

Post Memes or Post-Meme:  
TikTok and the Rise of Algorithmic Meme Cultures

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## Abstract

### Post Memes or Post-Meme: TikTok and the Rise of Algorithmic Meme Cultures

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In less than five years, TikTok has gone from an obscure online niche for lip-syncing teens to the definitive global platform for short-form video content. With over a billion users worldwide, TikTok prides itself in providing a wellspring of entertaining, inspiring, and imaginative content through an endless feed that feels curated *just for you*. This thesis examines TikTok's meme culture and considers the app as a site for the platformization of cultural production. Drawing on meme studies and platform studies, and using methods influenced by ethnography and political economy, I analyze its creative affordances, its monetization pathways, and conditions of discoverability. What I find is that TikTok is giving rise to an algorithmic meme culture which incites participation in trending memes by rewarding creators with increased visibility. I also consider the unique challenges that arise for creators labouring within an algorithmic platform economy, and the strategies available to them for success. I conclude by considering the implications for the continued relevance of the meme on a platform which seemingly erodes its conceptual boundaries by incorporating its logics within the platform architecture.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In June 2021, the internet was gearing up for another viral hit from the Houston-based rapper Megan Thee Stallion. A rising rap star, Megan Thee Stallion is known for her strong production and vivid lyrics about publicly embracing female sexuality, but also for her success on short video sharing app TikTok by inspiring numerous dance trends. Her songs “Savage” and “WAP” became hits in part through the dance moves set to snippets of her lyrics, popular on the app as fans craft their choreographic interpretations of Thee Stallion’s lyrics. TikTok, in other words, is now a memetic “hit maker,” an important change in popular culture and Internet culture where the latest memes draw their formal qualities from audio, such as popular music (Banjo, 2021). “Thot Shit” seemed poised to be the next memetic dance hit. Fans would encounter the track on TikTok’s For You page, setting off a month’s worth of new videos with the song as the backing track. However, one week after the song was released no clear dance trends had emerged (Sung, 2021). The relative unpopularity of “Thot Shit” on TikTok actually belies long standing issues on the app related to creative labour and popular recognition. In the lead up to the song’s release, Black creators on TikTok vowed to collectively strike against creating choreography for the track. This came as a response to the repeated incidents of white creators performing these dances to their vast audiences with unenthusiastic execution and no credit to the original choreographers, such as with Jalaiah Harmon’s “Renegade” popularized without credit by teen TikTok superstars Charli D’Amelio and Addison Rae (Lorenz, 2020b). This is far from an isolated incident as TikTok has given rise to dozens of non-Black creators performing and profiting from the fruits of Black creators’ labours (Sung, 2021). While appropriation and whitewashing of online content, particularly memes, is nothing new (Ellis, 2017); TikTok represents a new and growing terrain for cultural production that implicates

existing concerns about attribution, compensation, and visibility while introducing new challenges wrought by its unique affordances such as its dynamic and engrossing algorithmic For You page.

### *Context*

TikTok's rise to prominence in the year 2020 was undeniable. The so-called lip syncing app, first launched globally in 2018, went from a quirky outpost of youthful frivolity to a heavyweight in the world of video entertainment. Boasting over a billion users worldwide, TikTok has recently been brought to the forefront of several discussions about politics, culture, and technology (Savic & Abidin, 2020). The app centres around a never ending feed of videos "that feel personalized just for you" (TikTok, n.d.) and has been called everything from a passing fad, to a supercharged micro-trend mill, to digital fentanyl made by China to spy on and brainwash American youth (Newport 2022; Jennings, 2021; Gallagher, 2023). In reality, it is much more complex than that. While studies of the app's privacy setting reveal that it is no more invasive to users' privacy than Facebook (Jia & Ruan, 2020), for example, its algorithmic content recommendation systems are seen as some of the most accurate presently available (Lin, 2021). TikTok's interface and its importance as a memetic hit-maker, I argue, have significant implications for the cultural production of memes and internet culture.

TikTok's unique affordances are undoubtedly what makes it stand out from other social media platforms. Its suite of easy to use creative tools paired with sites of content aggregation such as the "sounds" and "effects" pages, which link all videos using a given creative tool, ensure highly professional looking content that operates in lockstep with visual and auditory trends. As such, the culture of meme making on the app represents a distinct shift away from the ugly, the amateur, and the esoteric which has historically characterized the production and

circulation of internet memes (Douglas, 2014). Moreover, the rise of prominent TikTok personalities implicates important questions about labour, commodification, and compensation.

In this vein, I pose two questions that have guided the research I undertake in this thesis:

1. How does TikTok's platform affordances, including its production tools and conditions of discoverability, influence the cultural production of memes?
2. How do TikTok's economics and creators' pathways to monetization influence the cultural production of memes?

In endeavouring to answer these questions, this thesis attempts to uncover how TikTok's unique conditions of visibility and commodification, as administered through their algorithmic recommendation systems, implicate new and unforeseen modes of cultural production, specifically of memes. In particular, and as a means of periodization, TikTok has shifted the administration of memetic cultures, not determined by but co-produced with the platform. By extension, this thesis contends with the potential broad economic, social, cultural, and political ramifications of meme cultures becoming enmeshed with algorithmic cultures.

### *Methods*

In order to probe the unique conditions of cultural production that arise on TikTok, my thesis takes a two pronged methodological approach in keeping with Nieborg and Poell's (2018) suggestion in their paper to approach the study of cultural production by examining platform governance and market structures. To do so, I have forged a novel methodology that attends to the interlocking infrastructural, cultural, and textual norms of TikTok as a platform.

### Affordance and software methods

I employ a novel critical media ethnography to examine TikTok's creative environment. This approach follows Cunningham and Craig's (2019) approach to studying creative labour on YouTube, which aimed to "demonstrate how creators are, and should be recognized as, vital stakeholders in a complex media ecology alongside platforms and policy makers, activists and advertisers, communities, users, and citizens." (p. 3). In the case of TikTok this platform infrastructure includes its affordances such as the algorithmic For You page which also double as a vector of discoverability, negotiations of visibility labour (Abidin, 2021), new forms of technical expertise, and nested economic interests (Duffy et al. 2020). In my view, these components are all readily articulated by and encompassed in the memes of the platform, particularly when these memes are taken up as advertising strategies by brands on TikTok. Following Abidin (2021), this is achieved by

online immersion periods on TikTok for at least an hour each weekday, selectively following/unfollowing and liking/unliking posts in order to experiment with the algorithmic triggers, explor[ing] various subcultures and genres on the app, and map[ping] out trending and viral activity through field notes (e.g. written notes, screengrabs, downloads, etc.). During this period, there were also multiple and frequent spurts of intense activity where daily observations took place for between 3 and 6 hours, usually when there were controversies or time-sensitive incidents unfolding among observed networks of TikTok creators on the app (p. 78)

For my study of TikTok, I conducted my observations over a span of six weeks, from November 1, 2021 to December 12, 2021. I made use of my own personal TikTok account on which I was active almost daily since March 2020. This meant that my For You page was primed to surface relevant, timely, and emerging trends rather than needing to play catch-up through the funneling

systems employed when a new user joins TikTok. Timeliness was crucial consideration here since, by their own contention, TikTok's For You page algorithm will typically select content from any time in the past 90 days to serve on the feed (“5 tips for TikTok creators”, 2019). This, coupled with their tendency to present higher engagement videos more prominently to court user satisfaction and interest, means that an account which spends less time on the app will likely encounter older videos with proven popularity, rather than newer and emerging trends. This was doubly important as my goal was also to make sense of how memetic trends were (or were not) captured by the Discover page.

Now defunct, the Discover page was a key site to understanding what was trending on TikTok as it would rank the popularity of various sounds, effects, and hashtags on a daily basis, as well as act as a space for TikTok to promote social justice campaigns and sponsored content. Anecdotally speaking, new memes typically arise on a weekly basis and require a gestation period before they are widely adopted or incorporated into schemes of commodification. This period of approximately a month and a half allowed me to observe the rise, contestation, and monetization of such trends, while keeping an eye out for any visible changes to the platform’s affordances and more subtle shifts in the recommendation system. This was supplemented by comparing the memes I saw on my For You page with the content trending on the Discover page.

In order to guide my research, I developed an observation grid (Appendix A) adapted from Gaudet and Robert (2018). This allowed me to be very clear about the type of content I wished to record, its formal properties, and how it was being mobilized by the users interacting with it. A typical observation session would see me open the app and immediately record the top ten trending topics for the day. I recorded the name of the hashtag or sound that was trending, the number of videos or views the topic had garnered, and any written copy present to describe the

trend. I also took screenshots to bolster my typewritten notes. I would then proceed to the For You page where I would spend anywhere from an hour to two hours at a time scrolling. When I encountered a video that used a memetic format I had seen either earlier in the session (i.e. repetition was necessary for notation) or during my own personal use of the app, I would record the characteristics and metrics of the sound, and then proceed to the specifics of the video including a robust description of the visuals, on-screen text, engagement metrics, and a description of the video creator including their statistics. When I encountered other video-memes using the sound, during that session or at another point in the observation period, I would simply record the characteristics and metrics of the video itself and file the notes adjacent to the sound description and write up the other meme instance. It was helpful for me to think of the sounds with the general formulaic qualities that constituted a template and the specific instances of how the format was interpreted by unique users as the meme artifact. By the end of my six-week observation period, I had collected 18 meme templates and a total of 73 meme artifacts outlined in Appendix B.

My data collection was undertaken on both an Apple iPad, procured for the purpose of this project, and on my iPhone XR which also allowed me to examine how TikTok is differently optimized for various devices. I primarily conducted my observations from home, on my personal Wi-Fi connection, however I also occasionally conducted observations from the Concordia campus. Given that this is a Master's thesis, the temporal and budgetary scope of the project is somewhat limited, however, in ideal circumstances and without such constraints, I would have endeavored to perform research on the For You page in multiple locations using various Wi-Fi connections. If additional resources were available, I would have also been interested in the possibility of conducting some research on an Android device to ascertain any

possible difference in app architecture and creator experience while using a non-iOS operating system.

### Business model methods

While TikTok's unique affordances are undoubtedly what makes the experience of producing and consuming content on the app stand out, the business model that drives the platform is essential to dissect. As Nieborg and Poell (2018) have made clear, shifting market structures and the rise of new platformized economies inherently impact the administration of cultural production. In keeping with their suggestion to interrogate these systems, I examined how capital animates the platform through an engagement with TikTok's own reporting of revenue production for creators.

Following Caplan and Gillespie (2020), whose work on YouTube's Partners Program is highly relevant to understanding TikTok's talent management strategies, I situated my findings surrounding the affordances for cultural production within the broader history of the company's creator economics, as revealed by their public-facing policies regarding monetization. I chose to foreground the Canadian context, and eschew discussions of the Creator Fund (the dedicated pot of money meted out to creators with large followings based upon view counts for videos over one minute long) or TikTok Pulse (the revenue sharing program from advertising on the For You Page announced in June 2022), as these revenue streams proved to be outside the scope of the thesis. The Canadian perspective was also unique as it allowed me to highlight the widespread use of Virtual Gifts and Life Gifting practices which, while globally available, tend to fall to the wayside in analyses of TikTok in such countries as the United States and the United Kingdom. In this way the Canadian context proves incredibly unique as many of the norms surrounding

marketing, commercialization, and advertising remain the same as in the UK or US, but the options for creators to be meaningfully compensated from their work are far rarer.

In developing the analytical approach and cases I engaged with in this chapter, I embraced reflexivity and iterative processes. It was only once my observations for chapter three were complete, that I was able to consider the links between discoverability, visibility and the financial success of creators. This realization was utterly crucial for developing the model of political economy with which I engage in the chapter. My own observations of meme-making during the November to December 2021 period illuminated these tensions, therefore, the chapter itself took up a greater analytical rather than a methodologically programmatic structure. I also remained attuned to news about TikTok's developments in the realm of monetization, which shed critical light on the topics already taken up in my chapter. In some ways, the duration of this research has allowed for an organic, long-term examination of the changes TikTok has applied to its business models and revenue streams, particularly when it comes to the prominence of direct audience support, such as virtual gifts.

### *Thesis Overview*

This thesis proceeds in the following manner: In chapter two, my literature review situates my analytical and methodological approaches within existing frameworks of research for meme studies, platform studies, discoverability, and TikTok. In chapter three, I offer an analysis for the affordances of meme making on TikTok. By focalizing one meme from my observations, known as *Let's Go*, I investigate how TikTok memes operate. This includes their sound-based templatability, their easy contextualization and reproducibility through unique features, and their codification as trends on the Discover page. This chapter also takes up the politics of attribution

for memes, a longstanding quandary in meme culture which TikTok's conditions of discoverability complicate in new ways.

Chapter four further engages with the *Let's Go* case study from the previous chapter to consider how TikTok's economics are inherently linked with visibility. This allows me to explore the ambivalence that arises from these conditions. In order to have their videos reach an audience, and therefore create opportunities for profit, creators must make decisions about whether to play by the rules of discoverability or to apply tactics to manipulate the algorithmic content recommendation system. I also consider the significance of direct audience support for creators through live gifting and virtual currencies to TikTok's business model, and within the wider platform economy.

My conclusion grapples with TikTok as the rise of algorithmic meme culture and consequences of incorporating memetic logics into platform architecture. I consider how this might constitute a co-opting of the sociality of memes, and how its platformization results in a flattening of creativity, a conflation of authenticity with signifiers of vulnerability, and the management of visibility through salient memetic forms. Lastly, I make a foray into the continued significance of memes as a theoretical framework for studying TikTok when it seems that the application of memetics on a platform level may produce a dissolution of boundaries between meme and non-meme content. In other words, I am left to wonder if TikTok the definitive meme machine or signalling the end of the meme as we know it.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter situates my research within various scholarly traditions upon which I draw in developing the methodology and analytical framing for this thesis. I start with an overview of Meme Cultures and the study thereof, which has risen to prominence in the past decade. I position the meme as key analytical kernel from which I built my understanding on TikTok, both in the lead in to this research and its fruition. Following this, I examine Platform and Cultural Production. Here, I consider how platforms have been theorized, the impact they are having on social and cultural formation, and how the technical constraints of platforms produce certain outputs. Next, I link the study of platforms and the analysis of their affordances to algorithmic recommendation systems. This is crucial to understanding how TikTok functions, and I explore how this through notions of Calculated Publics, visibility, and discoverability. Lastly, I conclude by providing an overview TikTok research to date. This contextualizes my thesis within the larger body of existing TikTok scholarship and also introduces concepts with which I engage in my analysis of TikTok as a site of the platformization of cultural production via memes.

### *Meme Cultures*

The origins of the term meme are undeniably attributed to Richard Dawkins who, in his work on evolutionary genetics *The Selfish Gene*, coined the meme as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (as cited in Shifman, 2014, p. 39). While this was largely a cursory theoretical move on his part, the notion took hold and quickly spawned a growing field of neo-Darwinist memetics which sought to attribute the propagation of cultural trends to the ever-elusive meme (Sampson, 2012). With the rise of the Internet, the concept of the meme was given new life as the internet meme, notably defined by meme studies theorist Limor Shifman as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance,

which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). Shifman, along with others such as Tony Sampson (2012), argued against the Dawkinsian conception of the meme pointing to its seemingly deterministic quality which sidelined the agency of those individuals and groups with whom it propagates. As such, definitions of the internet meme typically foreground the impact of users who reimagine, reinterpret, and recapitulate memes in order for them to spread widely and take hold amongst diverse groups.

As scholarship on internet memes<sup>1</sup> progressed, the definition continued to be refined. One notable contribution comes from the work of Ryan Milner, who introduced the notion of five memetic logics: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread (2016). While each of these logics prove valuable points of articulation, I am particularly compelled by the notion of resonance which explains that memes do not resonate equally, or resonate for different individuals for different reasons. To explain this, Milner discusses Roland Barthes’ notion of *studium* and *punctum* (Barthes, 2010). In this case, *studium* is the cultural attunements that account for a viewer’s understanding of a meme, while the *punctum* is the “pricking” described by Barthes which manifests differently for each individual (2016, p. 30). Resonance, therefore, blurs the lines between text and context, “underscor[ing] the intense multiplicity that makes media memetic.” (2016, p. 39). Once again this is an attempt to move away from the determinism implied by Dawkins’ initial conception of memes. Moreover, resonance articulates how individual texts, which may demonstrate formal properties that lend an air of “meme-ness” while not drawing upon reappropriational logic, can still be memetic without being a meme, *per se*.

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<sup>1</sup> From here on, simply “memes”

Therefore, this aspect of resonance is instructive for considering other conceptions of user-led cultural production such as vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006) and digital folklore (de Seta, 2020). These concepts approach digital practices which include the use of emoji, cospypastas, lomography, GIFs, and chain emails as non-memetic expressions of collective and individual creativity which propagate and evolve over time. These intellectual traditions similarly draw upon pre-Internet theories of cultural production, which themselves draw upon long standing theories of mimesis dating back to classical philosophy (Mamary, 2001; Dolar 2017). This is to say, while memes prove to be a useful analytical tool, with the profusion of venues for self-expression online, memes are just one tool amongst many to consider the global phenomenon of digital imitative practices, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts (de Seta, 2016).

That being said, I have chosen to use memes as the analytical kernel of this thesis because of their capacity to describe relations between users, texts, and contexts in a generative fashion. Going forward, the definition I rely on for discussing memes from here on out is that of Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner, who refer to memes as “evolving tapestries of self-referential texts collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online.” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 30). I am particularly drawn to Phillips and Milner’s definition because they are open to notions of folkloric expression embedded within memes, linking less distinctly memetic texts to the wider arena of meme studies.

Importantly, initial studies of memes and internet culture often treated the landscape as homogenous, influenced overwhelmingly by a white, male perspective and sense of humour which framed the spread of harmful rhetoric as “just for the lulz” which has ultimately influenced mainstream cultural discourses and events (Phillips, 2019). Therefore, focalizing the

multiplicity of experiences expressed through shared cultural production amongst marginalized groups marks an important shift in meme literature, such as the attention given to Black Twitter (Brock, 2019). In other words, the value of theorization which foregrounds a plurality of meme cultures rather than a singular or monolithic meme culture cannot be overstated. Given that this thesis will stand as a platform-specific examination of meme making, it is helpful to attend to how theorists have previously undertaken such research. Due to the ease of data collection, much focus has been paid to text based Twitter memes, including hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #YesAllWoman in the wake of their political mobilization (Phillips & Milner, 2017). Moreover, examinations of such sites as 4Chan's /b/ board (Nissebaum & Shifman, 2017), Reddit's r/MemeEconomy (Literat & Berg, 2019), and Facebook's Student Problem Memes group (Ask & Abidin, 2018) have revealed how memes may act to accrue cultural capital, demonstrate sub-cultural fluency, and commiserate over shared issues, respectively. To summarize, meme cultures are globally important, but also porous and subject to context collapse and, therefore, require a cultural and platform specific examination given the changing conditions of production in an era of platform dominance.

Importantly, meme cultures are now becoming deeply enmeshed with commercial culture. From FuckJerry selling memes for cheap during Michael Bloomberg's brief Presidential run (Lorenz, 2020a), to the rags-to-riches life of Grumpy Cat (BBC News, 2018): meme cultures are also commercial cultures. However, the question remains: for whom are the spoils of commercialization available and what socio-technical barriers enforce these inequalities? Largely, subcultural and marginalized groups maintain meme cultures which exist in excess of the structures on commodification, as with Brock's work on the libidinal economies of Black Twitter (2019). As such, the value produced by the libidinal is not easily captured in strict

schemas of monetization. However, in the era of the super-platform, the promise of viral stardom is seemingly always around the corner. The algorithms that govern what content rises to the top may also relegate some creators to anonymity, robbing them of any recourse towards broad recognition or compensation for their creative labours (Ellis, 2017; Poell et al., 2022). This has led me to think about the consequences that arise through a synthesis of platform studies and meme studies in my approach to TikTok since, in my view, the platform's ecology perfectly encapsulates the two perspectives.

### *Cultural Production and Platforms*

Engaging with literature on the platformization of cultural production is essential to studying TikTok: particularly when focussing on the relation to algorithms and the concomitant issues of changing affordances, conditions of discoverability and their impact on creators' work.

### Platforms

Tarleton Gillespie (2010) handily defined the platform in his work on YouTube, as a spatial metaphor which implies a raised and even surface for the creation and distribution of social, economic, and cultural commodities. While platforms are not inherently algorithmic, the increasing centrality of algorithms, framed as objective tools for mapping preferences and managing social interactions (Gillespie, 2013), dictate that to speak of a platform is to speak of algorithmic governance. Van Dijck et al. (2018) define the phenomenon of platformization as “the way in which entire societal sectors are transforming as a result of the mutual shaping of online connectors and complementors” (p. 19), where connectors refer to the intermediaries which offer services to users and complementors are services which are organized and intersected with other intermediaries in an infrastructural fashion. This typically lends itself to a model of the multi-sided market, or “an economic configuration, [where] a platform aggregates,

facilitates, and controls the connections and transactions between distinct groups of users: end users are connected with advertisers as well as with service providers or complementors, ranging from micro-entrepreneurs to news organizations and universities” (p. 38). Crucially, this model frequently lends itself to monopolization which is important as we are increasingly experiencing the interoperability of platforms, placing them at the centre of many aspects of daily life, including cultural production and consumption.

### Cultural Production of Platforms

Nieborg and Poell’s (2018) work on the platformization of cultural production is essential for many recent studies of digital cultural production and is a crucial touchstone for this thesis. In their paper, they lay out a framework for researchers to examine the effects of platformization on cultural expression and production, by way of an examination of the interrelated market structures, platform governance, and infrastructures. By drawing upon business studies, political economy, and software studies Nieborg and Poell suggest a two pronged approach: firstly, examining market structures that dictate cultural production, i.e. the development of publishing strategies that align with the business model of their respective platform. And secondly, examining how cultural production is governed through platforms i.e. economic and infrastructural control of cultural commodities. Of particular interest is the transformation of cultural producers into platform complementors (Van Dijck et al. 2018), in other words, linear modes of production become an environment where "content is contingent, modularized, constantly altered, and optimized for platform monetization" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4282).

In addressing the unequal application of policies surrounding content monetization on YouTube, Caplan & Gillespie (2020) recognize that YouTube must manage tensions between:

the social imaginary of YouTube as a platform of open expression; their tiered governance strategy i.e. different rules for different users and the associated optics; and theories of demonetization given rise by the opacity of content rules. Each of these factors represents a key aspect of the cultural production of platforms as imaginaries, affordances, and user theories thereof coalesce into the popular understanding of platforms. They also put forth the idea that positioning user labour as participation obscures exploitative elements, and structures cultural production on the platform. In other words, the multi-sided market of social media becomes the definitive landscape of cultural labour. In such a model "media industries shape production... by asserting the terms under which producers must labor" (p. 8). Similarly, in her examination of photo sharing app Snapchat, Hawker (2021) hones in on the use of corporately sponsored filters as digital piecework. Here, the user becomes the advertisement, labouring on behalf of brands and inviting them into intimate exchanges, whether they engage with filters ironically or not. As such, "users not only create the text but also refine the targeting and distribution strategy" (p. 16) since they choose who will be most affected by the content.

### Affordances of cultural production

According to Nieborg and Poell, "to understand how platformization shapes cultural expression, it is crucial to examine the seemingly serendipitous and minor changes in platform governance, ranging from content sorting and filtering to algorithmic curation" (2018, p. 4286). TikTok is unique insofar as it has signalled that it is open to collaborating with researchers to work towards algorithmic transparency through such measures as the opening of their Transparency and Accountability Centres and by releasing quarterly Transparency reports (Savic & Abidin, 2020). Nonetheless, I feel it is crucial to examine TikTok's recommendation system to

ascertain their ever shifting approach to discoverability, governance, and cultural production. Duffy et al. (2021), contend that visibility on digital platforms is inherently precarious and depends upon nesting markets, industries, and platform features. Importantly, creative labour has always been precarious, but is now subject to the machinations of platform capitalisation. Specifically, Big Data has ensured algorithmic culture and the logic of personalization have impacted how media are made and how their success is understood. This resonates with Nieborg and Poell's conclusions surrounding the application of platform logics to cultural production, particularly regarding how algorithms are inherently dynamic and therefore require examination over time. As such, they conclude that platform precarity is the mix of transparent changes in platform features and opaque changes in algorithmic systems. This gives rise to the type of algorithmic gossip observed by Bishop (2019), and to the types of strategic knowledge currently being employed by young teens through algorithmic folklore on TikTok (Akinrinade, 2021).

In examining the game engine Unity, Nicoll & Keough (2019) propose the concept of cultural software which they define as "software that provides code frameworks for actions we normally associate with cultural production." (p. 4). These frameworks mirror the templatability offered by TikTok's effects galleries, which equally promise professional looking results with a reduced burden of technical expertise. Crucially, this user-friendliness is understood as a promise of self-sovereignty for the individuals laboring as engines of culture and capital. Specifically, "cultural software... *gives shape* to specific production workflows, design methodologies, software literacies, and modes of (self-)governance" (p. 16). This type of governance becomes crucial for Cunningham and Craig (2019), who contend that in many cases such a model disempowers creators and excludes them as stakeholders of digital content production. On TikTok, this might be the opaque changes to the ForYou page recommendation system, the

introduction of new visual effects with embedded expertise, and the unexpected changes made to such monetization pathways as the Creator Fund which leave creators on the back foot, struggling to keep up with the rapid changes.

### *Calculated publics, visibility, and discoverability*

Considering the prevalence of algorithmic administration, new social formations are bound to emerge on platforms. One such case, is what Tarleton Gillespie (2013) refers to as calculated publics. These are publics constituted and codified by algorithmic technology; “publics that would not otherwise exist except that the algorithm called them into existence” (p. 189). In this way, calculated publics are artifacts produced by TikTok’s recommendation system that might be compared with imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), discussed further below. Calculated publics are linked by certain types of content, which then dictate the cultural production they may undertake. The possibility of encountering new or unfamiliar types of content balanced with the established content a user has been determined to enjoy then becomes a key preoccupation of algorithmic content recommendation.

To illustrate this tension, McKelvey and Hunt (2019) hone in on the notion of discoverability, which refers to the coordination of recommendations for user interaction with a given platform. On TikTok, discoverability might manifest through mechanisms such as the algorithmic For You page or the use of hashtags such #ForYou or #fyp to make users’ posts more visible. In their work, they examine Netflix through the lens of its personalized mechanisms for discoverability, and conclude that “the platforms’ capacity to personalize engagement with cultural content essentially means that these corporations are creating an individualized, constantly changing cultural policy for each user.” (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019, p. 8). This tendency to atomize and individualize platform experience is then the crux of

platformized cultural production and consumption, which is demonstrated *par excellence* by TikTok. This means that, generally speaking, content is produced to be visible to a specific audience with whom it will resonate, as determined by recommender algorithms. When content crosses the threshold from applicable to these specific audiences to the widely seen and engaged with, sometimes termed 'going viral,' we might understand it as moments of hypervisibility that supersede the typical parameters of the ultra-personalized feed. However, without vectors of discoverability, or when these vectors are improperly applied, as discussed by Abidin (2021), cultural producers cannot hope to achieve visibility in a meaningful way and therefore will not thrive within the platform economy.

Due to these hurdles, cultural producers on such platforms as YouTube and Instagram engage in strategic public performances aimed at curating specific types of engagement, known as visibility labour (Abidin, 2016). In turn, these strategies can be understood as "playing the visibility game" (Cotter, 2019) whereby producers of cultural content, such as influencers, develop informal understandings of the opaque rules of content recommendation algorithms and modify their approaches to suit the given parameters. This is spread through algorithmic gossip, whereby informal networks of influencers develop "communally and socially informed theories and strategies pertaining to recommender algorithms, shared and implemented to engender financial consistency and visibility on algorithmically structured social media platforms" (Bishop, 2019, p. 2602). Crucially, visibility is tantamount to financial viability and, therefore, the theories gleaned from algorithmic gossip and applied through playing the visibility game often ensure that the production of cultural content aligns with that which is already proven to be algorithmically favourable, as with feminized, beauty-related videos on YouTube (Bishop, 2019). Nevertheless, creators can only apply these notions of algorithmic favourability

provisionally, given that the past success of a certain type of content cannot guarantee the visibility of similar content in the future. As such, it can be said that "as regulatory devices, algorithms parameterize rather than determine behaviour" (Cotter, 2019, p. 902). In the case of TikTok, this might be the choice to employ a certain audio template, and thus a specific vector of discoverability, over another. While the platform does not mandate an audio template is used at all, its undeniable link to visibility ensures that the platform's creative affordances are typically applied strategically by creators seeking recognition from a potential or established audience.

### *TikTok Research to date*

Due to the popularity of the app, its rapid global uptake, and its impacts on popular culture over the past five years, there has been an explosion of research on TikTok. Internationally, scholars have recognized TikTok's cultural and technical significance, and there are many promising contributions to the growing body of work that deals with the platform. Zulli and Zulli's (2020) work on imitation publics lends itself most readily to a study of memes and the platform's meme culture. In their view, TikTok extends the meme to the level of the platform by way of its technical affordances. Here, "networks form through processes of imitation and replication, not interpersonal connections, expressions of sentiment, or lived experiences." (2020, p. 2). Crucially, offline identity does not necessarily correspond to engagement with an imitation public on TikTok. However, users frequently identify as occupying spaces on the app such as "Straight TikTok", where shared memetic activity places them in conversation with one another and differs from that memetic production which comprise the activities of other publics known as "Alt/Elite TikTok" and "Deep TikTok" (Lorenz, 2020c). Therefore, to speak of being "on" a given "side" of TikTok, as users frequently say, is itself an acknowledgement of membership in an imitation public by way of interaction with certain memetic trends.

Abidin's (2021) work on TikTok examines how internet celebrity is situated on TikTok given the platform's affordances and norms. She contends that TikTok is ushering in a new era of post-based fame, shifting away from coherent influencer personas based in consistency, as on Instagram or YouTube, and moving towards the ability to keep up with viral trends. She also notes that audio memes are the organizing principle for cultural (re)production on the platform which often pair with visuals that require complex editing techniques. This speaks to the technical expertise required to execute such work correctly, meaning that, even if the suite of creative affordances allow for users to produce content which appears highly professionalized, it does not guarantee wide reach. In other words, cultural and technical knowledge is required to demonstrate memetic fluency, which, in my view, is reminiscent of previous studies of meme production, particularly Miltner on the linguistic and technical demands of LOLCats (2014). Crucially, TikTok is novel insofar as "from the perspective of meme ecologies, the ability to trace the history and use of a template is an unprecedented record of documenting linearity in meme cultures." (Abidin, 2021, p. 80). In this case the template refers to audio clips catalogued alongside the videos that utilize them on the Sound Details page. However, the ability to re-upload and remix audios leads to conflicts over attribution. This deployment of visibility labour or, "the work that social media users perform to be noticed by their intended audiences, comprising self-posturing and the curation of self-presentations to be 'noticeable and positively prominent' among viewers." (p. 85) articulates a key aspect of the work of cultural producers on TikTok. This comprises algorithmic practices, which include users contending that one has "entered" a particular side of the app (recalling Zulli and Zulli's imitation publics), with invitations to "stay a while" and "If you see this" style videos which implicate a certain level of algorithmic serendipity both of which invite a level of continued speculation surrounding the

ever-evolving operation of the For You page algorithm. Visibility labour also comprises ownership practices such as “please credit” videos “where TikTokers seek attribution, acknowledgement, or authorship over specific videos, trends, dance moves, or dialogues.” (p. 85). This type of practice can be seen as a last resort and sole form of recourse when creators are both algorithmically and socially marginalized.

Similarly focused on TikTok as a site of cultural production, Savic’s (2021) work on the app, specifically when it was still known as Music.ly, approaches the platform from social construction of technology framework. He is particularly interested in TikTok's uptake within preteen audiences as a creative tool, and how this helped to alleviate parental concerns surrounding the app during its early popularization. This work hones in how non-users (i.e. parents, regulatory bodies) understand the app, how these understandings differ from that of users, and how the app's developers respond to these reactions. His findings suggest that the introduction of parental controls and safety features came in response to demands from parents and regulatory bodies, which reaffirms their importance to the social dynamics of the app's deployment. Moreover, it suggests a level of malleability in the affordances of the app for certain groups, in this case underage users, and points to the co-creation of the platform between developers, users, and non-users.

Meanwhile, other culturally focused studies of TikTok have honed in on its re-articulation of “bedroom culture” as a celebration of girlhood (Kennedy, 2020) albeit a highly racially homogenous and moneyed version of girlhood; as a bastion for LGBTQ+ content (Simpson & Semaan, 2020); as a key site for examining youth political cultures (Zeng & Abidin, 2021) and, as the locus of memetic production on the platform, how the lip-synch trends using

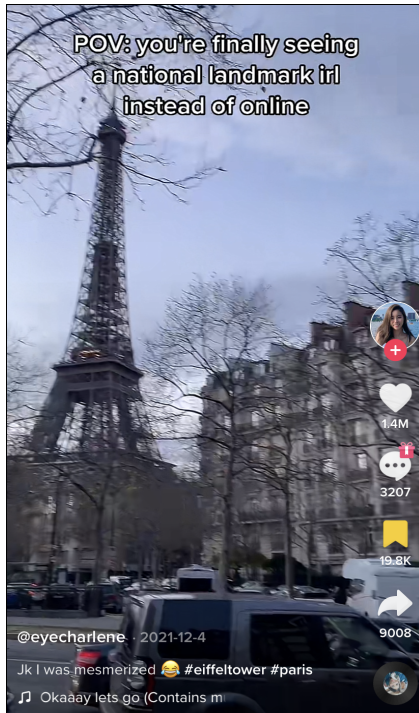
ephemeral and reproducible sounds prove rife for misattribution of creative works (Kaye et al., 2020b).

On the technical side studies of the platform, Zhang (2020) has noted the infrastructuralization of Douyin within the Chinese context, which manifests in various ways including: interoperability of other platforms through sharing tools, the presence of sponsored content, the integration of e-commerce, tourism, and education services, and the advent of the creators fund. A key corollary to this infrastructural view are studies of user privacy on the app which have attended to the privacy governance of the app, sometimes in comparison to other Chinese-based apps or TikTok's Chinese equivalent Douyin (Jia & Ruan, 2020; Kaye et al, 2020a; Lin, 2021). In sum, there are an abundance of perspectives from which to study TikTok. Given my repeated focus on memes as a vehicle for understanding commercial and creator cultures, it is through this lens that my thesis examines the app.

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the context from which my thesis emerges. I have attempted clarify the links that exist between memes and meme making with the affordances of cultural production provided by platform, the conditions of discoverability for such content, and the precarity that arises from cultural production on algorithmically governed platforms. It is from this point that my research, analysis, and writing then proceeds.

## Chapter 3: The Technical Affordances of TikTok

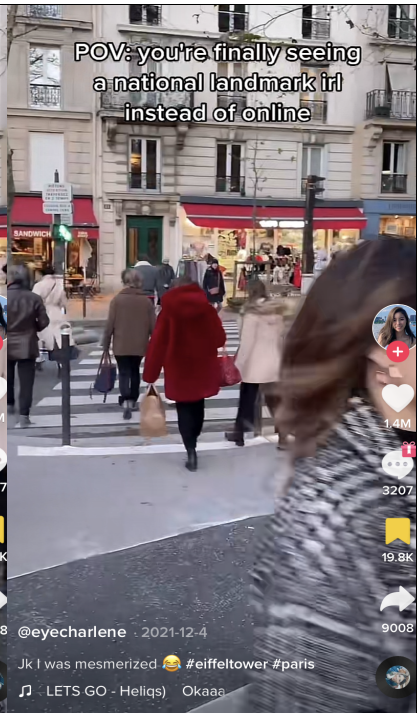
### Introduction



*Figure 1: A screenshot from @eyecharlene's Let's Go meme, view of the Eiffel Tower*



*Figure 2: A screenshot from @eyecharlene's Let's Go meme, view of Charlene regarding the Eiffel Tower*



*Figure 3: A screenshot from @eyecharlene's Let's Go meme, Charlene turning away*

On a cloudy evening, the Eiffel Tower stands out amid the typical architecture of Paris. As the camera pans to a lone woman, her elegance matches this Parisian scene. She wears a wool coat in a houndstooth pattern and her lipstick stands out on screen. She stares out at the skyline, taking the scene in with rapt attention and a wide smile. The video appears, at first, to showcase all that is possible in an era of aspirational-image-driven tourism: the perfect moment, accompanied by the text: "POV: you're finally seeing a national landmark irl instead of online." Then a chime sounds, and her expression changes as she lip syncs along to the dialogue, seemingly saying "Okay let's go" while she turns and walks away. The implication is that she

has seen what she came to France to see and is now ready to depart. However, this sentiment is belied by the caption which reads “JK I was mesmerized.” Sightseeing, the video jokes, is as much about being seen as the sights themselves. During the final weeks of my observations, I saw dozens of similar videos on my ForYou page. In the audio template, a chime sounds followed by a voice saying “okaaaay, let’s go” in a goofy, almost strained tone. As the sound grew in popularity, spawning over thirty thousand videos by the time I recorded it in my observation notes, it had become a way to express disappointment or reluctance in meme form.

This chapter serves as an analysis of the ethnographic data I collected on TikTok memes from November 1 2021 to December 12 2021 using the *Let’s Go* meme described above. As such, it stands as a temporally-specific study of TikTok and its features. Following Nieborg and Poell (2018), I see the platform affordances available to creators as giving rise to a particular type of memetic cultural production. Specifically, I was interested in what I refer to as “aural reaction memes” where a creator uses a linked “sound” as a template to explore a humorous, relatable, or personal scenario which corresponds with the situation put forth in the audio. This definition takes cues from Kaye et al. (2021) wherein an aural meme is identified as video which employs the “use this sound” feature embedded in every TikTok as the anchor for a memetic process. Leading into my data collection I developed a specific set of criteria to determine if the content I observed was worthy of inclusion in my observation notes.

Based on these guidelines, I identified 18 aural reaction meme templates and 73 individual aural reaction meme instances. I chose to spotlight a single meme, dubbed *Let’s Go*, to explore the three crucial aspects of TikTok meme culture which express what makes the app unique from previous meme cultures. The first section uses *Let’s Go* to elucidate how TikTok memes occur: how they operate formally, and the tools that give rise to them. As a meme-based

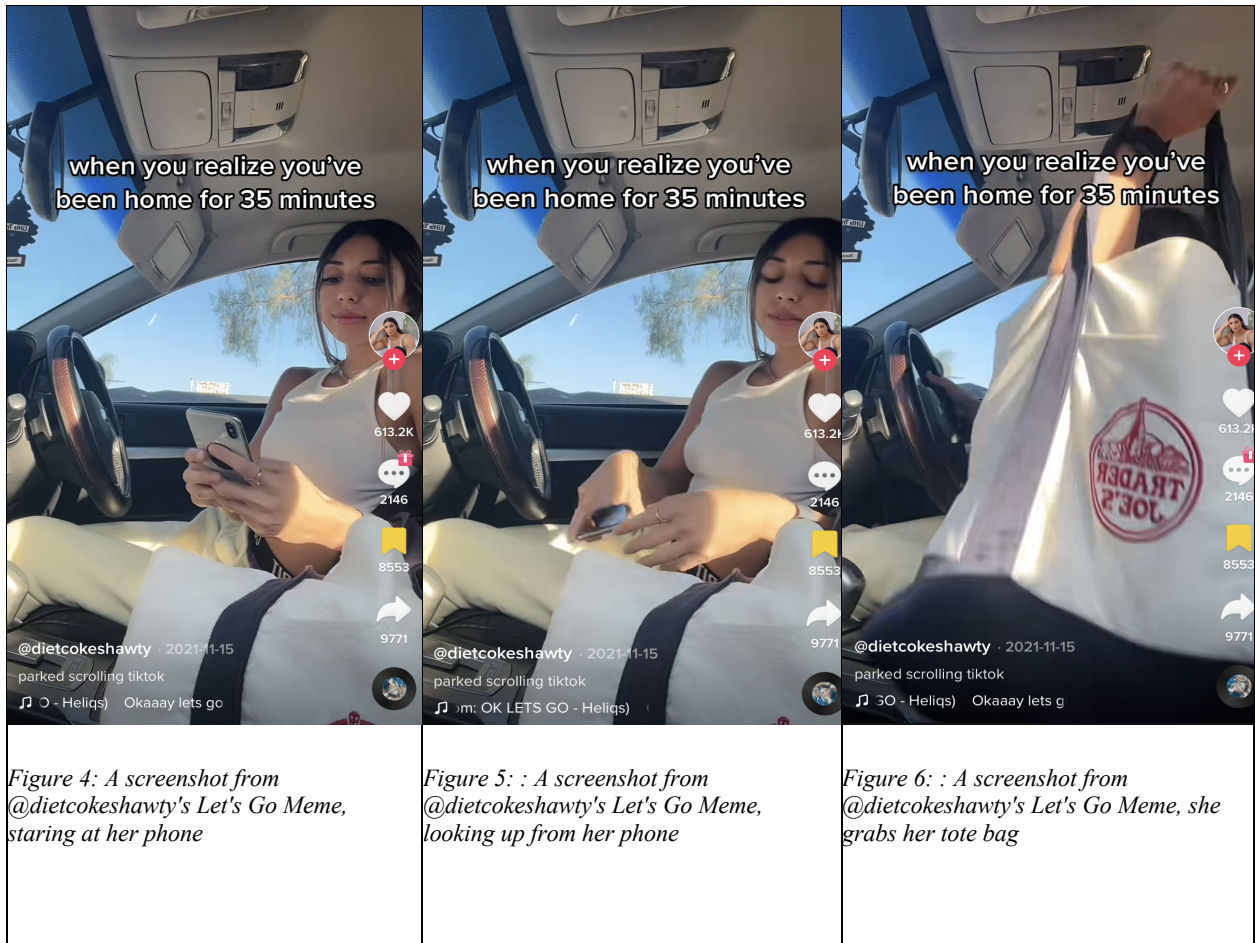
study it is crucial to understand how memes, the entry point of this research, are produced uniquely on TikTok and how the tools for their production differ from other platforms. Secondly, I examine the significance of trends, as understood through the Discover page, to TikTok's meme culture. As this research evolved, it was clear that the relevance of certain memes was central to my observations of the For You page. While these decisions surrounding relevance were made by me, the participant-observer, it was crucial to understand how TikTok made sense of trends on the platform and granted relevance to memes through their inclusion on the Discover page. I conclude my analysis with a discussion of the barriers to accurate creative attribution that exist on TikTok through an investigation into the veracity of the seemingly organic *Let's Go* trend. The politics of attribution emerges as a key dimension of meme culture. Moreover, TikTok's automatic attribution system, discussed at length here, is a defining characteristic of what it means to labour as a cultural producer on the app. These findings are not only significant to the continued study of TikTok's meme culture; they also illuminate broader changes occurring in meme cultures across the internet. Situated at the intersection of subcultural significance, commercialization, and algorithmic recommendation, findings from TikTok are uniquely germane to understanding these wider developments in the platformization of cultural production.

While my observations shored up many fascinating memes which would have suitable for analysis in this chapter, I chose to focalize *Let's Go* for the insight it provides on TikTok's essential technical affordances for meme-making. The corpus I developed demonstrated the manifold ways users creatively interact with the platform's architecture to produce memetic content, but *Let's Go* proved to be useful for how it expressed the disjuncture between Discover page trends and trends that are expressed algorithmically on the For You page. Furthermore, the

investigation I conducted into its provenance, led me to important findings about attribution which I explore in this chapter, and provided an invaluable starting point for my exploration of techniques that creators employ to enhance their algorithmic visibility which is taken up in the next chapter.

### *What is a TikTok meme?*

User @dietcokeshawty sits in the driver's seat of a parked car. She is dressed casually in a white tank top and yellow sweatpants, hair tied back in a low bun. She stares at her phone, thumbs scrolling across the screen [Figure 4]. The on-screen text reads "when you realize you've been home for 35 minutes." As a chime sounds, she lowers the phone and gazes past the camera and out the windshield. She then rolls her eyes and sighs as she grabs the Trader Joe's tote bag sitting in the passenger seat, exclaims "Okay, let's go" and moves to exit the car. The caption on the video reads "parked car scrolling tiktok" which playfully invokes the phenomenon of memes appealing to hyper-specific niches on the app, or "sides" of TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2020; Lorenz, 2020c). In this case, @dietcokeshawty hopes that her video resonates with those people who find themselves scrolling on their phones in their stationary car despite having arrived at their destination. While the two examples explored here have applied the sound template differently, both videos mobilize memetic resonance where a familiar feeling or experience is expressed through a formalized medium.



*Figure 4: A screenshot from @dietcokeshawty's Let's Go Meme, staring at her phone*

*Figure 5: : A screenshot from @dietcokeshawty's Let's Go Meme, looking up from her phone*

*Figure 6: : A screenshot from @dietcokeshawty's Let's Go Meme, she grabs her tote bag*

The video is a TikTok meme. Like memes elsewhere online, TikTok memes balance a fixed or stable element against novel content to produce a unique cultural artifact (Milner, 2016). In the case of the classic image-text meme, the image portion of the meme usually acts as the stable element, producing a template of sorts, while the text produces the unique instance of each individual meme. On TikTok, templates emerge when users popularize “sounds” or audio clips by using them in their videos in humorous or unexpected ways. As the audio begins to be applied to diverse scenarios, an element of familiarity and predictability is introduced, and the viewer is able to anticipate the punchline and relate the individual meme instance to the body of existing memes using the audio. In this way, audios become templates by both enabling and limiting expression (Segev et al., 2018). This is a natural formal progression as TikTok, once known as

Music.ly, began as an app which allowed users to easily make highly stylized lip-synching and dance videos that would otherwise require great technical skill to produce (Savic, 2021). Formal standards emerge as users imitate the style and execution of others and soon, aural memes are cemented as memetic artifacts anchored by sounds and mobilizing text, visuals, and hashtags to infinite, if often predictable, ends. It is for this reason that my observations and analysis take sounds as the entry point from which to study memes on TikTok.

The production of audio based memes is built into TikTok's platform architecture through two key features:

1. Sound Details pages, which organize all videos using a given sound in one place and provide information about the source of the sound, if available.
2. The "use this sound" button, found at the bottom of every Sound Details page, which redirects the user to the video creation screen with the audio preloaded.

These affordances streamline meme production and build the logic of memetics into the platform in a way never seen before TikTok. Where the Sound Details page informs users by contextualizing trends, the "use this sound" button explicitly incites the user's participation in the meme. Together they allow TikTok users to go from meme observer to meme participant in mere seconds.

The Sound Details page organizes and archives all videos using a sound, allowing users to gain insight into meme trends, techniques, and execution. This page is accessed by pressing the record icon or sound title found at the bottom of a video, which indicates which sound is being used. This means that when a user encounters an unfamiliar sound or meme in a video on their For You page, they are able to quickly investigate its origins. Sounds are sometimes named meaningfully, with a description of the audio content, or the official name of a song and its artist,

but are just as often named automatically by the system where they are attributed the title “original sound—[username].” It is important to note that while TikTok has formalized the process of making short video content, it has not standardized it in any meaningful sense. Because of this, significant variations exist in the way that sound templates are named and catalogued. In the case of aural meme templates, drawing from sources such as reality television or pop music, there may be duplicate versions of the same audio track making memes that appear to be produced the same way into completely unrelated videos from the perspective of user and page data. These situations can also lead to misattribution of sounds, an issue which is taken up later in this chapter.

TikTok also builds in the logic of reproduction through the “use this sound” button. The red, capsule-shaped button, which appears on the Sound Details page, features white text and a camera icon which pulsates gently to draw the user’s eye. As one scrolls the page, observing the context of the sound and how others are using it in their videos, they are explicitly encouraged to add their own video. This incitement to (re)produce trends allows “TikTok creators [to] engage in a practice of memetics” (Kaye et al., 2021, p. 3209), and reveals TikTok as a *de facto* meme machine. The Sound Details page is no mere content archive. It affirms TikTok’s mission to inspire user creativity: a user visiting the Sound Details page is interpolated not simply as a seeker of memetic content but also as a potential participant.

TikTok’s distinct meme culture takes form through this produsage tendency, in which audio clips are used and reused in creative ways. Sounds originate from various sources: phrases from celebrity interviews or television shows; instrumentals, lyrics from popular music, or edits and remixes of popular songs; and, perhaps most interestingly, audio from widely-reproduced

videos made on TikTok itself. This last type of aural meme is the best demonstration of the app's self-sustaining meme culture.

One of the most important sources are Original Sounds, discussed above. The mechanism by which Sound Details pages are organized remains opaque: videos with greater engagement typically rank higher on the page, but there is not a perfect mapping of reach to assigned spots, nor does chronology appear to be an important factor. It is possible that there is subtle personalization at work on the Sound Details pages, perhaps favouring videos from creators a user has interacted with previously, but this remains unreported by TikTok's official blog. However, regardless of engagement, the Sound Details page will identify the original video for a given sound by displaying a red banner reading "Original" on the video thumbnail and placing it at the top left of the grid. This feature is not available on every sound, particularly if the video did not originate on TikTok and instead has been reposted from another online source. Nevertheless, it is an important way to introduce context to the meme trends on the For You page, and illustrates how these audio snippets undergo templating. This mechanism—a video catalogue perused by the curious user—dictates that meme-making on TikTok is a singular experience. In other contexts, particularly when making image-text memes for Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or Reddit, the transformation of images into meme templates is largely ad hoc and incidental. If a user wishes to re-meme the image they must retrieve a blank template through resources such as Google Image search, overwrite the text on an existing meme, or utilise a meme generator such as Imgflip. There is no meme repository on these platforms, neatly curating every instance the image has been used to make a meme. Moreover, if a would-be-meme-maker wishes to glean context on the origin and spread of a certain meme, they can use an encyclopedia such as the wiki-style KnowYourMeme.com to learn more. While these aspects of

meme-making have long been normalized and incorporated into the culture of memetic production, even having distinct implications for the look and visual vernacular of memes (Douglas, 2014), TikTok nonetheless marks a break with this ad hoc approach. Sound Details pages effectively add the context provided by KnowYourMeme within the app, and users are able to recreate memes without ever needing to rely on tools outside the app.

Naturally, both @eyecharlene and @dietcokeshawty's videos can be found on the Sound Details page for *Let's Go*, among thousands of others. Interestingly, however, the *Let's Go* meme was one of the least popular on my For You page during my observations, as reflected by my table of observations (Appendix B). This is important to acknowledge as its significance to my research draws not from its prevalence on my own feed, but from its presence on the Discover page's trending topics, and its complicated relations of attribution which I explore in the following sections.

### *The significance of trending*

Users like me likely found out about the *Let's Go* meme through TikTok's curation of trends. If memes are shared references, then a key feature of TikTok's interface, and its memetic culture, is how the platform shares these references. Memes, I argue, are trends. Monitoring the Discover page's trending topics, which include sounds, effects, and hashtags, became a crucial part of my research as my observations progressed. The page was a key site for monitoring video trends, specifically how TikTok themselves understands the activity occurring on the app from day to day and actively curates it for users. This became a way for me to compare how popular the memes I observed were beyond my For You page, and if they merited formalization through the recognition of a trend. A meme's inclusion on the Discover page was also a subtle signal that participation in the trend would act as a booster to visibility on the For You page. Indeed, this

editorial function of the Discover page should not be understated. From what I observed, the topics on the page were typically reorganized on a daily basis, though no clear ranking logic was described.

Curated trends are not unique to TikTok as both Facebook's Trending Topics and Twitter's Moments have previously come under scrutiny for the opacity of their processes for recommending news and other timely content (Duguay, 2018). It was also unclear if organizing the Discover page was undertaken through automation, human curation, or a mix of both. TikTok offers no insight into this on their official blog, but, according to their Transparency and Accountability Centre tour, the purpose of the Discover page is to highlight trending videos, hashtags, effects or sounds within the app. Similarly, the banners on the carousel are programmed by TikTok and can change daily. These banners typically highlight and promote things like scheduled live streams, trending hashtags, and, occasionally, sponsored brand campaigns (Kowalchuk, 2022). After regular examination and comparison with other users, I established that this page was not subject to algorithmic personalization and trends appear to be consistent, at least within Quebec but possibly nation-wide. This is supported by my observations that sponsored hashtags, including the campaigns #ShoppersWishList and #PCInsidersReport, were from Canadian brands.

The layout of the page resembles a vertical scrollable list, featuring videos laid out horizontally under each trending topic. At the top of the screen, above the trending list, is a banner carousel which features events, programming and other content TikTok wishes to highlight. Typically, when selected, each topic provided a short blurb describing the trend and giving context for users looking to imitate it. Much like the Sound Details page, prominent

examples which employ the trending sound or hashtag are showcased to demonstrate how users interpret the trend [Figure 9].

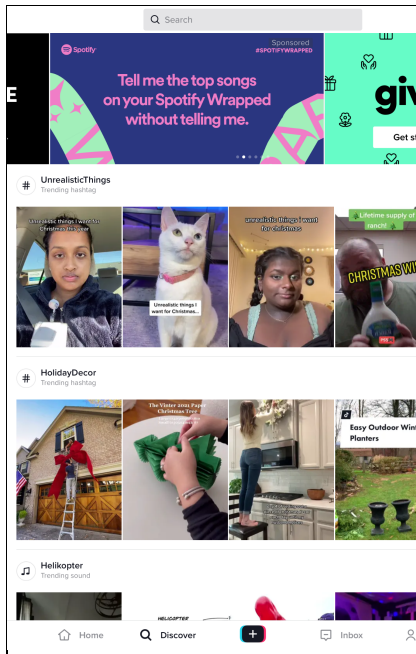


Figure 7: Screenshot of the TikTok Discover page showing banner carousel and top trending topics

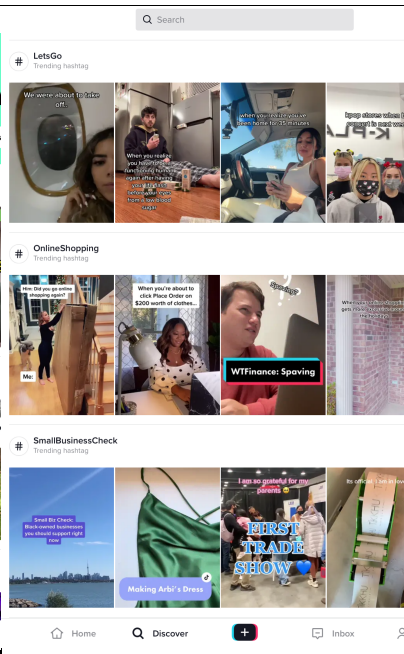


Figure 8: Screenshot of the TikTok Discover page showing the #LetsGo trend and other top trending topics

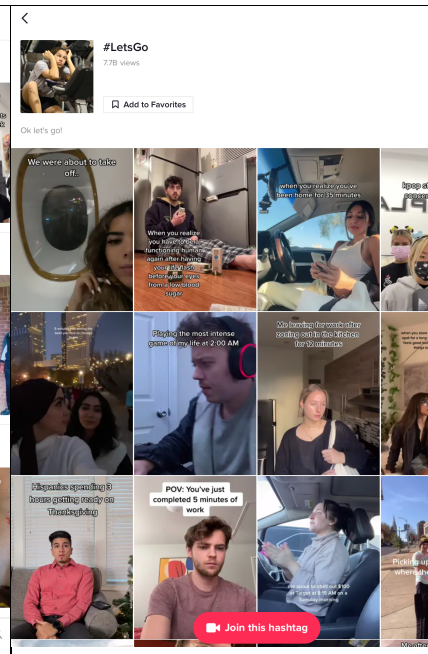


Figure 9: Screenshot of the #LetsGo topic page, showing Sarah Vilard's video at the top left

Throughout my observation period, I saw little overlap between the meme trends that populated my For You page, and the top trends on the Discover page. This was curious as many of the top trending topics were largely absent from my For You page, suggesting a disjuncture between my algorithmically personalized experience and the wider trends on the app. However, during the final week of my observations a familiar meme hit the trending page. Represented by the hashtag #LetsGo, the *Let's Go* meme graced the top ten for four days. At the time of initially recording it in my notes, the hashtag had reportedly garnered 7.3 billion views, a metric that represents the total views all videos under the hashtag have garnered across the app.

The hashtag corresponded with a sound titled “Okaay lets go” from the user Sarah Vilard (@sarahvilard). Vilard, whose video appears first under the hashtag’s suggested examples, seemingly originated the trend with a video posted on September 1, 2021. In the video she appears on a plane, filming the view of the darkened surroundings from the window by her seat [Figure 10-11]. The on-screen text reads “We were about to take off..” Shortly thereafter the chime that indicates a pilot’s announcement plays and someone is heard saying “okaaay let’s go” in a goofy and overly emphatic tone of voice. This is paired with on screen text that reads “but then the pilot made this announcement : sob emoji : ” Upon hearing the captain’s announcement, Vilard’s eyes widen and she looks up in confusion. She has just captured a moment of spontaneous outlandishness that appears to leave her feeling doubtful of the captain’s ability to safely pilot the aircraft. This is reinforced by her video caption which simply reads “Help”.

Vilard’s post, which is attributed as the original #LetsGo video does not use the hashtag. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it implies that Vilard did not set out to seed a viral meme with her video on the plane. The events on-screen appear real as her video serves to document the bizarre moment on her flight, rather than to solicit further imitation. In other words, this is an instance of organic hilarity rather than a cynical attempt to start the latest meme trend. The ensuing trend thus becomes an unexpected but fortuitous moment of visibility for Vilard who finds herself inundated with millions of likes on her videos and thousands of new followers. The video, which was initially posted on September 1, 2021, had garnered 4.9 million likes by December 2021 when I recorded it for my observations.

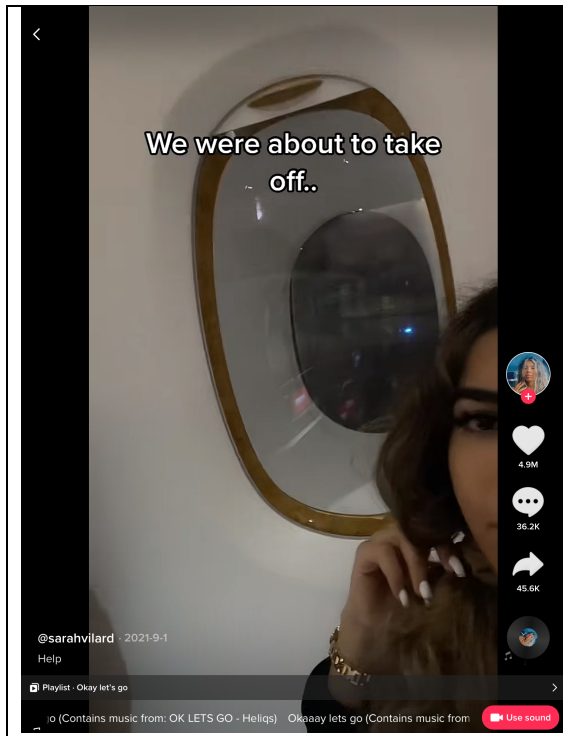


Figure 10: Screenshot from @sarahvilard's video in which the "Okaay let's go" sound originates, view of the window

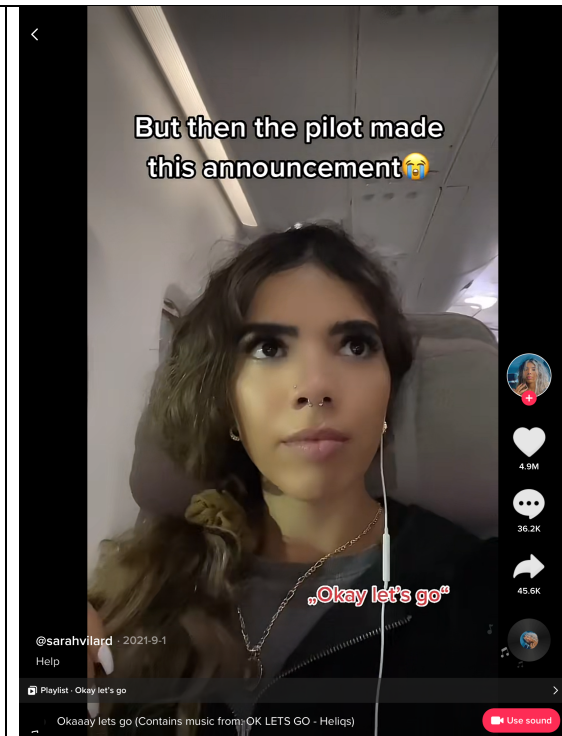


Figure 11: Screenshot from @sarahvilard's video in which the "Okaay let's go" sound originates, view of Vilard listening to pilot's announcement

Secondly, the absence of the #LetsGo hashtag from the video evidences the editorial aspect of Discover page trends. Here, TikTok can be seen as responding to organic trends emerging through the For You page and channeling them into salient forms that can be ranked by the Discover page. In other words, if the conceit of the Discover page is to rank and promote trending sounds, effects and hashtags, trends must be understood through these forms in order to merit inclusion on the trends list. So, in light of this, the team responsible for curating the Discover page may take spontaneous trends and memes that emerge on the For You page, possibly using a common creative affordance such as a sound, and index them using a hashtag. In this way, trending hashtags on TikTok express a top-down effort to render trends visible to all users, rather than just those who have seen the trend on their For You page. This is a distinct

break with how trending hashtags are used elsewhere online, particularly Twitter, where grassroots or bottom up hashtags allow users to place posts in conversation with one another and only trend once they garner enough engagement. In this view, TikTok's strategy for trend curation mirrors Facebook's efforts to curate trending news stories through human intelligence (Gillespie, 2016), rather than through automated systems that favour personalization, as on Twitter (Duguay, 2018). All said, this points to TikTok's desire to actively curate trends for their user-base, cultivating increased visibility for memes which translate to increased platform participation. In short, TikTok is fundamentally shaping creative production through the lens of algorithmic discoverability.

#### *The struggle of attribution*

Returning to Vilard's video, it is important to note while she is identified by TikTok as both the owner of the "Okaaay lets go" sound and the originator of the #LetsGo trend, the events of the video are imaginary and the pilot said no such thing on her flight. The audio is, in fact, a snippet from a Dutch reality television program *Man bijt hond* (*Man bites dog*), which highlights human interest stories in a newsmagazine format. The episode from which the sound originates, found widely online under such titles as "Turbo polyp, man bijt hond," depicts a middle aged man and a young boy playing around with a microphone with strong reverb settings, seemingly acting as emcees for the toy carnival set up on a table in front of them. Eventually, the boy utters the "Okay let's go" heard in Vilard's airplane video, confirming the origin of the viral TikTok sound.

TikTok's attribution system, imperfect as it may be, distinguishes the app from its predecessors. The system, including such features as the spinning record icon or the "contains music from" designation found on Sound Details pages, could be seen as an effective tool to

ensure cultural producers are properly credited; in actuality it proves more effective at encouraging mimicry and imitation. Unlike YouTube's Content ID system which penalizes copyright infringement through demonetization or takedown, few repercussions exist on TikTok for similar offences such as re-uploading a viral sound without credit. This partially lies in the core of TikTok's production model which allows users to apply snippets of popular music to their videos without fear of requiring a licensing agreement, provided the clip is under a minute (Banjo, 2021). Specifically, TikTok's automatic attribution system is ultimately more concerned with "facilitating effortless produsage" (Kaye et al., 2021, p. 3197) than protecting the copyright of cultural producers. This proves a double-edged sword for creators trying to make a career on the app as the laissez-faire approach modelled by TikTok's automatic system proves demotivating for those who might otherwise make effort to credit the originators of popular sounds. Rather, TikTok's singular approach to attribution prioritizes shortcuts to algorithmic visibility, reinforcing the app's tendency towards viral post-based fame rather than sustained creative personae.

With this in mind, it is plausible that Vilard recognized the popularity of the "okay let's go" audio meme amongst Dutch internet users and took advantage of TikTok's architecture to claim the popular sound as her own. By inserting the audio into a bizarre scenario and then making the sound available for other TikTokers to use, she leveraged a years-old meme into a moment of viral stardom. Indeed, Vilard has a history of soliciting such engagement on TikTok, having retold the story of holding herself a fake wedding in a video that garnered much attention (Pearson-Jones, 2021). From this view, it is clear that TikTok's platform architecture favours this type of eye-catching short video with versatile possibilities for reuse and imitation, giving rise to a particular type of cultural producer.

However, the disputed origins of this audio become more complex once the functionality of TikTok's automatic attribution system is brought into view. The system labels sounds as "contains music from" when they employ snippets from the copyright of recording artists. This feature was developed to credit the creators of music and other audio clips when their sounds were being used on the app, but the rampant culture of re-uploading sounds to capitalize on the inbuilt production affordances often makes this opaque and complicated.

In this case, the audio for Vilard's video, titled "Okaaay lets go", is marked as "contains music from: OK LETS GO – Heliqs." This is odd, not only because the sound does not contain any music but because the recording artist Heliqs posted a version of the track to YouTube on November 30, 2021 — post-dating Vilard's video by nearly three months. Heliqs identifies themselves as a remixer of popular TikTok audios, so the implication by the automatic attribution system, that Vilard was using Heliqs copyright, does not hold water regardless. Indeed, as I have detailed above, the "okay let's go" phrase is a popular and long standing meme. This is a revelation when it comes to TikTok: the need to accurately attribute memes places them distinctly within the realm of cultural products, not merely social ephemera. While etiquette may have previously dictated that credit to a meme's originator was preferred, there was never a mechanism to ensure this occurred. Moreover, a meme culture constituted by plurality and creative reuse is philosophically at odds with attribution and single-origin narratives. In this way, TikTok's automatic attribution system represents a significant shift in meme culture, subsuming content under the fiats of profit and accumulation.

This shift is particularly evident in situations when users who have misappropriated memes without crediting originators stand to profit from this activity, such as with the @fuckjerry Instagram debacle. There, @fuckjerry, a popular content aggregating account,

developed a network of accounts that would repost, for example, Twitter screenshots with the user's handle cropped out. With millions of followers, the network developed brand relationships, produced sponsored content and even released a board game on the backs of uncredited creators (Berger, 2019). Similarly, but to a far lesser degree, Heliqs can be observed as intentionally profiting from the "okay let's go" sound. However, where the cases differ is that the original instance of "okay let's go" was never said with the intention of being humorous or reproducible. The issue arises from the fact that this phrase has become a bona fide meme through years of communal (re)use. In that sense, the tension emerges not from one creator stealing from another but from a user who attempts to distill a decade of collectively built humour into a profit vehicle.

This occurrence articulates Kaye et al. 's (2021) concern that these tools for attribution do not guarantee that an aural meme template is accurately attributed to its originator. Reposting an original sound to claim it as one's own is a common practice on TikTok, as the renown that emerges from being the originator of a viral sound is highly attractive to users looking to amass likes and followers. From this perspective, TikTok has ultimately built and refined a platform where the surest way to ensure visibility is to misappropriate the work of other creators. By claiming a beloved meme as their own, Vilard and Heliqs each took advantage of this flawed system for potential monetary gain. While I cannot be certain that they earned money from their content, both users are positioned as potential high earners within TikTok's economic model, as I explore in the following chapter. This articulates the increasing commercialization of meme culture, which ultimately grants the savviest operators, rather than the most creative or inventive, the greatest potential to profit from these economies. The implications here are twofold. Firstly, as a platform that promotes creativity as their central tenant, TikTok can be seen as doing little to

actually protect the work of their homegrown creators from plagiarism and copyright infringement. Secondly, this is a profitable move for TikTok: a feature rather than a bug. The benefits that emerge from the possibility of achieving viral fame by re-uploading a creator's sound outweigh the costs of ensuring proper licensing and royalties. This demonstrates that ultimately TikTok's avenues to professionalization and their relationship to creators is far more fraught than it may appear.

### *Conclusion*

*Let's Go* is just one example of TikTok rendering relevant or trendy content visible through algorithmic and non-algorithmic means. While viral memes have long translated the popularity of their formats into increased potential for engagement and spread (Galip, 2021)—an effective positive feedback loop—TikTok attempts to apply this logic to every memetic form. Sounds are isolated and explicitly identified as vehicles for engagement. This mechanism, acting as both affordance and logic, inherently impacts how memes are made. Opting for a trending sound over a tonally similar but passé or irrelevant sound, for example, is the mechanism at work. The question is no longer “what are meme cultures” but rather, in light of the platformization of cultural production, “what are algorithmic meme cultures?”

Importantly, in May 2022 TikTok phased out the Discover page, replacing it with a feed for videos from mutual followers known as the Friends feed. This change irked many, including users who relied on the Discover page to highlight trends which could be used to boost the visibility of their content. However, from another perspective, the jettisoning of the Discover page both confirms that users primarily interact with the app through the For You page and reaffirms TikTok's confidence in the sufficiency of the algorithmic curation of trends as the definitive way to regulate discoverability. In other words, TikTok prefers to communicate trends through the experience of scrolling through the For You page and relying on contextual

knowledge of emerging trends, as I did in my observations to determine if a sound was being used in memes. For users who value a personalized experience above all else, this may be appealing and beneficial. Though it may also serve to further entrench users within their imitation publics. This shift also has interesting implications for sponsored content, seemingly disadvantaging sponsored hashtags in terms of awareness and tacitly encouraging advertisers to employ video ads. This form of advertising, largely driven by the Creator Marketplace, is explored further in the following chapter.

TikTok is proving incredibly adept at integrating shifts that have occurred more widely on platforms over the past decade. While memes as an emergent form of cultural production are well documented, TikTok has developed affordances that embed memetic logics within the platform. The quantification and representation of trends to a platform's users have also posed challenges to platforms such as Facebook, which TikTok chooses to evade through the functionality of their algorithmic For You page. However, TikTok meets a stumbling block at the heart of meme and remix cultures in attempting to solve the aporia of attribution. As a creator, the ability to monetize one's platform proves that attribution, reinterpretation, and memeification emerge as complex socio-technical processes, especially where algorithmic platforms are concerned.

## **Chapter 4: Economics of and Monetization by TikTok**

### *Introduction*

Of the world's over 4 billion internet users, 10.6% are considered influencers. These internet celebrities are seemingly abundant across major platforms, and are known for their intense visibility and ability to monetize their vast followings. However, according to new research, of the sea of internet users, only 0.001% (or 60,000) earn more than \$50K USD per year (McKelvey, 2023). In other words, a vanishingly small number of people worldwide make a modest living from being an online creator. At the same time, interest in pursuing a career as an online creator is skyrocketing amongst young people and the platformization of cultural production is intensifying across industries (Willment, 2022; Poell et al., 2022). With this in mind, it is worth investigating how TikTok is helping to shape this creator economy and the cultural production of memes, and if its current iteration might offer sustainable, or even livable conditions for cultural producers. TikTok's forms of monetization are inextricable from content discoverability: celebrity creators, influencers and other prominent cultural producers require high visibility to access financial rewards. Therefore, in order to conceptualize the stakes for creators seeking economic success on TikTok, it is crucial to make an explicit link between reach and earning potential.

TikTok is not publically traded and, therefore, does not have any requirements to publish reports on their revenue streams. While ByteDance generated 58 billion dollars in revenue in 2021 (Yang & Yu, 2022), TikTok's contribution to this total remains opaque— as does its share paid out to creators worldwide. From the Canadian perspective the three following cases are instructive for understanding TikTok's economics: pop music and audio memes; advertising as administered by the TikTok Creator Marketplace; and the use of in-app virtual currencies, Diamonds, and Live Gifting. This chapter serves as an analysis of data collected both during a

six-week observation period of the TikTok For You page and the Discover page from November to December 2021, and monitoring of news and official sources such as policy documents and blog posts by TikTok for information about content monetization strategies between 2021 and 2023. I was particularly attendant to the Canadian context as Canada is excluded from major forms of monetization on TikTok such as the Creator's Fund and TikTok Pulse. Following Nieborg and Poell (2018), I attempt to tease out the market structures and governance decisions that produce a form of platformized cultural labour on TikTok, i.e. meme making.

Each of the moments I examine in this chapter provide opportunities for creators to access financial remuneration: from the platform itself, from advertising partners and from their audience, respectively. Yet each of these revenue streams is deeply fraught by problems that reflect wider concerns in the creator economy. This chapter will proceed by way of an exploration of each of these moments, grappling with the unequal availability, high barrier of entry, and extractive nature of these revenues streams and conclude by reflecting on TikTok as not only a new outlet for existing creative labour, but also a site at which new labour practices and monetization strategies emerge.

#### *Audio: musicians and meme makers*

As a platform that facilitates and rewards creativity, the ability to scan the environment and make inventive, unexpected, and inspiring interventions becomes a crucial skill on TikTok (Abidin, 2021). For example, remixing a popular song into an audio meme template is an expertise which is often rewarded through increased visibility and recognition, albeit one tempered by the unpredictability of the FYP algorithm. In other words, when pop songs and other trendy audios are spotlighted by TikTok, successful meme-makers will reimagine songs in

ways that garner views and credit in videos, mutually (if unevenly) benefiting the creator, the artist, and the platform. Furthermore, visibility operates as a disciplinary process whereby creators are compelled to produce outputs that align with favorable aesthetic and creative tendencies, or find shortcuts to appear as if they are doing so (Zeng & Kaye, 2021).

These negotiations of visibility are well exemplified by the inbuilt attribution function provided by the “contains music” feature, first described in the previous chapter. As I explored there, music producer Heliqs piggybacked off of the viral popularity of Sarah Vilard’s *Let’s Go* trend by releasing a song that contained elements of the sound. Because of TikTok’s tendency to prioritize attribution for the work of musicians, Heliqs’ name was put in front of every user to investigate the sounds page for *Let’s Go*, driving traffic to their streaming pages and associating them with the vastly popular trend. What remains unclear is if, and how much, Heliqs profited from this endeavour. Regardless of the actual income it may have generated for the producer, this case highlights a radical manipulation of tools designed to protect industry and artist financial interests in order to boost one’s visibility in algorithmic platform environments. Moreover, it calls into question the efficacy of the automatic attributions system if it is easily thwarted by the opportunistic naming conventions of small-time music producers.

Though this type of visibility negotiation is unambiguously dishonest, from a contextual perspective it is compelling for what it indicates about the precarious condition of cultural producers on TikTok and the relationship meme-making has to visibility. As Duffy et al. (2021) have explored, precarity is characteristic of the creative industries, however, within the context of platform capitalism it is amplified and inherently linked to fluctuations in visibility. On TikTok, this precarity is characterized by both wider cultural trends which creators must engage with for hopes of succeeding and with subtle changes to algorithmic recommendation systems

which occur without transparency. However, Duffy et al. are sure to emphasize that precarity also works hand-in-hand with the *promise* of visibility, which dictates that a lucky few are able to access forms of monetization reserved for established creators: namely those who exceed a minimum follower count in the tens of thousands. The opaque and ceaseless nature of these updates to recommendation systems ensure creators are striving to keep up with changes, following trends and engaging in what Abidin has dubbed visibility labours or “the work that social media users perform to be noticed by their intended audiences, comprising self-posturing and the curation of self-presentations to be ‘noticeable and positively prominent’ among viewers” (2021, p. 85). In the context of platformization, algorithmic recommendation, and the attention economy this type of labour is necessary for success. Consequently, it is useful to conceptualize both Heliqs and Vilard’s actions in terms of the precarity of platformized culture production and the visibility labours available to creators to negotiate these conditions.

From this perspective, both creators have engaged in visibility labours: self-posturing for Heliqs, and the strategic presentation of self for Vilard. While Heliqs has attached their name to Vilard’s trend, she herself manipulated her audience in using a years old meme as a spontaneous gag. As explored above, “blowing up” by starting a viral meme trend remains an indirect measure to earn money on TikTok. For memes based in sounds that draw from popular music, artists make crumbs from TikTok streams, but still profit (Leight, 2022). Meanwhile, platform-native creators who make inventive audios pulled from original videos do not benefit directly from their creative outputs. The appeal of going viral is therefore the increased attention and the concomitant cultural relevance (i.e. follower count) which then translates to the ability to earn money through TikTok’s monetization mechanisms. Plainly, these require a large baseline of

followers to access as both the Creator's Fund and Live Gifting require over 10,000 followers to utilize (TikTok Creator Fund, 2021; LIVE Gifts on TikTok, n.d.)

In the past several years, TikTok has become the de facto hit-maker in the music industry. From emerging artists such as Doja Cat and Olivia Rodrigo to established names like Harry Styles and Kate Bush; viral stardom is seemingly granted overnight to artists whose tracks are taken up by TikTokers in videos used in dance trends, background music, and audio memes. As I explored in the previous chapter, TikTok is unique in how it employs memes with audio templates. This means that the trends constituted by these memes are frequently based in pop music. This initially occurred incidentally when fifteen second clips of danceable music were made available for creative re-use during the platform's days as Music.ly, but this phenomenon was formalized and institutionalized as TikTok now works closely with record labels and recording artists ensure mutual profitability (Savic, 2021; Banjo, 2021). This is accomplished by strategizing on music-based marketing campaigns and in some instances, TikTok directing labels to select singles optimized for the platform based upon swaths of user data. Furthermore, TikTok has refined and intensified a systems whereby marketing is realized on platforms as the commodification of referentiality. Brands can pay to be seen, and overcome the gamified uncertainty of algorithmic recommendation systems. In this context, there are two options for how to make your content seen. One is to play by the rules: influencer marketing, paid visibility, and the strategic presentations of self in line with trends and salient forms of content such as memes. The second is to break the rules and do your own thing. These are the negotiations of visibility within the platform's governance framework which entail strategies such as the manipulation of the automatic attribution system: using vectors of discoverability in unforeseen

and creative ways to enhance the visibility of your content and (potentially) reap financial rewards as demonstrated by the Heliqs/Vilard example.

In short, the case of Heliqs, Sarah Vilard, and the intentional misuse of attribution mechanisms proves to be a rearticulation of a question that has plagued meme creators, communities and researchers of meme making for years: who can, and should, profit from making meme templates? There is a fundamental contradiction at work which one type of cultural producer, whose industry has historical recognition and institutional power, should receive recognition, while another—whose outputs draw users to the platform and mobilize their participation in trends—receive none (Kowalchuk & McKelvey, 2022). TikTok is seemingly deepening and intensifying these tendencies, and when coupled with the unpredictability of changes to algorithmic recommendations systems, and the subsequent primacy of trends, the app proves an excellent site for critically examining this aspect of meme-making.

### *Advertising, marketing, and memes*

By now it is clear that TikTok offers various pathways, albeit uneven ones, to monetization for cultural producers. In the previous section, the discussion of Heliqs demonstrates that TikTok can function to connect creators with audiences and revenue streams beyond the platform: driving users to stream an artist's songs on Spotify, for example. On TikTok itself, visibility matters to creators who profit from avenues like the Creator's Fund and TikTok Pulse, TikTok's revenue sharing program. However, as outlined by the discussion of precarity, sustained visibility is the ultimate challenge for creators in algorithmic environments. And to benefit from these forms of monetization that are coupled with visibility, creators must align with normative values such as following trends (Duffy et al., 2021; Zeng & Kaye, 2021).

Following trends is often not enough to keep creators in the spotlight which raises questions about the gendered, raced, classed biases built into these systems (Noble, 2018; Biddle et. al, 2020; Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Not all creators start on even footing and are consequently not afforded the same means by which to maintain their visibility and access economic rewards. In the face of the algorithmic lottery, a solution can be found, then, in paying to be visible. This logic is the crux of marketing. The alleviation of algorithmic uncertainty occurs when brands pay to be seen. In this section I explore two facets in this matrix of branded (in)visibility and consider how TikTok is unique in engineering these conditions.

I wish to begin this discussion of branding and visibility by providing an explanation of a mechanism by which TikTok manages recommendations. In early 2023, a leak and subsequent investigation by Forbes magazine revealed that TikTok possesses a back-end feature available to employees that can make any content go viral. The so-called ‘heating button’ was designed to diversify content recommendations to newer users and help creators making cross-genre videos find the correct niche. While heating is a common practice on social media platforms, it is typically disclosed and applied in cases where it benefits the public good (e.g. accurate COVID-19 information on Facebook). On TikTok it appears that the feature was used to strategically manipulate the visibility of certain types of content. “TikTok has often used heating to court influencers and brands, enticing them into partnerships by inflating their videos’ view count. This suggests that heating has potentially benefitted some influencers and brands” (Baker-White, 2023). In other words, TikTok artificially inflated the reach of paid visibility content, in an attempt to convince brands and influencers of its efficacy in connecting them with audiences. When taken alongside the decommissioning of the Discover page in June 2022, which from my observations served a daily list of national, non-algorithmically curated trends on the app, this

existence of this feature demonstrates that the key to understanding TikTok's business model lies in the management of attention

Furthermore, as Zeng and Kaye have found, instead of content moderation, TikTok engages in visibility moderation or “the process through which digital platforms manipulate (i.e. amplify or suppress) the reach of user-generated content through algorithmic or regulatory means” (2022, p. 81). This requires creators to engage in innovative means of overcoming algorithmic obscurity. Both mainstream creators and regular users can negotiate visibility by manipulating mechanisms for content discovery, such as sponsored hashtags. As Zeng and Kaye found, creators will engage in this type of “bandwagoning” wherein they utilize TikTok-made hashtags associated with social justice campaigns to boost their video views. While TikTok attempts to boost the visibility of social-justice driven content as a means of curating their corporate image, creators find that by tagging their (unrelated) videos with these hashtags, they benefit from the tags' increased potential for recommendation.

What I found during my six-week observation period of the For You and Discover pages is that a similar strategy is being applied to corporate hashtags by creators at all levels of professionalism: thus affirming that branding solves for algorithmic invisibility. In mid-November 2021, I observed that Shoppers Drug Mart and President's Choice, two major Canadian retail brands, launched sponsored hashtags to accompany their holiday ad campaigns. #ShoppersWishList and #PCInsidersReport were designated as trending sponsored hashtags on the Discover page, which incited users to participate in their campaigns by using a branded filter to construct their gift wish list from Shoppers or to win points for a free gift, respectively. Canadian users quickly and cleverly misappropriated these hashtags and used them in their videos as a vector of discoverability. As is shown in Figures 12-15 users applied the hashtags to

videos that were completely irrelevant to the topic of the hashtags in a manner that implies their utility for increasing reach. This is a crucial distinction: whether the use of #ShopperWishList or #PCInsidersReport actually increased the reach of these videos remains to be seen, but creators understand bandwagoning to be a useful shortcut to visibility. This implicates a new politics of discoverability. Users have found that while brands can use them for free advertising, they also have the ability to turn this back upon itself and benefit from the effects of paid discoverability. By using an amplified (i.e. sponsored) hashtag for an off-label purpose, users negotiate their visibility on TikTok and demonstrate the efficacy of paid advertising as an alleviation for the uncertainty of algorithmic recommendation. This affirms my findings in the previous section in regards to the dovetail in options available to meme-makers for their visibility management. One can choose to organically participate in the engineered trends and memes offered by brands, or can manipulate these mechanisms for their own purposes. These off-label uses, so to speak, reflect wider beliefs held by creators on how to game the recommendation system identified as algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019) and algorithmic folklore (Akinrinade, 2021) elsewhere.



Figure 12: Screenshot of a video from TikTok user @bel using the #ShoppersWishlist tag opportunistically



Figure 13: Screenshot of a video from TikTok user @siancena using the #ShoppersWishlist tag opportunistically

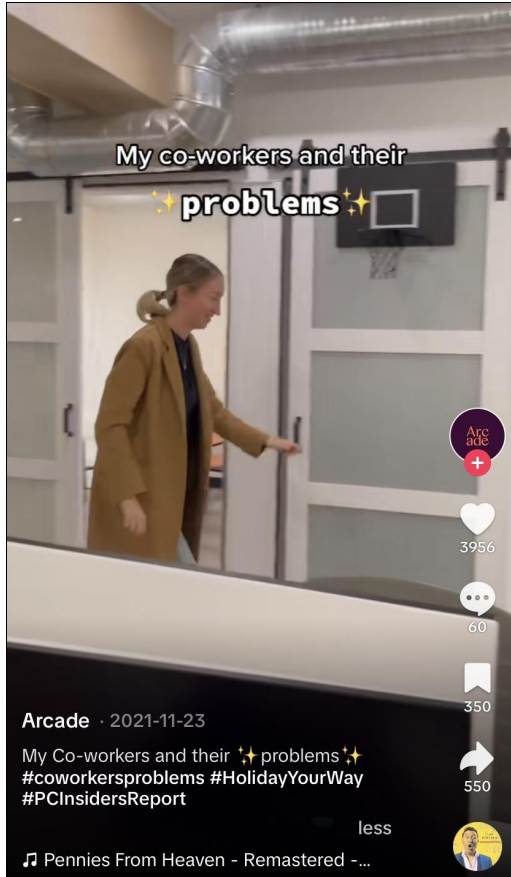


Figure 14: Screenshot of a video from TikTok user @Arcade using the #PCInsidersReport tag opportunistically

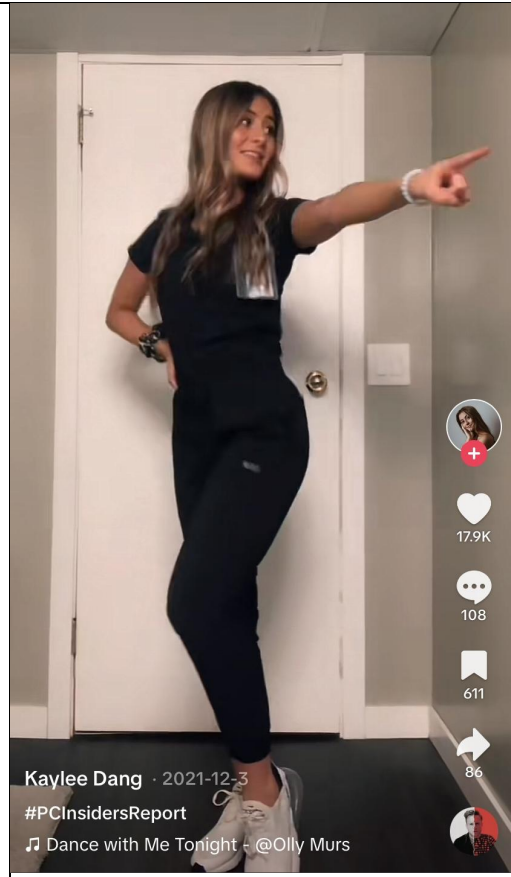


Figure 15: Screenshot of a video from TikTok user @Kaylee Dang using the #PCInsidersReport tag opportunistically

Another instructive example to consider when examining how TikTok administrators visibility in the light of commercial intervention is to examine advertising on the platform. These are videos which include the pre-roll ads which play when the app is opened and must be bypassed to continue scrolling on the For You page, and the branded videos that bear the “Sponsored” banner and/or #Ad designation that appear in the For You page amid regular videos. For example, videos which appropriately applied the #ShoppersWishList and #PCInsidersReport hashtags were sponsored and featured prominent Canadian creators to pique

interest in the campaigns. Creators have the opportunity to participate in this commercialization when brands hire them to be the face of these highly visible videos. Conveniently, brands are able to create advertising campaigns with established creators using the TikTok Creators Marketplace (TTCM). This supplementary platform is designed by TikTok to facilitate business transactions between creators, their talent management, and brand representatives. As a business owner or social media manager, one registers for the TTCM and is able to browse through thousands of creators whose profiles designated their follower count, genre of content, country of origin, and base rate for brand deals. Brands are therefore able to shop around for the perfect creator for a particular campaign, reach out to multiple creators with offers at once, or merely get an idea of how much creators charge for a typical campaign. This model proves helpful for newer or less established players in this market, from both the perspective of creators and the perspective of brands. In more traditional influencer marketing schemes, brands must reach out to talent managers or general inquiry emails to make proposals to influential digital creators, but the TTCM facilitates these connections with speed and ease. Much uncertainty is removed from the process and several (if not all) aspects of a brand deal can be managed within a single platform vertical. Consequently, the TTCM positions TikTok as a talent management and branding intermediary in a way that has not been seen before in the creator economy.

On YouTube, for example, pre-roll ads are common but rarely feature the subject of the videos a user logs on to watch. In a similar vein, YouTubers frequently feature sponsorships in their videos with brands that are known to work with creators across the platform. “This video is brought to you by...” is a common refrain and content is often tailored to match the character of the brand. It is also understood that these brand deals are managed outside the YouTube platform and despite their prominence, YouTube as a corporate entity has little role in connecting these

players. TikTok, though, innovates upon this model entirely. While creators maintain the ability to make branded content on their pages which have been facilitated through management, the TTCM also makes it possible to collaborate with brands on sponsored videos which have guaranteed reach in the FYP. These videos can then originate either from the brand's page or from the creator's page, which is more common. These videos bear a "Sponsored" banner, indicating to the user that the content they are consuming is a paid endorsement of the product mentioned in the video. Paid partnerships are a form of legitimation that both index a creator's popularity and further their reach with new audiences. Brand deals both affirm that a creator is relevant enough to bestow their trust (and that of their followers) upon a brand, and the nature of paid visibility for these ads ensures that the creator will be surfaced on the For You pages of users who may not have otherwise encountered them. Since sponsored content must also compete for users' attention in the FYP<sup>2</sup>, these videos increasingly takes formal cues from, and even outright imitate, trends. In other words, brands must meme in order to maintain relevance on TikTok. This perfectly encapsulates the way meme cultures and commercial cultures mutually reinforce each other on the platform. Advertising and sponsored content on TikTok, then, emerges as a frontier upon which the interests of brands, creators, meme-makers, and the platform itself come up against one another in complex and unforeseen ways.

*Diamonds: Direct audience support and meme makers*

Lastly, I wish to explore a form of monetization that is particularly relevant for a political economic analysis as it exemplifies the commodification occurring across platform economies

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<sup>2</sup> While brands pay for their videos to make it to the feeds of users, there is no mechanism in place to make sure the videos are actually watched. Users may scroll past the videos as they do with any other in the feed.

and highlights the extractive nature of the platformization of labour. Platforms have become technologies for moving and extracting capital in as many ways as possible (Srniczek, 2016). This is demonstrated clearly through in-app virtual currencies. In-app virtual currencies are an increasingly common form of financial remuneration made available by platforms in order to facilitate payments between users and service providers. Often found in such livestreaming contexts as Twitch.tv or sexcam sites (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Hernandez, 2020), they can take the form of coins, tokens, bits, or gifts which are purchased in exchange for legal tender by a user and then converted back into cash by the service provider. In particular, Antonia Hernandez's discussion of this technology on the sex-cam platform Chaturbate illuminates the widespread practice of exchange rate manipulation at work with this monetary form. This price manipulation has also been occurring across virtual currencies such as those on the blockchain, for several years. However, unlike cryptocurrencies and other monetary forms residing on the blockchain, this is not a clear case of financialization and still remains undertheorized with the respect to TikTok.

The present state of prominence of in-app virtual currencies on platforms is telling. This form of payment underwent institutionalization by platforms, as it formalized a tendency on such livestream sites for viewers who wished to support their favourite streamers to make donations through apps like PayPal. As Johnson and Woodcock found in their study of Twitch streamers (2019), integrating this functionality into the platform increased revenue for streamers as donors could make financial contributions without leaving the page and was, additionally, attractive to the platform itself as they were able to take a cut of the donation when they facilitated the transaction. In doing so, in-app virtual currencies have produced a new form of unregulated extraction of capital from platform users and cultural producers. Twitch's in-app

currency “bits” appear to have a transparent, if variable, exchange rate (i.e. \$1.40 USD for 100 bits, where the price is reduced when bought in larger amounts). TikTok, meanwhile, has developed a deeply convoluted method of making payments to creators which is governed by their Virtual Items Policy (2022). The policy sets out the method by which users over the age of majority may make donations to content providers by purchasing Coins at a transparent rate in the currency of their country of residence. These coins are then available for exchange into Gifts which may be awarded to creators (or so-called content providers) for certain types of content, both live and asynchronous (LIVE gifting, n.d.; Video Gifts, n.d.). Once a content provider receives gifts, they are converted into a virtual credit known as Diamonds. These Diamonds are considered by TikTok to be “a measurement of the popularity of the relevant User Content” and, more importantly, “are based on the Gifts a Content Provider receives, *at a rate of conversion to be determined by us from time to time in its absolute and sole discretion.*” (Virtual Items Policy, 2022, emphasis added). Once Content Providers accrue an amount of Diamonds they wish to cash out, they may withdraw the balance in USD through a PayPal account registered to them. This system of currency exchange and price manipulation is represented in Figure 16. Notably, the arrows, which represent the moments of exchange and therefore price manipulation, are unidirectional since at no point can the assets be converted back into their previous forms (e.g. gifts back into coins or coins back into CAD). Predictably, there is a lot of intentional vagueness in the language surrounding these policies which makes an informed analysis of the viability of this form of monetization nearly impossible.



Figure 16: Visual representation of TikTok's virtual currency exchange system, per their Virtual Items policy

The case of the mysterious floating value signifier of TikTok's virtual in-app currencies more generally exemplifies an issue taken up by Antonia Hernandez in her doctoral dissertation on the sexcam platform Chaturbate (2020). She found that, similar to TikTok, Chaturbate habitually halved the value of its in-app currency between the time it was bought by viewers and donated to cammers. She argued that, while it can be said that the platform keeps half the exchanged money, it cannot be said that the platform withholds half of the performer's earnings. This is an important distinction that positions a platform, whether TikTok or Chaturbate, as a financial institution with absolute discretion on the value of a digital creator's labour time. Diamonds are not equivalent to currencies in the blockchain or to NFT which are decentralized and can be speculated upon. Rather, they point to virtual currency creation as a key power of platforms. Building on Hernandez, this power is more about exchange rate manipulation than the production of fictitious capital. It is little wonder, then, that TikTok's most widely accessible form of monetization available to creators worldwide is the Coin/Gift/Diamond schema. Hernandez notes, "as money, tokens reveal more than a technology for equalizing labour time, they are simply a technology for extraction" (Hernandez, 2020, p. 105). Financially vulnerable creators in the global south and other locales where the Creator's Fund, TikTok Pulse, and the TikTok Creator Marketplace are not available turn towards this form of remuneration which creates more value for the platform than for the cultural producer labouring on its architecture.

Interestingly, the ephemeral nature of livestreams appears to be a constant for the contexts in which virtual currencies are applied to online creators: including on TikTok which, I reason, is twofold. Firstly, “live” creators can respond reflexively towards their audience by tailoring their activities during a live stream towards the preferences of the viewers to solicit greater monetary rewards. Secondly, and relatedly, creators are able to acknowledge these donations from their viewers in real time, thanking them and even addressing them by (user)name in an effective enhancement of the parasocial relationship they possess with their audience.

Without employing methods such as interviews with creators who earn money through Live Gifting to ascertain the consistency and exchange rate of their earnings (clearly beyond the scope of a Master’s thesis), there is little that can be done by examining the content of policies alone. However, the case of William White (a young Canadian TikTok star whose content skews towards the lip sync/thirst trap variety aimed at Gen Xers) elucidates some characteristically extractive properties of TikTok’s virtual in-app currency. In a 2022 magazine article examining how White’s relationship with his (more mature than one might expect for TikTok) fan-base turned toxic, journalist Jessica Lucas noted that White had proved himself a top earner through TikTok’s Live Gifting function, providing him with enough cash flow to quit his work as a bricklayer. In fact, his earnings were such that

During a March [2022] TikTok Live Battle Week — in which influencers are pitted against each other to earn the most “gifts” — White was crowned champion after earning a total of 15.3 million “diamonds” in seven days. That translates to roughly \$231,740 in spending on behalf of White’s fans. After TikTok took its substantial cut, that meant \$76,500 in earnings for White. (Lucas, 2022)

Though these earnings are undoubtedly impressive for a week's work, they also illuminate several important facts about TikTok's in-app currency. Firstly, that the value of Diamonds, in this instance, is equivalent to 0.015 USD or one and half cents. Secondly, after White's fans spent over \$230,000 on gifts for their favourite creator, TikTok retained 67% of the monetary value of his fans' spending, White netted a paltry 33% which, admittedly, still amounted to nearly \$80,000. There are many possible reasons for the deeply intricate form TikTok's Virtual Items policy takes, though one stands out to me in light of the William White case. This complexity may be an attempt to avoid securities regulation, a notion further supported by the non-exchangeability and non-transferability of both gifts and coins which (if it were allowed) might produce an on-platform economy between creators and facilitate the adoption of speculative pricing and financialization of the in-app currency. Indeed, deregulation has historically enabled the unhindered flow of capital. In this case, a lack of regulation available for virtual currencies enables the platform to extract value from through the manipulation of exchange rates with few barriers.

My work exists at the horizon of new theories of commodification of platforms. There is little scholarly examination of the virtual in-app currency systems on TikTok despite its widespread use. It can be fairly said, then, that we do not understand its complexities, applications, or ramifications, but this is by design. Though in-app virtual currencies are in use on other platforms in similar ways to TikTok, the strength of a platform studies approach is felt through a concerted analysis of the specificities of individual platforms. As such, examining TikTok's particular modes of applying this logic are important for furthering a political economic analysis, particularly in light of its uniquely precarious position for influencers who battle to remain relevant in the context of algorithmic precarity. As I have explored above,

influencers are increasingly creators who produce things that go viral or contribute to things that go viral. In other words, we are observing a convergence of meme cultures and influencer cultures which has been occurring for the past decade, but that has been accelerated by TikTok's algorithmic recommendation system and its influence on popular culture. The question remains, for whom is value produced from these activities? Certainly for the platform which engineers the rise and fall of viral trends, of ingenuous influencers, and cultural crazes. But for all its innovation, TikTok has remained unable or unwilling to chart sustainable pathways to a career in cultural production for its creators.

*Conclusion: What does this all mean?*

Given the findings of this chapter, it is helpful to question how meme-makers, their labour, and its commodification should be conceptualized moving forward. My instinct is to offer a further investment into the framework of feminist political-economy, particularly in light of Hernandez's contributions surrounding the platformization of sex work. Virtual sex work implicates a blurring of lines between work and leisure to produce a form of entertainment, something that is echoed in the work of meme-makers and influencers on TikTok. Furthermore, after this initial blurring that gives rise to the figure of the sex worker or the influencer as a precarious and ambivalently positioned labourer, there is a second move towards the creation of professional norms around the figure of the worker. In the case of sex workers this is how they may solicit tips on a sexcam stream, and for influencers this may be the acceptable methods by which they monetize their following through either direct financial support or by delivering their audience to advertisers. While sex work remains socially marginalized, it is helpful to return to

the prominence of online creator as aspirational career for young people to consider how the capitalist exploitation of the marginal comes to inform the labour conditions of the mainstream.

What has become clear to me in my examination of the platformization of cultural production on TikTok by way of its affordances and monetization pathways, is that the app thrives as a one-stop shop. Memes are created, archived, and retrieved in one place. Advertisers connect with influencers and produce sponsored content without ever needing to leave TikTok. New forms of celebrity emerge on the For You page, where the boldest creators throw themselves into the abyss of algorithmic uncertainty to find audiences who pay them through virtual gifts, governed by arcane policies aimed at measuring their popularity. To speak of a TikTok creator or a TikTok meme is to speak of a precise and entirely unique entity. They could never exist elsewhere online. They have been molded to fit the shape of the platform and to succeed in ways that only exist here. This is the essence of platformization: a siloing of the open web. Why go anywhere else when everything is here?

This is to say, that the social, cultural, and political economic tensions in which memes are bound up, are accelerated, intensified, and crystallized on TikTok. Conversely, the quality and texture of platformization is brought to life by studying memes, as memeing, especially on TikTok, is bound up in so many conflicting capitalist interests. Cultural producers struggle to earn a living, while the producers of corporate meme content fail to inspire organic participation. So while it may be tempting to point out that even if memeing is ultimately an unprofitable endeavour for cultural producers, just as often memes as marketing vehicles ring false. However, just because something is unprofitable does not make it anti-capitalist, revolutionary, or emancipatory, and as this medium moves through platforms and algorithmic environments it is perhaps most useful as a weathervane for the changing winds of cultural production.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In their official communications, TikTok repeatedly emphasizes that their mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy through short-form mobile video. As a platform, TikTok prides itself on being a space to communicate authentically and allow users to be themselves through unique forms of self-expression (TikTok for Business, 2021). While these claims form the basis of the way they market themselves to potential users, investors, and advertisers, they also resonated for me as a researcher. From the beginning of my journey with TikTok, it has been clear to me that it marks a distinct break with previous platforms of cultural production, while also expanding upon the aspects of them that made them successful, particularly in regards to the production and circulation of memes within an algorithmically curated environment. From the outset, this thesis set out to accomplish three broad goals:

1. Periodize TikTok as a particular moment in internet and memetic culture;
2. Investigate the conditions of memetic production on the TikTok app that emphasize a certain kind of video meme production; and,
3. Examine the changing political economy of meme cultures online.

I hoped that through an engagement with the framework set out by Nieborg and Poell (2018), I would succeed in illustrating the first by way of the latter two. In fact, what I found is that the way TikTok has integrated memetic logics into its platform reveals an attempt to co-opt the sociality of memes. Here, creativity is circumscribed, authenticity is communicated through artificial signifiers, and visibility is managed through intentional formal choices made to appease the algorithmic recommendations system.

I began in chapter three by asking how the platform infrastructure of TikTok, particularly its affordances for production and discoverability, influence the cultural production of memes.

By clarifying what makes a TikTok meme distinct from other memetic forms (i.e. their templatability through audio as a fixed or stable element), the Sound Details page became a key site of analysis for me. This affordance proved to be one of the crucial sites at which TikTok incorporates memetic logics into its platform and streamlines the production of memes. The Sound Details page simultaneously contextualizes memes by organizing all videos that use the sound in one place, and facilitates participation by encouraging users to make their own video using the sound. This type of creativity, which is shaped or guided by the platform, is an example of what Kaye et al. (2020) have dubbed “circumscribed creativity.” This circumscribed creativity can also be observed in the way TikTok effectively engineers trends through the Discover page. This is not to say that there is a push to make obscure or irrelevant content “popular,” rather, TikTok uses available tools, such as hashtags, to index memes and applies them to emerging trends in a way that makes memes into salient forms that appear relevant on the Discover page. Plainly, this is the site where memes become formal trends.

This is significant as the Discover page was not algorithmically personalized. This means that it is the only space on TikTok where every user would have access to the same information about what was currently happening on the app. Furthermore, this process of engineering trends through the Discover page was doubly significant to my findings as it both reflected the popularity of memes on the For You page but also signalled to users that participating in these trends would boost the visibility of their content. This is underlined by the phenomenon of hashtag bandwagoning that I explored in chapter four, where users would apply sponsored hashtags to videos that were not relevant to the theme of the hashtags designed by corporate marketing teams. In this way, the Discover page emerged as a site of visibility negotiation where

meme-makers, marketers, and normal users could understand what kinds of videos Canadians were making and how they might use these cues to their own advantage.

As the *Let's Go* case exemplified, TikTok has imperfect ways of identifying who started a meme, and the platform's methods of indexing them tend to favor the reproducibility of trendy content rather than accurate attribution to the creators who originate a sound template. However, the structures that do exist to provide attribution for memes, such as the "original" banner for videos on the Sound Details page or the automatic attribution system for music, reinforce that on TikTok memes are cultural products, not merely social ephemera. The need to identify singular origins for these cultural products marks a shift from the communal, pluralistic ethos meme culture to one where commercial interests have become deeply enmeshed into meme-making. Moreover, this points towards the primacy of a viral, post-based fame logic in which the boom and bust character of the attention economy overrides more coherent, long-term strategies for fame and sustained recognition championed by earlier platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or even Vine. TikTok, therefore, marks the rise of an algorithmic meme culture. This cultural shift takes the tenets of traditional meme cultures, such as resonance and reproducibility, and simultaneously enhances their effects and subordinates them to the force of the algorithmic recommendation system.

It is also important to note that, since the conclusion of my research, TikTok has decommissioned the Discover page, replacing the tab on the app with a "Friends" feed. The significance of this change cannot be overlooked since, despite the criticisms of users who felt this would alienate brands and other users who relied on TikTok's trend curation for their creative success, TikTok has effectively doubled down on their commitment to algorithmically curated approaches to content discovery. This change affirms TikTok's belief in the efficacy of

their algorithmic recommendation system, and the importance of personalization as a key value of this system. In this model of content discoverability, a user will encounter all that they need to know about trending topics and memes through the For You page in a manner that has been precisely optimized for the preferences they have already signalled to the algorithm. From a more pessimistic viewpoint, this change also opens up possibilities of manipulation and an intensification of opacity associated with recommendations on a purely algorithmic feed. In other words, without a nationally applicable sounding board for relevant content, such as the Discover page, it becomes harder for users to understand why they might be seeing certain videos. Within my own corpus, I observed memes which appeared popular on my For You page, but never manifested as a trend on the Discover page. While this might be expected for a platform as vast as TikTok with as many subcultures or imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), it paints a troubling picture of an algorithmic regime that proves equally plastic as it is opaque.

### *Visibility, authenticity, and precarity*

In chapter four, I set out to answer my second research question: how do TikTok's economics and creators' pathways to monetization influence the cultural production of memes? This is obviously an incredibly broad question, and when faced with the global relevance of TikTok and its regional specificities, I chose to focalize the Canadian perspective. This allowed me to take an approach which balanced the political economic context of the global north with the regulatory limitations which exclude Canadian creators from major forms of monetization, such as the Creator Fund. This made the Canadian context both highly unique and instructive for examining TikTok's business models.

My most crucial findings in this section related to the ways in which visibility and monetization are inextricably entwined, leading to precarity for creators. These findings resonate with earlier work by platforms scholars such as Bishop (2018), Cotter (2019), and Duffy et al. (2021), though contextualizing this through TikTok confirmed that meme makers must strive to create videos that will align with the features of algorithmically salient content in order to access monetary rewards.

Meme makers increasingly attempt to create content that will allow them to access off-platform and in-app revenue streams, due to the increased visibility it affords them. However, visibility and monetary remuneration do not exist in a one to one relationship. Despite the increased focus on crediting creators of original content which I emphasized in my findings from chapter 3, even when a trend starter can be identified, they do not necessarily profit in meaningful ways. Rather, a few lucky creators triumph over the visibility jackpot to achieve tangible financial rewards which reinforces meritocratic myths. This is particularly significant when these success stories are those creators who have played by the rules, utilizing the nudges towards trending sounds, effects, and hashtags to boost their reach.

At its heart, TikTok's business model resides in the commodification of visibility through marketing. My analysis found evidence for this in such discoverability features as the heating button, which shows that TikTok possesses a lever that can make any video viral, and the technique of bandwagoning marketing campaigns, thus playing into informal or "folk" understandings of the algorithmic recommendation system. A major breakthrough that emerged in my examination of the TikTok Creator Marketplace is how talent recruitment for marketing campaigns is inbuilt on the platform. Much like the in-building of (re)production features for memes that I explored in chapter three, this folding-in of once distinct aspects of the influencer

marketing framework does an excellent job of expressing the nature of platformization as the development of the platform into the proverbial one-stop shop for aspects of an industrial sector, such as social media or entertainment (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Finally, I found that when users are given the ability to directly support the creators they like, such as with Live Gifting and virtual currency, it is through a system which extracts value from them both. Again, in order to gain the attention of viewers, content must be immediately eye-catching and engaging. Furthermore, these creators must cultivate intimacy with their viewers which is conveyed through signifiers of authenticity and spontaneity. The perceived intimacy of parasocial relationships is what makes these creators effective at contributing to viral trends. In this way, their labour and economic interests cannot be extricated from those things that go viral and incite reproduction (i.e. memes).

### *Algorithmic Meme Cultures and the Post-Meme Condition*

It must be reiterated that as a result of the platformization of cultural production, both content *and* complementors (i.e. creators) are ranked by algorithmic curation (Poell et al., 2022). From a political economy perspective, this process is rooted in norms and values that serve economic interests, and perpetuates an environment where other conflicting values such as creativity, accountability, equity, and social and cultural diversity have difficulty succeeding (Poell et al., 2022, pp. 91-92). This means that the outcome of algorithmic curation is the production of content that serves economic interests. As I have outlined throughout this thesis, this is either “safe” stuff such as joining in on a meme which has already proven to be popular and widely adopted or producing the most zany, provocative, and extreme videos: both of which aim to reach as many people as possible. When guaranteed reach becomes an aim (because

creators must fight against the threat of algorithmic invisibility), the ability to make things that are subtle, nuanced, or meant for many different types of audiences is lost. When coupled with the drive towards hyper-personalization, the meme culture that TikTok's business model fosters is one of a forced dual relevancy. Memes and other trendy content must resonate with broader, popular tendencies occurring across the app including the use of certain sounds or visuals, while also maintaining a specific niche that has been carved out by the hyper-personalization at work on the For You page. What is clear from these findings is that the platform's affordances and business model are mutually reinforcing, and continue to evolve concomitantly. TikTok's emphasis on algorithmic visibility as a prerequisite to financial compensation, its affordances which encourage (re)creation, particularly for content that it has deemed salient through explicit and tacit means, and its construction of authenticity as relatability and, therefore, discoverability and reproducibility demonstrate this plainly.

To zoom out further, it is useful to consider what TikTok can tell us about the wider platform economy, particularly platforms that facilitate the production of memetic content. Historically, these platforms have been built upon a social graph, where the draw of joining lay in the appeal of sharing virtual space with offline friends. Facebook and Twitter thrived in producing these unparalleled network effects, leveraging existing social connections into multi-billion dollar revenues and fundamental changes to our social order. But TikTok is different. Joining TikTok often has little or nothing to do with keeping up with what friends are doing. In fact, one need not even follow a single user in order to get the full experience of the app. Indeed, this is the power of the For You page: from the very first time one lands upon it when opening the app, it provides engrossing entertainment by way of endless scrolling. Some have posited this as the death of "social" media (Newport, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022), but at the very least to speak

of a "TikTokification" is to consider a turn from the social to the entertainment form as the dominant modality for platforms populated by user generated content. Indeed, while TikTok's staying power remains debatable, its impacts are deeply felt across the platform ecosystem. Its effective co-opting of meme sociality and the expansion of its logics to a platform level betrays its aim to cultivate a machine for making a new product: that of social media entertainment. TikTok is effectively divorcing entertainment and distraction from organic sociality, something highlighted by the notion of the imitation public (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Conceptually, a public oriented towards a common ritual of replication articulates a shared stance towards a form of entertainment more so than shared identities, discourses, or affects.

Moving forward, I wonder if memes will continue to be a useful way to think about TikTok and its forms of cultural (re)production at all. TikTok has incorporated memetic logics within the platform to such a great extent that in some ways, the contours of the isolatable meme begin to dissolve. Indeed, this thesis spent much verbiage exploring the confluence of memes and trends but was unable to fully attend to the distinction between the two, and how a group of texts collectively reproduced by users on TikTok but lacking rigid formal elements might be theorized. While this might be taken up by an examination of genre versus meme, it remains provocative in this moment of scholarly development within the field of meme studies, where some have begun to question if perhaps we are post-meme (Arkenbout et al., 2021). This quandary recalls the stumbling block for the first incarnation of meme studies that followed Richard Dawkins's theorization of a unit of cultural transmission in 1976. The exact locus of memetic transmission was never found (Sampson, 2012). Given new life in the internet era, the meme has provided a crucial lens through which to understand shifts occurring in social life, popular culture, and politics. But now, as its logics and mechanisms are being subsumed by some

of the biggest technical infrastructures built by humans to serve economic interests, we might need new theories. Further research on TikTok will surely engage with the changes the platform introduces to innovate upon its current business and production models. Meanwhile, at the end of this thesis, I find myself more intrigued with the dissolving edge of the meme that TikTok is inadvertently producing. So many of the most widely engaged cultural moments of the past few years have emerged from TikTok and spread elsewhere online. TikTok seems to be offering a venue for the emergence and spread of new cultural ideas, particularly ones bound up with consumerism, which might sometimes manifest in humorous and easily reproducible formats. While it might be the latest in a long line of digital technologies that offers this, it is no less worth remarking upon. Studying TikTok and its algorithmic meme culture recalls older forms of media and theory. Its problematics and specificities might feel new, but upon closer inspection we find that TikTok's applications and contexts are familiar. As always, new media recalls the old.

### *Reflexive Analysis*

It is a scholarly necessity to think about one's research reflexively. However, it is a rare luxury to have the space to do so alongside the work itself. In writing a thesis, theories, texts, methods, and word choices sediment to produce a singular output. Had other choices been made along the line, other roads taken, the findings, analyses, and conclusions might have been different. In light of this, I wish to offer some reflection on the process of developing, researching, and writing this thesis.

Firstly, this final written output has taken me nearly three years to complete. During this time, TikTok has made many important changes to the way that the platform works. Its technical infrastructure, affordances, and creator pathways to monetization have been altered in ways that

date my research. This was both a source of anxiety for me throughout the process of researching and writing, but also an inevitability. It was important for me to remind myself that this thesis stood as a temporally specific examination of the platform, and that this grounding also afforded me some important analytical advantages. One of these emerged with the decommissioning of the Discover page, which, as I explored in chapter three and the conclusion, signaled TikTok's commitment to and confidence in algorithmic personalization as the best method to connect users with relevant content. The lifespan of this process also allowed me to stumble across news stories which arose organically and made it into my analysis. The heating button and the William White stories, explored in chapter four, are two such cases. The (inadvertent) long term approach to this thesis allowed these important stories to find me.

Duration also illuminated some of the temporal oddities that arise when working with TikTok. While subtle and gradual changes to the interface often mean that, over the course of two years, one might not feel that much has changed on the app, an old screenshot can reveal how different the look and feel was. These differences, which include the introduction of longer-form video, also undoubtedly change the experience of content production for creators. On both the micro and the macro scale, TikTok time both races and stretches out infinitely. The effect of endless scrolling on the For You page, the automatic video looping, and the lack of visible timestamps create a sort of constant lived present on the app. Meanwhile, the perpetual emergence, rise, and diminishing into obscurity that trends undergo becomes the surest way to keep time on TikTok. This cycling is incredibly rapid, making each trend correlate to a specific time period. This allows users to talk about "2019 TikTok" or "2021 TikTok" as a shorthand for the type of meme trends that were circulating at that time, echoing existing offline ideas of culture where years and decades are characterized by the trends they encompass.

On a practical level, the issue of sedimentation of research directions is echoed in the experience of navigating the TikTok app as a researcher. I was never able to escape the feeling that every interaction with the For You page was significant. Pausing, visiting profiles, taking screenshots or recordings, reading comments to gain context— all constitute more time interacting with a video, thus eliciting further content recommendation in a similar vein. Engaging with an algorithmic recommendations system as a researcher is a relinquishing of control over an imagined “objective reality” that cannot exist in the environment of personalization. To observe is to intervene. Accepting this actuality was an important move for understanding the goal of my research. This was never a study of the For You page and its approach to content recommendation. Though the algorithmic personalization undoubtedly impacted the memes I encountered and recorded, it did not diminish the significance of the other processes and affordances at work in inciting memetic (re)production with which I engaged in my analyses. My situatedness was an asset, not a methodological sin.

Another concern that I returned to repeatedly during the latter stages of writing was an abiding sense that I had not applied the requisite theoretical rigor to my analysis of TikTok’s business models and monetization pathways. By opting to base this thesis in meme studies and then follow the framework laid out by Nieborg and Poell (2018) for the platformization of cultural production, I sent my research in a certain direction. This direction, while critical of how platforms wield power and create precarious and unequitable conditions under which cultural producers labour, did not allow for some of the more complex theoretical probing I found myself called to do after undergoing what we dubbed my “late Marxist turn.” With the limits on word count that come with a master’s thesis, as well as the forward momentum needed to complete such a project, I found myself disappointed by my inability to engage with theories of political

economy very deeply. This is worth noting since, firstly, I believe this tension is palpable in the final output for chapter four and, secondly, it is useful to acknowledge how the theories, thinkers, and references guide research from its earliest stages. There are still many unanswered questions about commodification, labour, and capital accumulation on TikTok that have not been exhausted by my analysis here. While this might indicate an opening, a direction for new research, it also remains a shortfall for my ambitions with this thesis.

I think this shortfall is well expressed in my ultimate approach to answering my second research question, “How do TikTok's economics and creators' pathways to monetization influence the cultural production of memes?” I think the tension of remaining true to my original plan of research while following the spontaneous provocations that arose in my research resulted in a reversal of the suppositions of the question. It was not so much the economics and creators' pathways to monetization influencing the cultural production of memes, but rather the way content is rendered discoverable (i.e. through salient forms that can be indexed as trends) that allows creators to access financial rewards. This is to say: memes do not arise and take hold widely because they make their creators money, but that those creators who can access monetization are participating in trending memes because they act as shortcuts to visibility and, therefore, money. RQ2 is not the “wrong” question. Rather, I think the difficulty of answering this question in the way I might have initially considered does a good job of highlighting the challenge of isolating “the meme,” such as it is.

Lastly, I wish I could have attended more closely to the way in which TikTok's meme culture is embodied; how the video medium and audio-based templating implicate the body, the face, and the voice in ways that rupture with existing traditions of meme culture. Where once, a meme maker simply selected and curated relatable images and humorous text to share ideas, now

they find that their physical self has become the memetic object. Might we then think of memes as modality training us how to be, a pathway upon which to exist while moving through the world? TikTok enhances this effect by inciting movement and engagement of the corporeal form. This post-meme condition could also be articulated as the ordinariness of the meme: signaling a moment where we are more adept than ever at encoding and decoding cultural minutiae. I find myself and my peers constantly anticipating punchlines, learning how they express differently for the contexts in which we use them: assembling an arsenal, a repertoire of self-expression to be called upon when making sense of events and behaviours — particularly the mundane, the petty, and the unremarkable. What I hope to communicate through this thesis, particularly the conclusion, is that a possible move to an era of post-meme thought, brought about by TikTok's algorithmic culture, is not a testament to the waning relevance of the meme but an acknowledgement of how this algorithmic culture is seeping into life offline.

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## Appendix A: Observation Grid

### *Situations to Observe*

- Is it a skit? (i.e. talking/acting directly to camera with or without linked audio)
- Is it a direct lip sync without application to new scenario?
- Is it a lip sync performed while doing one's makeup or a "fit check"?
- Is it a dance?
- Is it a trend which uses a prescribed sounds and effect combination without any element of personalization or transformation, in the Phillips and Milner sense? (e.g. use of the slow zoom effect coupled with the "Wildest Dreams" by Taylor Swift sound)

If the answer to these questions is yes, the video will not be included in my observations. If the answer is no, I will proceed to the following questions:

- Does it use a linked (non-original) audio?
- Is there onscreen text or a scenario that corresponds with the audio?
- How many likes, views, comments, and shares does the video have?

### *Formal Properties*

#### Sounds

- What sound is used (official title) and what is its content? (what is heard in the sound)
- Is the original sound properly identified in a video on the sounds page
- How many videos are under the sound?
- Is the sound familiar? (i.e. have you heard it before or is this the first time encountering it?)
- Have you heard it yet this scrolling session?
- Where did it originate? (pop culture, TikTok, music, remix, other social media?)
- Does the sound appear on the trending page?
- Are there other prevalent uses of the sound that do not correspond with the formal properties seen here?

#### Filters

- What filter is being used (official title)
- How many videos are under the filter?
- Does the audio used usually correspond with the filter?
- What does the filter do? (alter the self, surroundings?)
- Where is the filter categorized in creative suite?
- Does the filter appear on the trending page?

#### Hashtags

- What hashtags are used?

- Are they genuine (speaking to the content of the video) or opportunistic? (trending/potentially used to bolster visibility)

### Text

- If there was text on screen content identified by the “situation to observe”, what does it say/how does it correspond with the audio?
- What is written in the video caption?

### *Users of the Setting*

- Who is making the video?
- Age, apparent gender, other key demos
- How/Does their demo/identity correspond to the meme?
- Who is the creator?
- What is their handle?
- Are they verified?
- How many followers do they have?
- Are there corporate interests at play here? (sponsored sound, filters, sponsored posts)

## Appendix B: Table of Aural Meme Templates Collected

Sound Title	Content of Audio Template	Number of videos under sound at time of collection	Number of memes collected during observation period
<a href="#">"hide and seek"</a>	"They were here first"	989	3
<a href="#">"Big Mouth Season 5"</a>	"poof and just like that Lola's gone" "Wrong! Lola's right here you fucking brussel sprout"	15.7k	5
<a href="#">"There's not going to be a swimming pool stupid"</a>	"He says he's building me a swimming pool, and when they dig up that backyard and find my bones you'll go to prison" "There's not going to be a swimming pool you stupid slut"	8915	2
<a href="#">"original sound-ellxvhs"</a>	"material girl! I want Chanel 9 boots/ All these niggas steady jockin'/ Cause they know I'm the truth (Material girl)/ And I get it from my mammy/ Balmain, bustdown these hoes can't stand me"	41.2k	2
<a href="#">"YAAAAAY ... no gir thats bad"</a>	"Yaaay" "no Gir that's bad" "Aww" "Do you know what this means?" "Yes!" "You don't really, do you" "mmm"	34.1k	4
<a href="#">"PUT.. THAT.. DOWN.."</a>	"butter... Ragu..." "put that down" *beat comes in*	20.4k	6

<a href="#">"original sound - kardashianicon"</a>	"the elves... are ziplining and we have, what are their names again? Glizzy, slimegirl, blob, aaaand M&M!"	126	2
<a href="#">"screaming crying"</a>	"screaming, crying"	54.7k	4
<a href="#">"original sound - supremeaudiozz"</a>	"10s, 10s, 10s, 20s, and them 50s, bitch/ I'm a muthafucking star"	177.4k	2
<a href="#">"original sound- kuel_thecomedian"</a>	*Ringtone* *accepted call sound* "I hate him, I hate him, I feel like I'm never gonna..."	103.9k	5
<a href="#">"What? Am I?" by akil elijah</a>	"are you a Nicki fan?" "am I a Nicki fan?? pull up in the sri lanka whatttt?" *applause*	201.6k	8
<a href="#">"original sound theirishconnection"</a>	"Don't make unnecessary journeys! Don't take risks on treacherous roads! And don't swim in the sea!"	8155	4
<a href="#">"original sound – fatherchanel"</a>	"That was too good! Let's get the bill, purr"	21.7k	5
<a href="#">"Its not the vibe STOP"</a>	"It's not the vibe STOP"	163.6k	6
<a href="#">"original sound- pandemicproblems"</a>	"I'm not ashamed to admit it. It's hell in there, it's horror. You have to be a certain type of person to survive"	9866	3
<a href="#">"The women was too stunned to speak"</a>	"The woman was too stunned to speak"	102.8k	4
<a href="#">"Okaay lets go"</a>	"Okay, let's go"	31.2k	3
<a href="#">"apple pay with brittany laugh"</a>	*laughing* *apple pay verification sound*	191.7k	5
Totals			73