TikTok versus YouTube), contrasts between receptions on different apps, the amount of popular press articles that cover the songs in question, the predominant method by which people “discovered” a text, and the general consensus of opinions. When writing a textual analysis in any form it is important to relate it to a theory; as Brennen puts it: “...most qualitative researchers also focus on the theoretical underpinnings of the text because they see theory as central to the process of interpretation” (Brennen 2013 p.197). This indicates that it is almost crucial to relate the textual analysis to a theory to help find the underlying meaning of a text, or in this case, a video to help make an interpretation of the meaning of the videos. Finding a theory that can

relate to our textual analysis allowed us to create a better understanding of the texts that we reviewed, hence why we looked into affordances.

Regarding affordances, we sought to determine that they exist between TikTok and the selected niche songs, and then determine whether or not said affordances impact popularity. We also searched for affordances offered to the users and content creators among the TikTok user base, and analyzed those the same way - that is, seeing how this impacts the popularity of the selected songs. Lastly, we looked to see if YouTube supported the affordances offered by TikTok, if any. To look for affordances, we modeled our approach in a similar fashion to the Jones study; once an underlying theme, idea, or pattern of behavior was discovered in our textual analysis, we attempted to derive, name, and explain an affordance that could be responsible for these themes. We only named affordances that we felt confident in using as explanations for the themes we saw. An additional way that affordance theory and TikTok relate is that TikTok is designed with ease-of-use in mind. TikTok has a similar look and set up to the app Instagram, which has been around for years. Engineers and creators make apps easy to use to more users and people of all ages can use the app. The easy use of TikTok (as defined by Norman's interpretation of affordances) could have a lot to do with the fact there are a lot of songs becoming popular from this app.

When conducting research and a textual analysis it is important to bring up the definition of validity and reliability. Validity is the confirmation in making sure the research is capturing the ideas it is supposed to capture (Brennen 2013, p. 8). Reliability is making sure the research is consistent every time. If there is a discrepancy in the data then you can not say it's reliable because it is not consistent (Brennen 2013, p. 8). With our project, being able to make sure that the validity and reliability is consistent is crucial to our project. We were able to know the

validity of our research by double checking whether our data said more about the success of individual TikTok users than of the artists or songs invoked. In addition, we ensured our research was valid by using a list of specific, directed analysis questions to keep careful track of all the texts we found and studied, to categorize what we observed about the texts, and in general to make sure that all of our sources stayed organized. This list of questions is visible in the Appendix on page 29 of this document. By the same token, we knew to scrutinize our data for reliability in cases where multiple textual readings revealed contradictory underlying themes, patterns, and conclusions. Perhaps most importantly, we ensured our research was triangulated by cross-referencing each other's research - having two investigators helped increase the reliability of the data, as we were able to look for inconsistencies with more efficiency and precision. In the final analysis, we break down our findings as to how certain songs become popular through this app.

Results

In order to explore how “niche” songs were finding success through TikTok we had to explore the app itself. The app was pretty easy to navigate as we were first time users of this app. When you first download TikTok it encourages its users to fill out a survey so the videos are more personalized. We thought that this was pretty interesting as TikTok creates an algorithm of videos created for each user. Another feature from this app we found interesting was how users could look up a song and all the associated memes and videos would appear under the song, this was very helpful toward our research. After learning how the TikTok app worked, we looked at six songs that had an associated meme looking at comments, likes, and views on YouTube and TikTok.

The first song we explored on YouTube and the TikTok app was “Can You Feel My Heart?” by Bring Me the Horizon. This song was released in 2013 and is a heavy metal track. The most common associated visuals with this track is the “fan vs. enjoyer/gigachad” meme and the “falling” meme. The top watched TikTok with this song has 9.7 million likes and 42,000 comments; however, the most liked videos with identifiable trends (the falling meme and the gigachad meme) have 3.4 million likes and 1.1 million likes, respectively (Massie 2021; Aximee.edits 2021; Rainbowskinz 2021). Every comment on these TikTok videos is focused on the contents of the video, with the song being mostly ignored, aside from the occasional comment about the lyrics or the name of the song. After exploring the comments on TikTok, we decided to explore the comments of this song on YouTube. We decided to look at the official music video on YouTube; curiously, almost every single comment on this video was a reference to the gigachad meme. Thousands of users with identical gigachad profile pictures each commented references to the meme, in various languages. Searching for more diverse comments, we instead looked at a popular lyric video uploaded by user Matrix Sound. One of the comments that stood out to us on this video was written by user Ghost Killer Entertainment, in which he aggressively asserts his opinion: “I hate to be that guy, but Can You Feel My Heart is not a TikTok song, it’s been out longer than the app has been out. Get mad, I do not care. It’s the truth” (Ghost Killer Entertainment 2021). This comment has 24,000 likes.

The second song we explored on the YouTube and TikTok app was “Duvet” by Boa. This alternative rock song was released in 1998 and is popular among millennials and anime fans as it is used as the theme song for the anime *Serial Experiments: Lain*. The associated meme with this song is “POV: You’re Laying In My Lap” meme, in which one member of a couple places the camera in their lap and faces it up towards themselves while they smile, wave, or perform an

otherwise “cute couple” action. The most popular videos on TikTok with this sound are parodies of the trend; a video posted by user @gothpoet and user @mrbeast. (Gothpoet 2021; Mrbeast 2021). Mr. Beast is a popular YouTuber, which could help this song reach a wider audience, and these two videos being the most liked indicate the trend is so popular that it is now trendy to parody it. The most popular video of this song on YouTube (with comments) is the official music video, which has comments that are primarily references to *Serial Experiments: Lain*; this indicates the “niche” fanbase for this song (Boa UK 2021). After visiting this video, we examined comments on another popular lyric video, uploaded by Matrix Sound. Most of the comments on this video were derisive, defensive, bitter, and angry over the newfound success of this song among TikTok users, similar to the spiteful tone of the comments in the “Can You Feel My Heart” lyric video on the same channel. We then looked at the top comments on TikTok. None of the comments on TikTok mentioned the song itself, the comments either mentioned something about the associated meme or complimented the physical appearance of the Tiktoker in the initial trend videos.

The third song we explored on the TikTok app and YouTube was “The Leanover” by Life Without Buildings; we were intrigued by its success as mentioned in the Paste interview with the band, and so we wanted to dig deeper into the song. This song is an abstract alternative rock/art song that was released in 2001. The associated meme/visual with this song is “trendless;” that is to say, this sound has various TikToks ranging from lip syncs to makeup videos to haircut showoffs to outfit demonstrations - not one, unified, singular meme. Most of the comments about this song on TikTok refer to the people in the videos as well as comments revolving around the confusing/unique lyrics and delivery and how users find it difficult to understand the vocals. On YouTube, most of the comments refer to the song itself with no mention of the TikTok trend.

Some of the comments do mention the TikTok popularity of the song showing gratitude, not anger, for example, commenter “anon anon” praised TikTok for shedding light on “hidden gems” in the comment section of a YouTube upload of the song (Anon Anon 2021; Ray Cheung 2008). We thought this was pretty interesting as this was a break in the trend we saw from the past two songs we looked at. The past two songs we looked at showed anger toward the songs gaining popularity through TikTok, while users showed gratitude toward this song gaining popularity through the app which could have to do with the small fanbase.

The fourth song we explored on TikTok and YouTube was “Remember (Walking In the Sand)” by The Shangri-Las. This pop song came out in 1965 - however, the sound file on TikTok with the most videos associated with it is a reuploaded version, labeled as “Oh No” by Kreepa - a similar instance to what was outlined by one of the articles in our introductory literature, in which the song “All In” by ZaeHD & CEO was uploaded as “Em Em Dance” by Keezy (Chow 2019). The associated meme with this song - both the Shangri-La’s recording and the Kreepa recording - is a trend in which users post a video showing something that has gone wrong. For example, the most-liked video featuring the Kreepa upload depicts a woman recording her children playing when one of them aggressively and unexpectedly tosses a teddy bear at the other, frightening them (Kiagem 2021). Similarly, the top-liked video using the Shangri-La’s sound depicts a woman accidentally opening her makeup upside-down (Laura Evans 2021). The majority of comments from TikTok associated with this song relate to how this song came out a while ago rather than the meme associated with this audio itself. We decided to look at the most popular video of this song on YouTube. The video we looked at has 70,000 likes on YouTube with over 4.5 million views (Seedy Jeezus 2011). Most of the comments on YouTube from users mention how they discovered this song through TikTok, some of whom echo the lamentations of

TikTok popularizing the song that were seen in the comments of “Can You Feel My Heart?” and “Duvet,” but to a lesser extent. The overall theme from these comments is that users like this song and have positive reviews about it, while opinions on its TikTok popularity are mixed.

The fifth song we explored was “Little Dark Age” by MGMT, a synthpop track in the style of 1980’s new wave. Just like “The Leanover” by Life Without Buildings, the associated meme/visual with “Little Dark Age” by MGMT is “trendless”. This means that the videos associated with this sound included things such as transitions of people switching outfits to videos of users posting about things they used to hide when lip syncing to the line “just know that if you hide it doesn’t go away” (Swac42069000 2021). For a brief period, this song was associated with memes revolving around TikTok’s time-warp filter, but this period was not substantial or impactful enough to fully dictate the perception of the song. We explored the comments on TikToks using this sound. None of the comments had to do with user’s opinions on the song specifically, and like before, the comments tended to focus on the content of the videos themselves. After looking at the comments on TikTok, we decided to look on YouTube to see the general theme of the comments. The most popular upload of this song is the official music video, with 61 million views - the comments here are all praising the quality of the song itself, and few to none reference TikTok at all (Mgmtmusic 2017). Similarly positive are the comments on the third most popular upload, a lyric video of the “TikTok” remix, in which the song was partially slowed down (TikTokTunes 2020). Most of the users that commented express how this song and band reminds them of the 80’s. Other comments mention how they feel that MGMT comes out with nostalgic songs. The comments we saw from TikTok and YouTube about “Little Dark Age” by MGMT were positive, and this was the first song we examined that had absolutely no trace of bitterness in the comments section.

The sixth song we explored on TikTok and YouTube was “Sweet But Psycho” by Ava Max, another song we were prompted to look more deeply into after reading about it in popular press articles. This song came out on August 27, 2018. Ava Max is a relatively new artist who creates catchy pop songs that everyone can sing along to. The associated meme with this song is boyfriends playing pranks on their girlfriends with this audio as it says “she’s sweet but a psycho,” and filming their reactions (Iammrsnesbitt 2021). Other videos with associated memes to this sound are people dancing to the audio. None of the comments on TikTok mentioned anything about the song itself, but rather commented on the TikToker who created the video. After looking at the comments on TikTok, we looked at the comments on YouTube. The original music video has 740 million views and 5.7 million likes on YouTube (Ava Max 2018). Although we did not find any comments from the music video regarding TikTok, we did notice the positive comments on YouTube. The comments on YouTube were very positive and a lot of users mentioned how they still listen to this song all the time and how it never gets old. This was the second of the six songs to feature absolutely no overwhelming negativity in the comments section on YouTube.

Discussion

Once we were certain of all the underlying themes we’d discovered, we scanned back through the literature review and began determining which themes and patterns could be summarized with an affordance. It is important to recognize that affordances are not the only means of explaining these patterns, and not every pattern we uncovered could be explained through the lens of affordance theory. However, after completing our textual analysis, some tentative affordance descriptions did emerge. Following the examples set by Gibson and later by

Jones, we have given names to the affordances we believe to have uncovered, and describe them each below.

When we began our research, we knew that Don Norman's approach to affordance theory would also play a significant role in how we determined TikTok's affordances. The design of the app itself was the first element we considered examining for affordances, as it seemed to be the most direct place to start looking from. After a brief period of becoming acquainted with the app layout, we uncovered what we call the affordance of "locatability" - simply put, this affordance results from a combination of unique design features in TikTok's interface that allow users to instantly find a song based on any set of criteria. Users can input song titles into TikTok's search bar as they would with any other search engine; in addition, they can locate the same song through a simple lyric search, such as in the case of "The Leanover," a song many TikTok commenters discovered through this method, as evidenced by the autofill suggestion when the lyrics are typed in. Additionally, TikTok affords locatability to these songs by offering TikTok creators playlists of personalized song choices for their videos, along with playlists of currently trending songs, songs that have trended the most during the year, and newer suggestions. Through this design choice, TikTok is effectively categorizing the memes and songs by itself - this ties into an affordance that will be explored further on.

Perhaps the most salient design feature we found to contribute to this affordance was an animated graphical icon at the bottom right corner of every TikTok video we reviewed. Situated next to a text label of the song title used in the video, This icon displays the album artwork for the song used in the video, and it catches the attention of the viewer by rotating and releasing animated music note icons upwards from it. Users who click on this icon will be taken directly to a page with the song's name, artist's name, and a list of every video featuring that song. This

design feature makes use of Norman's concept of "words plus graphics" and contributes to the affordance of locatability (Norman 2018). However, we quickly learned that the locatability affordance ties in with another, much more complicated one.

The Paste Magazine interview with Life Without Buildings mentions that there are "over 72,000...videos" on TikTok using "The Leanover" as a sound (Martin 2021). However, when the user clicks on the spinning icon for this song, the official artist page lists only 608 videos. This is because there exists a copy of the song, uploaded by TikTok user "andrew :) >," that the overwhelming majority of TikTokers use to access the sound. While this user does credit the song title and original artist, this incident bears a startling resemblance to the mislabeling of the song "All In" by rappers ZaeHD and CEO, in which another user uploaded a sample of the song with a different title and artist attribution (Chow 2019). This pattern also occurs in searches for "Remember (Walking In the Sand)" by The Shangri-La's - the official clip has only sixty-eight videos that use it, while clips labeled with "Oh no oh no oh nonono" or those uploaded using the sped-up "Oh no" uploaded by Kreepa have hundreds of thousands of videos listed. Based on these patterns, we have determined that "replicability" is another affordance that TikTok grants to these songs - the design of the app allows various users to upload clips of the song themselves, be they official or not, thus giving the song more opportunities for exposure and increases in popularity.

While the affordance of replicability has more to do with the design of the app itself, a similar affordance can be used to describe the way the songs migrate between platforms. TikTok affords what we call "memeification" or "memeability" to any songs - not just niche ones. This is when TikTok's design affordances that allow a song to become visible work in conjunction with trending, spreadable memes to "link" songs with the trends, making them nearly impossible to

separate. This can be seen in the linking of “Can You Feel My Heart?” to the “gigachad” meme, a trend visible among the most-liked videos using the song on TikTok, as well as in the comments of the official music video on YouTube. The thousands of identical YouTube comments referencing the TikTok meme with which the song is associated is evidence of the “memeification” or “memeability” that TikTok affords these niche songs. The sheer volume of connections between this particular song and its meme could indicate that linkage with a meme results in the song being known exclusively (or at least primarily) associated with the meme that popularized it, and not the song’s original intended meaning or audience.

Lastly, the surprising difference between the YouTube and TikTok comment reactions has led us to name a pair of affordances that explain it. We determined that TikTok affords both “supportability” and “gatekeeping” to niche songs, affordances that work together despite producing opposite reactions among users. By “supportability,” we refer to the tendency of TikTok commenters to focus on the trends paired with each song as opposed to the songs themselves, reserving their comments for events in the video, compliments to the creator, or references to memes. The occasional comments about the song tend to be neutral remarks on the lyrics or positive remarks on the song fitting in with the video. Regardless, TikTok’s design fosters the creation of these small, positive-commenting communities that ride the trends and contribute to the song’s popularity. Eventually, the song’s meme status on TikTok spills over into YouTube, where a more split reaction takes place. Some commenters, such as those on videos of “Little Dark Age” and “Sweet But Psycho,” carry on with the positivity shared among TikTok users, expressing gratitude at the song’s resurgence among newer fans. However, as we discussed in the results section, the majority of YouTube comments tend to be bitter, aggressive, and hateful - this is where “gatekeeping” comes into play. Members of the “niche” audiences for

which the songs were originally intended tend to be upset by the song's surging popularity on TikTok, uniting in the thousands in YouTube comment sections to push back against the trends and lament their favorite song's newfound fandom - further contributing to the song's popularity in the process. TikTok creates a fanbase for which the older followers can rally against, creating just as much buzz by stimulating gatekeeping as the initial TikTok trend itself.

Conclusion

Being college students in the age of technology, we were curious as to why "niche" songs with specific, non-mainstream followings were gaining sudden popularity on TikTok. We also wanted to gain more knowledge on why TikTok is to thank for some of the success of these "niche" songs. While TikTok is one of the most popular apps in today's world, there were not many articles on the topic of how "niche" songs were gaining popularity through this app. While conducting our research we were exploring "How does TikTok afford Success to Niche Songs?". One of the reasons we believe "niche" songs are gaining popularity through the TikTok app is the easy-to-use set up of the app. TikTok is an app that allows users to dance and create memes to songs of all genres, even with "niche" songs. If an app like TikTok is user-friendly, it allows "niche" songs to become popular. This relates back to the affordance theory, since the design of the TikTok app is user-friendly people are more likely to use this app.

Another finding we found interesting is the comments on TikTok versus YouTube. With the six songs we researched we found the comments on TikTok to be less focused on the song, and more focused on the trend itself. When we looked at the comments on YouTube, the majority of the comments were talking about how users were upset and angry that these songs were gaining popularity from TikTok. We found this very interesting as the comments on TikTok had more to do with the trend, while comments on YouTube had to do with fans of these "niche"

songs angry from the popularity these songs gained through TikTok. Some limitations we ran into within our research were the lack of previous research studies on our topic, a relatively short amount of time, and the restriction to one research method. While textual analysis was the most reasonable method for us to progress with, this topic would have benefited greatly from a multimethod approach, involving both qualitative and quantitative tactics. The textual analysis uncovered various affordances - but not all possible affordances; it should also be noted that affordance theory explains an aspect of these songs' popularity increase, but is not the sole lens through which to examine them. Further research possibilities we would consider would involve in-depth interviews for more detailed analysis and surveys we could send to classmates regarding if they discovered these "niche" songs through TikTok. Specifically, another research possibility would involve finding out who within the student population creates their own TikToks (accomplished with a survey) and then conducting a series of in-depth interviews with a selected sample of those students to determine their thought processes on selecting songs for their videos, and how affordances influence their decisions.

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Appendix

This is the list of questions we asked ourselves when conducting our analyses:

1. What is the name of the song, and what is the song like?
2. What meme, trend, or visual is associated with this song?
3. What is the most popular instance of this song on TikTok? On YouTube?
 - a. If applicable, what are the second and third most popular instances on both platforms?
4. What does the top comment say on the most popular instance(s) of the video? How many likes does this comment have?
5. What is the general tone of the top comments?
 - a. Do the majority of comments reflect this tone?
 - b. Are there any discussion threads reflecting or disagreeing with the opinion/tone of the section as a whole?
6. Do any comments indicate where they first heard the song?
7. Are there any relevant popular press articles covering the rise in the song's popularity?
8. What, if any, affordances can be named to categorize the trends and patterns we're seeing?