

# The Music Ecology of TikTok

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## Introduction

A unique relationship between *platform* and *sound* exists on TikTok. While TikTok is not unique within the social media landscape in its use of music and audiovisual content, the audiovisual nature of social media has become heightened with the app, one that is not ‘for music,’ specifically, but centres *sound* as integral to the user experience. TikTok is therefore a useful site to examine the intersections between music and media, or perhaps more aptly, music *as* media, or music as *intermediary*. These distinctions can be situated within wider discourse and debate surrounding the position of music of medium, and whether it may serve as communicative potential for emotion, ritual, entertainment, or as Ian Cross argues, ‘floating intentionality’ (ch. 2).

As will be discussed, music serves a variety of mediating purposes within the TikTok ecosystem, including, but not limited to: social relationships; insider/outsider distinctions; brand management; and intermediation. In reflection of the practices of the production and consumption of all forms of content, looking at music from the perspective of mediatization recognises its communicative potential regarding the ways in which people construct their technosocial worlds. As such, this paper offers a way to conceptualise this relationship, proposing *music ecology* as an effective framework for analysis, through an overview of some of the main uses of sound found on the app, with a case study of the rise of TikTok videos using Kate Bush’s ‘Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)’ (1985) circa November 2022.

## Literature review

To define *music ecology*, it is important to first contextualise *media ecology*, as a starting point within the long-standing theory of the study of media as environments. Media ecology, as a theory, emerges from scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, and is defined by Lance Strate as:

the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs...it is technological determinism, hard and soft, and technological evolution. It is media logic, medium theory, mediology.

Similarly, Postman defines the metaphorical similarities between media and biological environments, and how these relationships between phenomena and environment inform the concept of media ecology, as noted:

In biology, a medium is defined as a substance within which a culture grows; in media ecology, a medium is a technology within which human culture grows, giving forms to its politics, ideologies, and social organization.

To briefly summarise, media ecology recognises media as environments, but also environments as media, through the examination of the interplay between humans, technology, media, and environment (Levinson). Media ecology can be seen as a broadening of the definition of ‘media’ from a form of communication to a complex environment. In regard to social media platforms, such as TikTok, a media ecology approach might examine how the platform, as technology, serves as a technocultural environment for various aspects of sound and music to become integrated into sociocultural systems. It is drawing attention to *how* we communicate, not only through the platform, but also through the types of sound/music made possible *through* the platform.

Limited research does exist in relation to music ecology, or the study of music in its environments, which both extends the concept of media ecology, and specifies it with a focus on music as media. As with media ecology, music ecology paradigms originally emerged in the late 1960 and 70s (Archer), but are re-emerging in con-

temporary research (DeNora). Similar to media ecology, there are different ways of understanding and defining music ecology, ranging from studies of the ‘live music ecology’ (Behr et al.), to more literal conceptualisations of environments as connected to the physical landscape, an approach more often associated with the field of Eco-musicology (Feisst).

According to Maria Anna Harley, music ecology may emphasize ‘holistic perception and the sonoric approach to music’ (5), which is a useful framework to examine the technocultural environment of TikTok and the way music/sound becomes contextualised within the platform. The analysis of music as sound is particularly pertinent, in that TikTok does not necessarily discern the difference between ‘music’ and ‘sound’, and both the platform and users tend to refer to any audio recording as ‘sound.’ Within a broader shift in digital spaces to refer to any output as ‘content,’ there is a similar sonic turn within TikTok, whereby any recording becomes ‘sound,’ and there is a movement away from perceiving an exceptionalism of music as a media format.

For the sake of this paper, I take a more metaphorical, or technocultural, definition of environment: the environment of TikTok, as the music that exists as connected to this environment, and informed by the affordances and conventions of the app. In the same way that Harley notes that an application of a music ecology application recognises the ecological principles of diversity, complexity and symbiosis, the same can be said regarding how sound and content circulate within TikTok, as connected to the affordances and cultures of the app.

## Context: What is TikTok?

To provide some background context for TikTok, although it has quickly become one of the most-used social media platforms, it is still largely dominated by youth users, with 38.9% of users reporting to be between the ages of 18 and 24, and 32.4% between 24 and 34, as of February 2023 (Ceci). In late 2021, TikTok broke over 1 billion active monthly users (Brandon). It was founded in 2016 as the Chinese app Douyin, by ByteDance, and launched outside of China in 2017 as TikTok. Over the past six years the maximum length of video has increased from 15 seconds to 10 minutes, and is currently trialling 20 minute paywalled videos (Capoot).

The functionality of the app is centred around the FYP, or For You Page, whereby a black-box algorithm curates highly personalised feeds through one’s movements both in and outside the app. The algorithm tends to position users into groups based on demographics, such as political and ideological stances, sexuality, neurodiversity, and interests. The short length of video, and ease in which people can scroll from one video to the next has arguably amplified broader aspects of scrolling culture found on social media platforms. A study by Tina Kendall has found that the scrolling function of TikTok maximises watch time.

## TikTok Sounds & Methodologies

This paper outlines some initial digital ethnographic exploratory findings of the uses of sound/music on TikTok. It is acknowledged that these initial findings are limited because of the nature of the algorithm and therefore which videos are prioritized on my own feed. Further research would better take these limitations into account, through the use of a ‘blank’ account, and purposeful scrolling. However, the affordances and features of the app remain consistent across users, and arguably, the use of sound/music.

Through focused observation, sounds and are found to serve a number of mediating functions within the music ecology of TikTok, most notably:

1. Sound/music as the basis for memetic function. For example: accompanying challenges, ‘skits’, lip syncing and gesture, and/or dance.
2. Self-promotion for musical artists
3. New music creation using the duet feature, remix, and/or other audiovisual recording techniques

This list is by no means an exhaustive overview of the ways in which music, and sound, function on the app, but captures three most-used uses, as identified. For the purposes of this paper, the remainder will focus on the concept of sound/music as intermediary, which underlies all three of the identified mediating functions, with a case study of Kate Bush’s ‘Running Up That Hill,’ its re-emergence in popularity following viral TikTok success, and cross-generational engagement, in recognition of a broader sense of generational imaginaries. In regard to the

se of sound/music within the TikTok environment, there are interesting ways in which sounds converge across generations, with implications for traditional industry success

## TikTok Intermediaries: Cross-Generational Engagement

During the Covid lockdowns in early 2020s, there was a marked shift in TikTok demographics, from being a predominantly youth-oriented app to the inclusion of more adult users looking for ways to spend their time. This resulted in a surge of more ‘family-oriented videos’ with whole families doing dance challenges, and so on, during the pandemic, as Gen Z users found ways to incorporate their lockdown home life with their social media use. This served as a quite explicit form of generational exchange, with parents and children recording content together, but it was not necessarily in a way where phenomena associated with generational groups became mediated through these exchanges. Where this type of interaction has taken place, however, is within the resurgence in popularity of popular music recordings from the 1970/80/90s, in which Gen Z audiences both discover these recordings and forge emotional/cultural connections to them, but also navigate the cultural connections that already exist between these sounds and their parents’ generations.

Through the online disinhibition effect (Suler), the intimacy of disclosing directly to one’s mobile screen, and the support of the comments sections, both youth and adult users were, and continue to, use the app to disclose all aspects of life, from the quite personal (such as information about bodily process), to participating in dance challenges. And this perceived intimacy can be seen to impact the relationships between generational users, particularly in their claims to cultural artifacts, such as music. This is not to say that different generations did not interact before TikTok, but the app has removed some of the barriers to conversation and exchange, existing outside the social norms that often influence the preventions of such open and frank dialogue across age groups.

There is some precedence for the resurgence in popularity of older songs, through mediated symbiosis with another format, such as TV. For example, during the height of popularity of shows like *American Idol* (USA) and *X Factor* (UK), it became common for older recordings to re-emerge on Top 100 charts for a week or so following a memorable cover performance on the show. These successes were mostly short-lived, and largely one-directional; as in, a performance would occur on the TV, show success would follow with the original recording, and then it would quickly fall off the chart system. Unlike TikTok, these ephemeral successes were not well positioned for the original artists to use them as a platform for renewed success in the contemporary landscape.

TikTok’s functionality, however, through its participatory and interactive conventions, and backgrounding of the original artists/creators of sounds/music, and focus on remix/copying, has demonstrated increased potential to maintain the success of older songs in this space, resulting in both online and offline success. Often, this success occurs within a process of nostalgia, or imagined nostalgia, depending on the demographic of the user.

By breaking records for the largest gap between chart successes at 44 years, Kate Bush’s ‘Running Up That Hill’ is a useful case to apply a music ecology approach to cross-generational intermediaries on TikTok. The mainstream press often connects the song’s renewed success to its presence on *Stranger Things*; and while this arguably played a critical part in raising the initial awareness of the song to younger viewers, it is also important to acknowledge that TikTok had already primed users for this viral and nostalgic moment. Prior to the re-emergence of ‘Running Up That Hill’, there were niche communities whereby ‘Wuthering Heights,’ another Kate Bush song from the 1980s, had become integrated into the public conscious, through the use of the sound in challenges, skits, lip synching, and the like. In addition, there was much sharing and duetting of a clip of Noel Fielding’s choreography cover of the original video, from a 2011 episode of ‘Let’s Dance for Comic Relief’ by the BBC.

Therefore, this moment where ‘Running Up That Hill’ seemed to saturate many users’ For You Pages, uniting niche groups across algorithmic interventions, became incorporated into a complex environment of pastiche, nostalgia, and the re-emergence of sounds from the 1980s, as mediated through TikTok, but also extending outside of the immediate TikTok platform. For many Gen Z users, they witnessed how this song already contained cultural context for Millennial and Gen X users, sometimes with a sense of tension over who culturally ‘owns’ the sound, as the meaning had shifted through the mediation across platforms, whether *Stranger Things*, TikTok, or the original recording as it existed in physical format. The popularity of this song was driven by the nostalgia of Millennial and Gen X users for the music of their youth, while Gen Z participated in a form of imagined nostalgia (Appadurai) for the late 80s and early 90s, a sentiment that currently is quite common both on TikTok, and through shows like *Stranger Things*.

Interestingly, Kate Bush received a higher degree of engagement with her songs through their (re)use on TikTok, than in their initial success. This is not something that is exclusive to Bush; because of the way in which

the artists tend to be backgrounded as songs are decontextualised from their originators, songs are valued more for their ability to become recontextualised on the app, through skits, challenges, and the like. The historical focus on artist aesthetic, particularly for female artists, is lessened. Instead, songs are popularised through the aesthetic potential of the TikTok *users*, the intermediaries between the original artist, their music, and the TikTok public. As such, the cross-generational consumption of popular music has become complicated, entangled in the affordances of the platform.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the music ecology of TikTok and the technocultures of the app, afford new possibilities for both music industry success, and wider sociocultural exchange and production. In this paper, I have focused on cross-generational exchange through the recontextualization of older songs within Generation Z users, but this can be considered a starting point within a further examination of the wider ecosystem of TikTok and the intermediation of music within that environment.

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