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Decolonising the music on TikTok: "Let's duet!"

Descolonización de la música en TikTok: "¡Hagamos un dúo!"

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Abstract

Currently, social media such as TikTok are changing the mode in which musical narratives spread worldwide. In this predominantly musical short-video app, users share a wide range of creative content on a daily basis without moving from their own socio-cultural backgrounds. In this sense, the platform facilitates the creation of non-western "migrant" content, integrating values that reflect cultural, social, rural, and oriental development. Based on 510 music duets created by TikTok users, this study explores how the platform empowers the decolonisation of the music industry, previously ruled by Western recording studios. In order to explore user-generated content around the #SingWithMe challenge, a semiotic analysis was conducted. The results point towards a process of rediscovery and healing, dreaming, engagement and action for industrial emancipation. It is concluded that the TikTok duet is a pivotal engaging tool awakening a sort of unconscious popular user-driven decentralisation.

Keywords

Transmedia music; decolonisation; TikTok; cultural industry; duet; cover

Resumen

En la actualidad, redes sociales como TikTok están transformando el modo en que se expanden las narrativas musicales por el mundo. En esta aplicación de micro-vídeos eminentemente musicales, se comparten diariamente diversidad de contenidos creativos que no se alejan de los contextos socioculturales de sus usuarios. En este sentido, la plataforma facilita la creación de contenido "migrante" no occidental, integrando valores que reflejan el crecimiento cultural, social, rural y oriental. Con base en 510 dúos musicales generados por los usuarios de TikTok, este estudio explora cómo la plataforma potencia la descolonización de la industria musical, gobernada hasta entonces por estudios de grabación occidentales. Se desarrolla un análisis semiótico para explorar el contenido generado por el usuario en torno al reto #SingWithMe. Los resultados apuntan hacia un proceso de redescubrimiento y recuperación, sueño, compromiso y acción para la emancipación industrial. Se concluye que el dúo de TikTok es una herramienta clave que despierta una suerte de descentralización popular inconsciente dirigida por los usuarios.

Palabras clave

Música transmedia; desconolozación; TikTok; industria cultural; dúo; versión musical

1. Introduction

Nowadays, platforms such as TikTok are revolutionising the way musical narratives take form worldwide (Abidin and Kaye, 2021). This app of short videos, up to 10 minutes long, hosts daily volumes of content in which audio prevails (Navarro-Güere, 2023). Embedded in a macro-database that can be reused, its potential enables the co-creation of audio-visual posts into challenges and chains of memes (Arrieta, 2021). Since its predecessor version Douyin acquired and integrated the Musical.ly interface in 2017, the platform has continued to grow in popularity internationally (Wang, Gu and Wang, 2019). In terms of music, its popularity has not been exclusively dependent on the creativity or extensiveness its features. On TikTok, music engages followers and encourages trends by fostering a form of “music curation” through its audio element (Vizcaíno-Verdú, de-Casas-Moreno and Tirocchi, 2023), which has the potential to spread group storytelling dynamics (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2022).

To grasp the focus of this study, which explores how music becomes part of the process of industrial-commercial decolonisation through content generated, appropriated, and mimetised by TikTok users, we must consider the concept of decolonisation of the Internet. This notion, which is related to digital governance, involves the establishment of technical standards, mapping of resources, and legal management and monitoring of access to online information by the West (Carr, 2015). Alternatively, as Syed-Mustafa (2018) argues, the possible fracturing of the Internet is a result of unguided actions by non-Western societies and governments. Decolonisation, as suggested by Shepard (2019), goes beyond its ontological and epistemological perspectives. It involves the exploration of dreams, the analysis of problems, commitments, grounded purposes, and the rethinking of socio-cultural assumptions. In other words, it focuses on platformised and inclusive digital phenomena, which are founded on the defence of cross-cultural practices by and for the Global South (Karhade et al., 2021).

Given this standardised discourse characterised by predominantly Western and successful globalisation, some studies have already devoted their efforts to giving voice to traditionally marginalised cultures through music. In *Western music and its others: Difference, representation, and appropriation in music*, the research addressed the relations between Western music and the music “of the others”, attending to how music has been culturally and politically rejected or popularised since the twentieth century (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000). Webb-Gannon and Webb (2019) later introduced an analysis of the rise of popular musical protests during the colonial occupation of West Papua. More recently, in the context spearheaded by TikTok, Sadler (2022) reflected on the social and ideological roles of protest music ascribed to user-driven cultural events and trends. Similarly, Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded (2022) suggested that in addition to these protests, community empowerment is based on transmedia music, understood as a musical piece appropriated by Internet users that expands existing cultural output or social events as a result of the interaction between the individual, music, and storytelling (Vizcaíno-Verdú, Aguaded and Contreras-Pulido, 2021). TikTok plays a leading role in these phenomena. In this sense, Kaye (2022) observes that in the face of the isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Duet feature offered by this platform allowed music content creators to connect, collaborate, and socialise openly, independent of cross-cultural divides.

Drawing on the underlying processes of independence, socialisation, and musical empowerment (Leman, 2016), this study explores the #SingWithMe challenge formed by TikTok duets. This trend, in which people perform snippets of original songs and invite other users to participate in their voices, determines whether the participatory culture of a social networking site such as TikTok constitutes a process of decolonisation from the music industry, previously controlled by Western recording studios whose interests were largely business-oriented.

More specifically, I explore the storytelling that supports this liberating process and how it comprises a decolonising journey. To this end, I conducted a literature review on the decolonising process of the music industry, followed by the role of music on TikTok. Through the analysis of 510 TikTok duos, the following sections reflect the music industry's decolonisation process through “rediscovery and recovery”, “dream”, “engagement”, and “action”. I conclude that TikTok's #SingWithMe challenge, in common with other meme challenges, has altered the way people consume and produce music on the Internet. In particular, I discuss about how the development of this kind of content has aroused unconscious popular decolonisation beyond traditional music industrialisation practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Analogy of the digital-musical decolonisation process

Historically, colonisation and decolonisation movements have been dominated by social factors (Laenui, 2006). Notably, colonisation, which is understood as a continuum of governance and cultural-economic control of societies from a “flourishing” Western society (Carr, 2015), has evolved into continuous decolonisation movements, representing a cultural self-defence exercise, an anti-imperialist strategy, and a call to adopt a critical and analytical perspective in order to reflect the advancements of a

dynamic and decentralised world (Glick, 2018). In other words, it constitutes the mode by which people challenge and reposition themselves vis-à-vis Western dominance (real or imagined). Understanding the process of decolonisation is critical to this study, as it is analogous to the power exercised by the music industry over decades.

As native son of Hawaii and human rights researcher, Laenui (2006) describes the process of peoples' decolonisation from a social approach. He notes that this process initially begins with "rediscovery and recovery", in which the collective reminds itself, feeling overwhelmed, in the face of the superiority of colonial society over the underlying indigenous one. This stage can lead individuals to curiosity, hopelessness, or migration. Next, emerges the "dream". This is a crucial step, as it provides the individual or collective with a realm of possibilities for debate, inquiry, and construction of dreams that become new social arrangements. Alternatively, it facilitates future aspirations, the reframing of norms, and the expression of hope. The third stage leads to "engagement", whereby this dreaming process creates opportunities for voices to converge in a popular desire to challenge current *status quo*. And the final stage, "action", involves this call for reason and reaction to prevent the suppression and punishment of international law. The same author adds that media, especially radio, television, and the press, have been essential and effective tools for implementing these plans for expression and representation.

Regardless of history and individual empowerment, the Internet is still designed by a minority group that ignores the needs and desires of the masses (Acey et al., 2021). However, as Meighan (2021) points out, communities and content creators continue to contribute to this emerging decolonisation movement in digital environments, including social media. These media, as Laenui (2006) projected, enable people to find each other, but also to be found (Mirzoeff and Halberstam, 2018). In fact, the adaptation of the music industry to these platformised scenarios constitutes a historical and evolutionary fact that has been carried over to TikTok today.

2.2. Participatory culture, music challenges and TikTok duets

Music decolonisation is a challenging approach that requires a multidimensional focus. In this regard, the concept of participatory culture and prosumers (producers and consumers of content) (Toffler, 1980) are essential. Some studies have provided insights into the relationship between participatory culture and music in the social media context. They emphasise the relevance of users' active interaction in the presumption of cultural industry content (Hidalgo-Marí and Sánchez-Olmos, 2016), discussing how these audio-visual platforms foster co-creation and reinterpretation of music, and promote cultural exchange (Guerrero-Pico and Scolari, 2016).

Currently, popular music continues to challenge the inflexible structure of the industry. Jones (2021) states that technology, notably the "Do It Yourself" (DIY) phenomenon – the practice of learning, repairing, making, and creating one's own tools – has changed musical experiences (Rogers, Freitas and Porfirio, 2023). More importantly, the advent of YouTube revolutionised this practice, turning users into content creators who are able to express themselves freely by reaching global audiences without intermediaries (Jarrett, 2008). In this sense, the democratisation phenomenon revealed the harmful aspects of competition instituted by the music industry. That is, DIY forms of music culture have historically vindicated the uniqueness of individuals in the face of so-called "mainstream" music. However, according to Jones (2021), this movement, which was understood to be emerging and has potential, is now an additional mainstream model that engages not only performers, record labels, and composers, but also users who lack professional knowledge of music (amateurs). In other words, the decentralisation of music creation has been closely associated with technological and digital developments that have changed the way music is currently created and consumed.

Among the music democratisation practices stand out the growth of "home studios" (Homer, 2009), which allowed artists to make music comfortably from their own homes, giving them greater freedom and creative control. Record self-promotion practices have also become increasingly popular, exceeding the productivity of conventional record labels (Dunn, 2012) and allowing artists to launch and distribute their music independently, free from major record labels. In addition, the flow of music through web platforms such as YouTube (Edmond, 2014) and SoundCloud (Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh, 2019) played a pivotal role in music decentralisation across the industry. These platforms have facilitated artists and content creators to share their music faster and reach international audiences outside of traditional constraints related to physical delivery.

Consequently, the aforementioned DIY democratisation has continued to expand to TikTok, one of the most popular music-based social networking sites. This platform, launched in 2017 by the Asian company ByteDance (known in China as Douyin) and merged with the former Musical.ly, helps users create and edit short videos featuring synchronisation, audio memes, and hashtag challenges (Darvin, 2022). Even as one of the top five most downloaded apps internationally in 2019 (SensorTower, 2019), TikTok consumption was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing millions of people around the world

to seek refuge and practice social distance. This event inescapably affected the music industry, where TikTok allowed record companies and their artists to continue to generate revenue through live streaming and other strategies (Kaye, 2022). In fact, TikTok has proven to be a robust tool for music marketing. During this period, the industry discovered that the app increased the visibility of the established artists. According to Coulter (2022), 75% of its users discover musicians on TikTok, 72% associate songs with the platform, and 67% attempt to locate these songs on other online music distribution services. Such has been the impact of TikTok that the platform itself has started to develop its own music distribution tool, SoundOn, launched in March 2022, similar to other platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, or Pandora (Radovanović, 2022).

While, taking into account the cultural perspective of music, what has set this platform apart among users worldwide is its algorithmic recommendation system based on interaction and engagement. The more a video is shared, viewed, and saved on TikTok, the greater the organic traction on its content (Coulter, 2022). This means that the design of this app promotes an algorithmic culture of great interest and virality (Collie and Wilson-Barnao, 2020), encouraging the concatenation of memes as a basis for socialization (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). Despite this democratic power to grant visibility to digital content based on personal and heterogeneous preferences (Gillespie, 2017), Gorwa, Binns and Katzenbach (2020) argue that the platform appears to continue introducing a bias in algorithmic governance that favours a few (Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar and Asadchy, 2022), making content moderation concerning vulnerable individuals and groups more challenging (Zeng & Kaye, 2021). At this point, re-semiotisation comes into play as a process for creating meanings that change depending on the context and bring together interpersonal and intercultural practices and stances (Darvin, 2022). Or put differently, despite its geographical, political, corporate, and human restrictions, unlike other social media or music consumption platforms, the audio element of TikTok enables co-creation and collaboration among users who do not know each other. This is where the Duet function makes sense (Radovanović, 2022).

Duet is a unique feature of TikTok, inherited from Musical.ly (which, in turn, imitates the singing platform Smule), enabling users to create musical compositions or audio in parallel with those of other users. That is, creating a new video alongside an existing one (Zeng and Kaye, 2021). The difference between Musical.ly and TikTok is that the former did not allow for additional audio recording, as users could only dance or lip-sync the original video. The uniqueness and success of TikTok, as noted by Kaye (2022), stems from the incorporation and fusion of Reaction and Duet, which led users to start interacting. Later, the Stitch function added the ability to clip a segment of the video to record the reaction, replacing Reaction and resulting in a whirlwind of limitless musical content. The use of this tool, employed indiscriminately by its users across a wide musical repertoire, has raised concerns among entities that hold intellectual property rights to these songs. To this extent, the platform includes a musical cooperation agreement for user-generated content under which intellectual property is not infringed as long as the content created by users employing songs does not involve unauthorized appropriation and redistribution (Admadja, 2022).

In this regard, it appears that the creative capabilities of TikTok's Duet have sparked a musical trend and challenge, where it is no longer artists or record labels that define the reach of a song but individuals themselves (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2022). This is a globalizing process that transcends geographical divides and disrupts the ascent of China and India over the formerly dominant Western powers of platformisation (Jia and Liang, 2021). Indeed, TikTok incubates a local population (Ma and Hu, 2021) that facilitates citizen emancipation and empowerment through music (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022), while also fostering subcultural feelings of unity (Sadler, 2022), with the potential to decolonize music videos originally erected by the industry and MTV.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology combining content analysis and semiotic interpretation to comprehend how music undergoes a process of decolonization within the industry through user-generated content on TikTok. To achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How does the process of social decolonisation relate to TikTok's #SingWithMe duets?
2. What characterises musical decolonisation on TikTok?

3.1. Semiotic analysis

In methodological terms, the research situates itself within semiotic analysis to examine and comprehend the discursive-symbolic nature of videos collected under the #SingWithMe challenge. This analysis relies on the theory of signs and systems of meaning present in cultural and communicative manifestations (Eco, 1976). In this context, I used a set of specific codes as a reference for studying audio-visual content, based on the four stages proposed by Laenui (2006) in his theory of social decolonisation. The stages

of rediscovery and recovery, dreaming, engagement, and action served as a conceptual starting point for interpreting the narrative expressions present in the analysed production (Schreier, 2012). This choice facilitated a deeper exploration of the processes of musical decolonisation within the context of participatory culture in platformed environments.

I conducted semiotic analysis at several stages. First, I collected a representative sample of the #SingWithMe challenge videos (see section 3.2). Next, I carried out inductive and qualitative observation and coding of each video, using Atlas.ti 23 software as a tool, and made field notes in cases where I identified similar or analogous practices to the decolonisation process. The ultimate goal was to identify, based on the four stages mentioned earlier, the visual, auditory, and gestural signs (Sanders-Pierce, 2006) that connected the content with the stages of social decolonisation. This coding allowed for systematic classification, interpretation, and analysis of emerging discursive patterns in the music videos.

Table 1: Codes of the social decolonisation process

Code	Definition
Rediscovery and recovery	The collective/individual becomes aware of their position in relation to others, prompting curiosity and/or a desire to depart from their cultural, economic, social, and/or political stance.
Dream	The collective/individual has opportunities and tools for debating, consulting, and expressing new social orders in cultural, economic, social, and/or political matters.
Engagement	The collective/individual comes together or cooperates to organize and bring about social change.
Action	The collective/individual appeals to reason and react to prevent the suppression of their cultural, economic, social, and/or political structure.

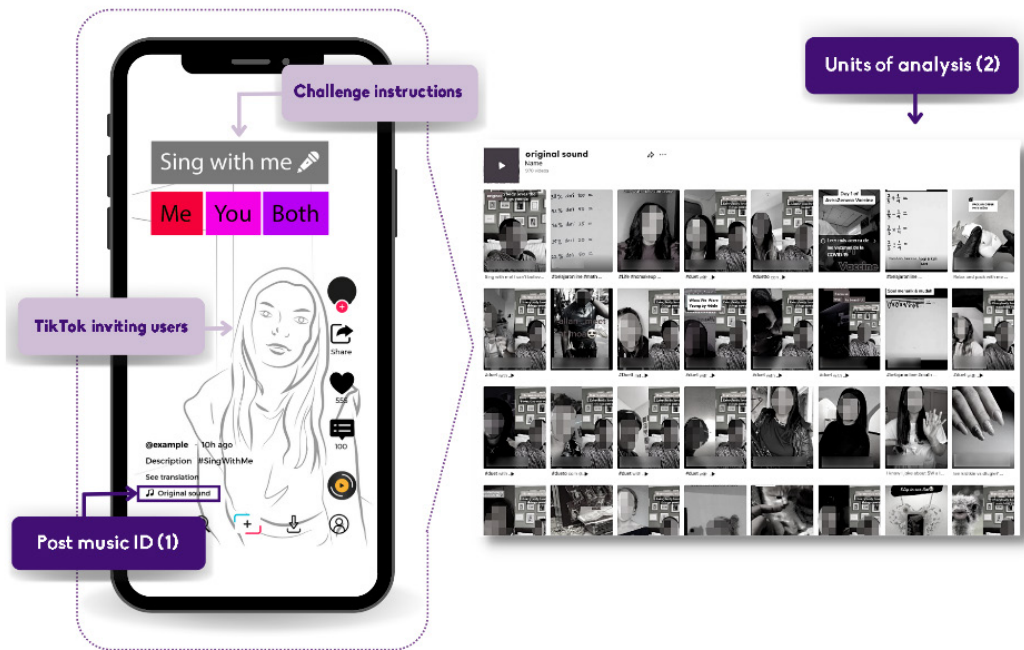
Source: Created by the author with reference to Laenui (2006)

3.2. Data sampling and collection: *walkthrough method* and *scraping*

The sample was determined using the *walkthrough method* and *scraping*. The first phase involved navigating, and directly interacting with the interface to understand its cultural and social references in relation to music (Light et al., 2016), directing my observations towards the study of musical duets on TikTok. After accessing the app for half-an-hour daily during February and March 2022 (59 days), I identified various contents that included hashtags such as #DuetMe, #Duet, #MusicChallenge, and others.

Faced with a multitude of music-related challenges, I applied hashtag analysis using the scraping technique (data and information extraction from websites in bulk using software) through a Python 3.6 node package. Using the terms "duet" and "music," I obtained the following, five most recurring TikTok hashtags: (1) #SingWithMe; (2) #DuetMe; (3) #DuetWithMe; (4) popcomduet; (5) #singingduet. Taking the most popular one, #SingWithMe, I proceeded to download all posts on the platform that used the hashtag using the same technique, collecting a total of 979 videos at the time of extraction (April 2022).

Figure 1: Units of analysis



Source: Created by the author

Subsequently, the *walkthrough method* served to determine the nature of the analysable units. In accordance with the previously outlined objective and questions, I did not explore the videos inviting users to participate in the duet, but rather the responses to that content (Figure 1). This criterion involved selecting posts in which TikTokers invited users to freely perform the lyrics or tune of a song, as indicated in the challenge instructions in Figure 1. To collect these units of analysis, I employed scraping using the musical ID of the video. Additionally, to streamline the analysis, I randomly selected 17 posts and scraped a maximum of 30 replies for each, compiling and analysing 510 duets (see full repository at <https://bit.ly/3XEv6Qb>).

4. Findings

4.1. Rediscovery and recovery: the challenge of music cover

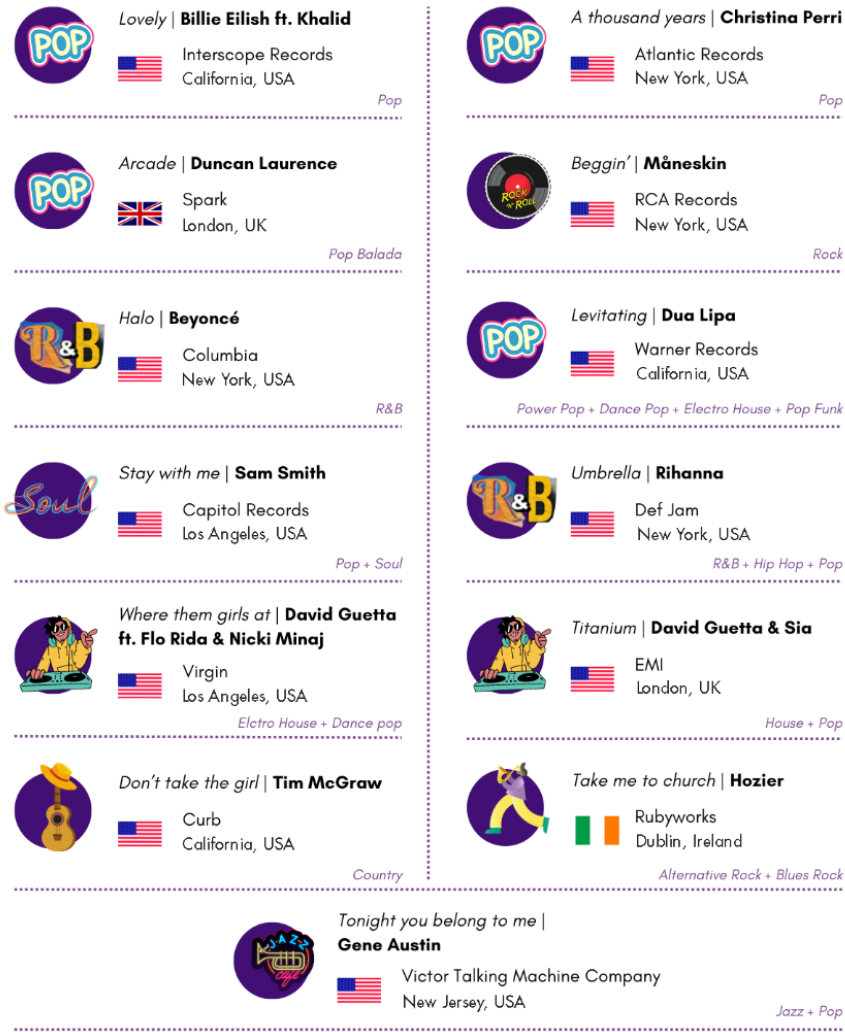
As a first instance, the analysis of duets in #SingWithMe revealed a "rediscovery and recovery" stage, whereby a collective becomes aware of its position with respect to the other. This prompts the group to become intrigued by or to seek refuge from its cultural, economic, social, and political circumstances. In a manner similar to this approach in the music industry, this paper discusses the mode in which users fostered musical curiosity ("covers" and "appropriation"), escaping from the original language or song through ethnic adaptations, their own translations, musical genres, and instruments different from those of the originals. To identify these symbols, I first focused on the songs used by the TikTokers to invite participants to take part in the challenge. These performances encompassed musical genres such as pop, rock, R&B, Soul, House, and others, associated with American, British, and Irish record labels (Figure 2). This indicates their inclusion within the Western and Anglo-Saxon music industry.

A common practice among TikTok duet performers was covering songs using musical instruments. The songs in which they participated served as backing tracks to the TikTokers while demonstrating their musical skills (Figure 3). In other words, they substituted the vocals with musical notes played on instruments that were not part of the original song. For instance, in Figure 3.1, the user uses a stylophone. This instrument, recognized as a pocket-sized analog keyboard operated by a stylus, was initially marketed as a toy due to its compact size, distinctive sound (reminiscent of 1980s video games), and user-friendly interface. In this case, the instrument plays *A thousand years* by Christina Perri, whose instrumental background comprises piano, guitar, and violin.

In Figure 3.2, the melody is played on a violin. Despite the TikTokers providing the lyrics for users to sing along (while already performing the song with a piano), this particular user incorporates the vocals with their stringed instrument. In Figure 3.3, the TikTokers played Duncan Laurence's *Arcade* on her harp,

even though the primary instrumental arrangement in the original song includes classical guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, drums, keyboard, and cavaco.

Figure 2: Duets' original songs



Source: Created by the author

Finally, Figure 3.4 presents an electric mandolin cover of Rihanna's *Umbrella*. Notably, there is a distinct contrast between a popular instrument originating in Europe and the Middle East, which did not start to reach North America until the 19th century, and an American R&B recording piece that features instruments such as guitar, bass, saxophone, drums, piano, harmonica, trumpet, and others.

Alternatively, users diverged from the original song by modifying the tone, lyrics, and style of singing. Within its variety, I identified styles such as gospel. In Figure 4.1, the user performs *Lovely* by Billie Eilish ft. Khalid using Indonesian singing (as stated in the video's text overlay), and in Figure 4.2, they translate Måneskin's *Beggin'* into the same language. Figure 4.3 similarly translates the lyrics of the song *A thousand years* by Christina Perri into Spanish.

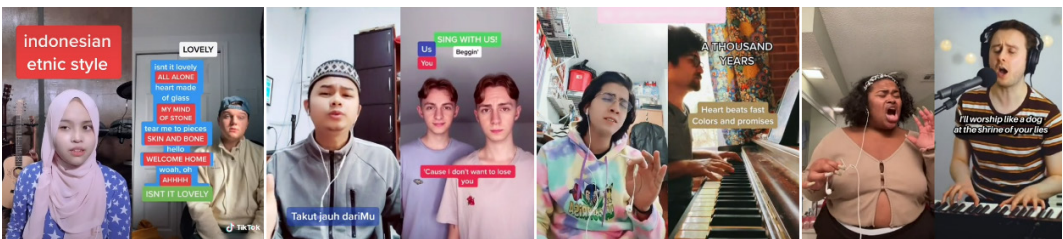
Figure 3: Duet instrumental covers



Source: Sample screenshots extracted from TikTok. (Images L-R) Figure 3.1: Stylophone; Figure 3.2: Violin; Figure 3.3: Harp; Figure 3.4: Electric Mandolin

Additionally, in Figure 4.4 there is a modification in the style of singing. From the alternative rock and blues rock of Hozier's *Take me to church*, the performer switches to a *cappella* gospel, considered a religious and American musical style that emerged in African-American Pentecostal, Protestant, and evangelical churches. The latter case exemplifies the difference between the values and beliefs of the religious musical style and the meaning of the song's lyrics. In the song, Hozier expressed his own frustration with the rigid attitudes of the Catholic church (and the like) towards homosexuality.

Figure 4: Stylistic, linguistic, and genre adaptations in the duets



Source: Sample screenshots extracted from TikTok. (Images L-R) Figure 4.1: Indonesian chant; Figure 4.2: Indonesian translation; Figure 4.3: Spanish translation; Figure 4.4: Gospel style

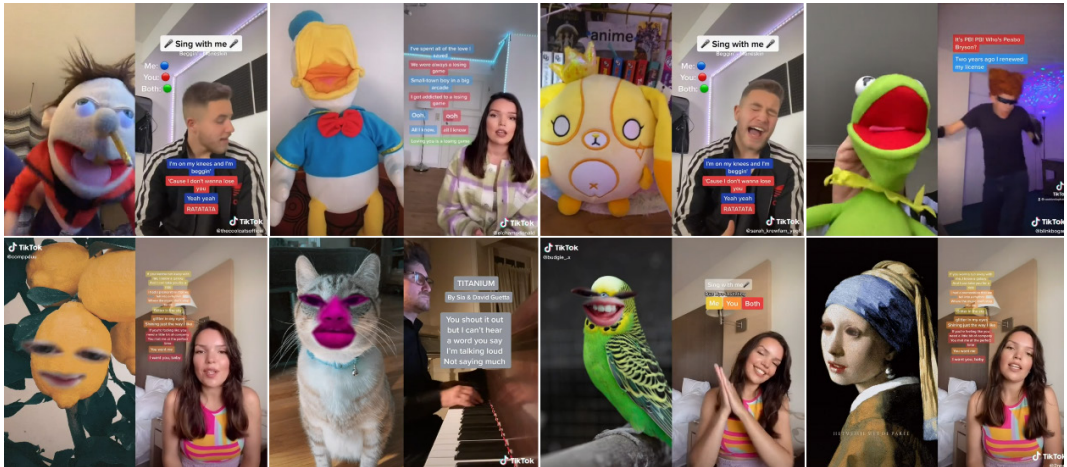
4.2. Dreaming: musical-creative constructions

After undergoing processes of rediscovering, covering, adapting, and appropriating, which deviate from the original musical foundations in terms of both style and design, users also engaged in the "dreaming" stage. In brief, this step is where individuals or collectives explore opportunities to discuss, question, and express new social orders. In this sense, TikTok appears as a critical platform for music-making and co-creation.

First and foremost, predominantly humorous or satirical elements prevailed. Whether by anonymising their identity or changing the meaning of the song, features such as TikTok's *Green Screen* or inanimate objects played a role in the sampling process as a means of expression. The most prevalent examples included singing to stuffed toys (such as Donald Duck, Kermit the Frog, and various puppets) or using the *Green Screen* filter, which allowed cats, lemons, onions, flowers, or parakeets to appear as singing performers (Figure 5).

Storytelling served as another approach to engaging with music. For example, a particular TikToker allowed users to introduce themselves by jamming to the sound of the piano. These short, one-minute posts in English, Spanish, Portuguese or Italian outlined their passion for creating music. Some examples made reference to cultural-geographical status (see lyrics in Table 2 at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22284904.v1>). They specifically conveyed their self-esteem in relation to melanin, heritage, and female empowerment, along with their determination to challenge social stigmas concerning ethnicity and gender. Some statements noted: "love my melanine", "A queer Brown girl just tryna break the stigma", "Filipino... Indian... if that even says a thing about me".

Figure 5: Creative performances in duets



Source: Sample screenshots extracted from TikTok. (Images from L-R; T-B) Figures 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4: stuffed animals and puppets; Figures 5.5, 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8: Green Screen filter with mixed pictures

However, within this dreaming process, the primary focus is on narratives that address “musical ambition”. Using TikTok as a means of self-promotion, the would-be musicians described their inexperience with recording. In essence, the lyrics reflect their dedication to singing or songwriting, followed by confessions about their future ambitions (view the lyrics in Table 3 at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22284904.v1>). For example, the first group of users openly declared themselves to be musicians: “I sing”, “I play saxophone”, “music is my whole freaking universe”, “I’m a singer songwriter”, “I write my own music”, and “I love to sing”. The second group expressed their intentions to gain popularity and pursue careers in music: “I will be pursuing music”, “I know you will hear from me at some point”, “famosa qui su TikTok per cantare” (famous on TikTok for singing), “I’ve dreamt of shining”, “Working on becoming a sensation”, “I’ll be pursuing music”, “I have dreamt of shining”, and “I have dreamt of becoming a celebrity”.

These examples demonstrate that TikTok serves as an effective platform for musical expression and community-building for aspiring musicians. However, it also prompts the question of whether this community can establish a sustainable and profitable music industry in the long term or if it is merely a temporary trend (featuring satirical productions where an onion performs Western music hits using children’s voices). Remarkably, the app has democratized access to music, enabling people worldwide to engage creatively in singing, songwriting, and audio-visual editing. These experiences seem to enrich musical culture, thus fostering diversity and inclusion in the music realm.

4.3. Engagement: cross-culturalism in musical sync

The term “engagement”, as interpreted in the context of social decolonisation, represents the stage where voices converge with a shared desire to address societal issues, defining the essence of the #SingWithMe challenge. To be precise, the challenge encourages interactions among users, serving as an invitation to sing alongside others, whether they are unknown or distant, in an exceptionally creative manner. Within this co-creative endeavour, users showcase their musical talents while also sharing insights into their identities and origins.

Within #SingWithMe, a form of cross-culturalism emerges, encompassing users from Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe, North America, and South America. As highlighted by one user in her self-descriptive rap shared earlier, TikTok portrays a cross-cultural landscape defined by melanin, languages, and cultural identity symbols united by a universal language: music (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Cross-culturalism in the #SingWithMe duets



Source: Sample screenshots extracted from TikTok

In this challenge, we can appreciate several cultural signs, such as traditional musical instruments, regional costumes, and folklore chants. This cultural symbol appears to represent the origins of individuals. The hypothetical visual capture (Figure 6), which disrupts *mtvian* standards (standardized canons of beauty, dress, hairstyle, makeup, and props supervised by professional stylists and designers), also converges into a unique voice. Basses, altos, tenors, sopranos, and others sing the same song from their homes, the street, or the car (listen to my edit of #SingWithMe vocals performing *Titanium* by David Guetta and Sia at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22289476.v1>).

4.4. Action: daily performance

The convergence of the widespread desire to engage with music leads to a decolonising “action”. This final stage, which involves the call for reason and the response to avoid oppression, is evident throughout TikTok’s videos. The duet feature is one of the platform’s key facilitators of co-creation, serving as the primary means to foster this “glocal” (global from local) performance.

While traditional label recording studios were once accessible exclusively to a privileged group of talents, we cannot definitively state that the emergence of new avenues for musical expression directly resulted from this exclusivity. The proliferation of new forms of music democratisation and dissemination, including “home studios”, self-promotion, and digital platforms, does not solely stem from a reaction to the exclusivity of recording studios but is rather a result of the increasing participation of content creators, bolstered by a culture of participation. Through an innovative algorithmic approach, TikTok has broadened the scope of cyber-citizen opportunities, allowing users with internet access to broadcast themselves globally. Hence, the #SingWithMe duet represents an experience of widespread and democratic interactions involving various “non-musical” elements. This challenge involves performances that are far different from traditional concerts, pubs, or music videos.

Figure 7: (Re)actions from ubiquity



Source: Sample screenshots extracted from TikTok

The extensive sampling included purely everyday environments: household rooms, such as the kitchen, dining room, or bathroom; and outdoor settings, such as courtyards, balconies, streets, and cars. Microphones take the form of bananas, make-up brushes, or combs. Some users sing while lying in bed, while others do so while traveling or waiting in a car. These actions exhibit situational diversity, with participants (re)acting from various locations around the world, including places that are not traditionally or professionally equipped for music and its appropriate acoustics. In fact, the headphones connected to the devices from which they recorded their duets were the central element of the challenge. Thus, these duet challenges constitute a unique form of musical interaction.

5. Discussion and conclusions

TikTok, as a model of online democratisation, has become an integral part of the historical decentralisation of the music industry (Dunn, 2012; Edmond, 2014; Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh, 2019; Homer, 2009). In this context, users do not need to be music experts nor do they need traditional tools to record, produce, and distribute songs. Instead, they can co-create and share short performances using the technological devices and editing features provided by TikTok (Abidin and Kaye, 2021). Notably, in this study, musical challenges such as #SingWithMe involve engaging people in a decentralised musical journey that is both unconsciously musical and highly industrialised. Through these duet challenges, constituted as genuine "music challenge memes" (Vizcaino-Verdú and Abidin, 2022), users engage with music in a more intimate and emotional manner while also participating in its creation. Indeed, the DIY practices that drove the mainstream currents of popular music culture less than a decade ago (Jones, 2021) are now evolving into entirely mimetic phenomena (Zulli and Zulli, 2020).

The #SingWithMe challenge embodies the ubiquitous practices of popular Internet culture. In response to the first research question (the relationship between social decolonisation and TikTok duets), we understand that this feature facilitates informal musical co-creation and broadcasting, as observed throughout the cases. Beyond the standards of discographic records, or even further than the previous processes of musical democratisation, this platform hosts a type of co-musical (co-creative and musical) empowerment. Although the app's strategies to build its own distribution tool (SoundOn) (Radovanović, 2022) seem to be developing organic musical industrialisation, we are faced with a platform that, anew, follows and accommodates to commercial agenda. At first glance, the app allows content creators to participate in music challenges and audio memes, promote songs, or showcase new artists. However, upon closer examination of the platform and its content, we discover an algorithmic recommendation system that selectively screens "interesting" videos. This means that the platform, configured with geographical location parameters, user interactions, and demographic data, favours certain content over others, amplifying the (in)visibility of these challenges (Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido and Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022). This inhibits overall participation and creates filter bubbles (Jones-Jang and Chung, 2022). While the polarisation of musical blockbusters (pieces of Anglo-Saxon songs) may remind us of what Syed-Mustafa (2018) described as actions not directed by "governments" (see cultural industries), TikTok showcases a contemporary and evolving practice where users strategically engage in musical discourse from their homes. As such, and far from scepticism about the decolonisation of the Internet, these audio memes seem to define innovative grounds for the dream exploration and rethinking of what we have so far understood as "musical songwriting".

By following Laenui's (2006) process of decolonisation, we can trace the trajectory of these creative performances. Experimenting with diverse instruments and folkloric rhythms, often far removed from the song's original origin or genre, marks an initial phase in which the foundations of musical creation need to be re-examined. Through "rediscovery and recovery", users perform songs that have already been covered first-hand by certain TikTokers. In other words, the concept of "covering the cover" gives rise to a cross-personal and cross-cultural re-semiotisation process, as emphasized by Darvin (2022). This mode of appropriating industrial major labels progresses toward individual-collective self-expression through "dreaming", thereby circumventing the contentious improper uses that have been a topic of debate since the inception of this audio-visual platform (Admadja, 2022).

Through features such as the Green Screen, users sing lyrics employing homemade resources that resignify, satirise, or anonymise their participation. Nevertheless, this creative construction process marks the inception of alternative musical performance strategies. For example, the improvised songs typically heard in rap concerts or street performances are now featured in TikTok's "For You" section. Not everything ends with that post and a few thousand "likes" and comments. This improvisation addresses future ambitions for the music industry from a platform that depends on constantly redefined algorithmic recommender systems (Coulter, 2022). Indeed, the use of digital platforms for music promotion has been integral to mainstream music culture since the advent of YouTube (Rogers, Freitas and Porfírio, 2023).

Experimentation and dreaming did not differ in the context of TikTok users. The location from which they share their creations with the world is crucial for comprehending the direction of their duet interactions. Users from Asia-Pacific, Europe, North America, and South America voluntarily participate in music

performances. However, this action was not necessarily accidental. This process, in which individuals and collectives take an original song (originating from an exclusively Western and industrialised context), connect their headphones to a smartphone, and sing from their homes to a global audience (Ma and Hu, 2022), can either promote or hinder the decolonisation effort, as it intersects with mainstream label processes and strategies (Ma and Hu, 2022). Naturally, although it seems that there is no longer a need to knock on a company's door, spend nights in pubs, or invest in expensive systems and devices to create music from home, these practices give us an insight into the audience to whom such co-creations address (Western users). This reflection invites us to question the capitalist intentions of those who participate in places and conditions of supposed subalternity (Spivak, 1988), far separated from the rural musical tradition. Duets such as #SingWithMe, while built on this cross-cultural and dubiously subaltern participatory basis, bring people together through a digitised musical language, captained by "action". The extensive range of musical co-creations posted daily on TikTok (Kaye, 2022) is noteworthy not solely because they are produced from home but due to the ongoing co-creative (re)action they foster.

In this context, with regard to the second objective, musical decolonisation through TikTok duets represents a form of social interaction involving people and music. This process resembles transmedia music, where music, individuality, and storytelling intersect (Vizcaíno-Verdú, Aguaded and Contreras-Pulido, 2021). In this specific case, while TikTok duets may seem to challenge dominant musical norms and exhibit some cultural diversity, it is essential to acknowledge that the platform is still predominantly dominated by mainstream Anglo-Saxon pop music. There is limited visibility and promotion of non-Western folk music genres and artists on the platform, compared to the wide dissemination of mainstream Western pop. While some songs and challenges on TikTok have been employed to address social issues and promote self-awareness (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022), it is imperative that we critically assess the extent and effectiveness of these initiatives in advancing broader social justice. The platform primarily serves as an entertainment and marketing tool, and its capacity to drive meaningful social change and advocacy for justice remains limited, particularly in the context of algorithmic recommendation systems.

Moreover, this form of cross-cultural self-expression challenges the notion that there is only one "correct" path for music creation. As previously mentioned, this sense of an unconscious community operates within a platform-based framework that is intertwined with other industries. Specifically, we are discussing the fact that the content disseminated by TikTok is owned by another global company, ByteDance (Karhade et al., 2021).

6. Limitations and future research interests

Despite the theoretical and practical considerations, we are confronted with a movement that is regarded as particularly emergent and stimulating. As mentioned earlier, I have argued that we are encountering a social phenomenon that appears to be unconscious. These posts adhere to trends that lack an understanding of the industrial strategies and procedures related to music. Moreover, their users frequently do not orient their participation toward social (re)action or empowerment (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Sadler, 2022; Webb-Gannon and Webb, 2019; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022). Identifying and drawing analogies between social decolonisation and TikTok's duet practices entail a semiotic understanding that, from this perspective, should consider the interests and intentions of its participants.

In this context, I refer to the assumption that a process of remixing, covering, and performing songs originally produced by the Western music industry on TikTok exists. We should then consider where the success and limitations of this trend lie. This raises questions for future studies concerning music co-production on social media. For example, whether these trends are temporary and will not transcend mainstream popular music culture. In addition, whether they will lead to a sort of organic music industry driven by human creation and artificial intelligence. Alternatively, whether these practices will evolve into a distributed system in which each user becomes their own record label.

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8. Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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