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The *sign-sync* trend on TikTok: navigating engagement and digital accessibility in music challenges

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ABSTRACT

Within the broader ecosystem of music challenges on TikTok, the *sign-sync* trend combines lip-syncing, music, and gestural movements that emulate sign language. The analysis of 60 high-engagement videos, complemented by semi-structured interviews with six professional interpreters of Spanish Sign Language, provides insight into how these performances intersect with digital accessibility. Although they are widely perceived as inclusive by hearing audiences, most instances exhibit limited linguistic accuracy and depend on bimodal communicative strategies that diverge from the structural and discursive norms of signed languages. This disconnect constrains comprehension for Deaf sign language users and challenges the assumption that visual content inherently promotes accessibility. The findings highlight the need for critical reflection on how authenticity and accessibility are negotiated in user-generated representations of Spanish Sign Language on social media platforms.

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Social media; disability; Deaf community; accessibility; TikTok; music challenges

Introduction

Social media platforms have profoundly transformed communicative engagement, with TikTok providing an environment in which creative expression and participatory culture intersect, allowing users to engage in dynamic, mimetic, and highly visible forms of musical empowerment (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022). Music challenges play a central role in this process by inviting users to accomplish specific goals by creatively interpreting popular songs through storytelling and social interaction (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022).

TikTok's algorithmic structure, such as personalized content feeds and participatory remixing (Collie & Wilson-Barnao, 2020), amplifies the visibility of music challenges and transforms them into influential tools for social engagement. As a result, these challenges become deeply integrated into broader cultural circuits, where identity, visibility, and community dynamics are constantly evolving (Schellewald, 2021).

In recent years, TikTok has seen an increase in Spanish Sign Language (SSL) within music challenges, particularly through the adoption of the hashtag #LSE, an acronym