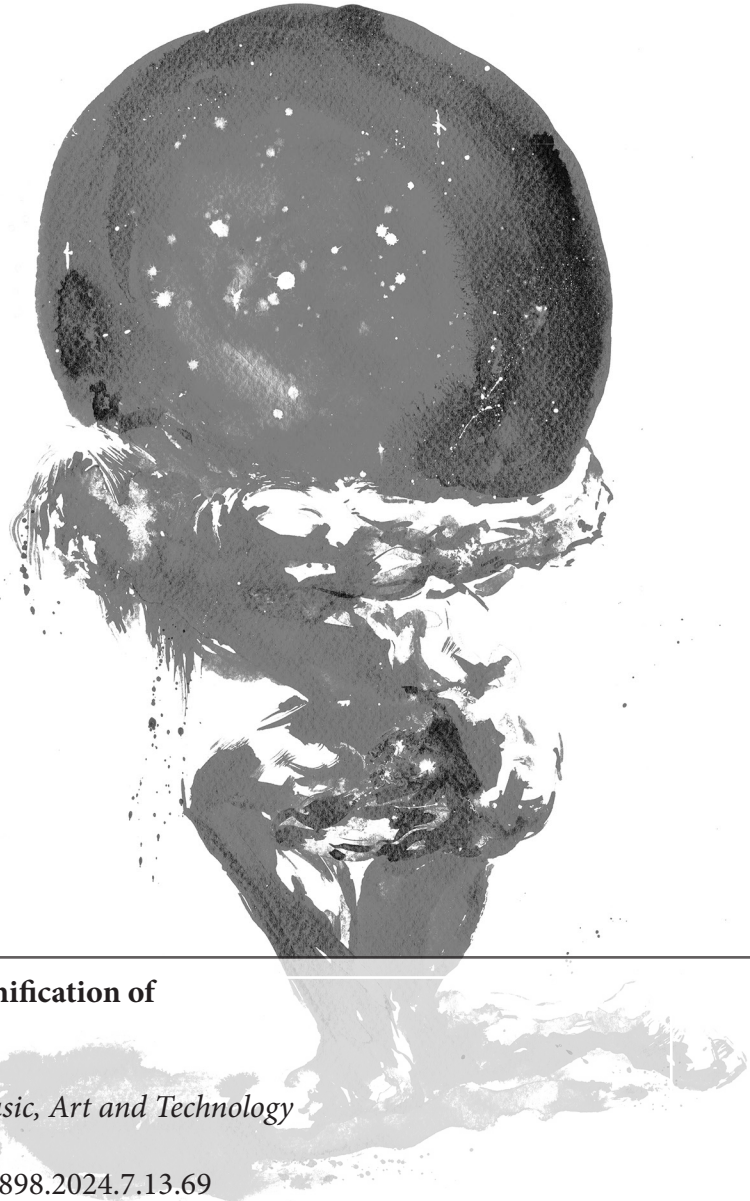


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Peter W. Stone

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I N S Δ M

Peter W. Stone*

*University of Derby,
Derby, United Kingdom*

RISE OF THE MICROSONG: THE PLATFORMIFICATION OF MUSIC ON TIKTOK AS AN ARTFORM

Abstract: The platformification of music has led to a significant reorganisation of music culture with the rise of microsongs on short-form video platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Facebook Stories, and Instagram Reels. This paper analyses the current state of microsongs on social media platforms, focusing on TikTok, and explores the challenges faced by musicians in navigating the digital reimaging of their art and the new aura this creates. The paper argues that the challenges facing the 21st century musicians whose work is based in the digital environment echo those faced by creators of newly mechanically reproduced art, as critiqued by Walter Benjamin. The symbiotic relationship between social media platforms and artists is examined, highlighting the benefits for musicians and songwriters, as well as the potential pitfalls of algorithmic based user direction. Data is gathered from a range of secondary sources and presents an analysis based on user behaviour and interaction with music content on TikTok. The findings suggest that while established artists and music production teams are best placed to overcome the challenges of platformification, the creation of microsongs remains a significant challenge for all musicians and their authenticity.

Keywords: TikTok, microsong, platformification, digital music, streaming .

* Author's contact information: pete.stones@gmail.com.

Background

Platformification refers to the movement of information, culture, and communication on digital platforms across various economic sectors (Poell et al. 2019). Platforms have become increasingly “influential in shaping cultural habits and identity formations”, particularly regarding music (Valtysson 2022). This has been viewed negatively by some within the music industry, regarding it as the “pervasive reach and impact of platforms on cultures” (Abidin & Lee 2023). It can be argued that the greatest cultural impact of social media on modern society lies in the realm of music. Information is “the new mode of production” (Pal & Harris 2024, 232). This is evident within a digital world “which looks extremely capitalist” in the way music is managed and reproduced, challenging those new to it (Pal & Harris 2024, 244). Digital reimagining of music and songs through platformification and the reframing of the original into smaller microsong formats has created a new sector in the music business. Microsongs are defined as shortened forms of the original song that have been cropped into a clip of less than one minute. This new format has become part of the complete “reorganisation of cultural practices” that are engaging with a growing number of users (Poell et al. 2019). The term microsong is used in this paper to clarify that once music is cropped, it is not only part of the original song but also becomes a unique entity with a new aura. The consumption of these microsongs seems to be most prevalent on TikTok.

Listening to microsongs takes place across a range of user-generated and content-driven platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, as well as well-established streaming sites, such as Spotify and Apple Music. The latter allows full access to musical works, with the former focusing on the clipped, adapted, or cropped forms of the original musical work, defined here as microsongs. The platformification and success of microsongs across this range of sources works in different forms but is inherently linked to the algorithm that drives user access to content. While user-generated platformification of music has allowed emerging artists greater understanding of target listeners, this is not without a range of challenges that musicians need to navigate. However, even considering these challenges, it has never been easier for musicians to distribute their music (Nwagwu & Akintoye 2023).

Music listening is embedded within social media usage, with evidence suggesting that 90% of regular social media users engage in music-related activities (Crupnick 2018). Accessing music through social media has grown steadily over the past decade. Evidence suggests that the growth of many short-form social media video platforms was supported by the social isolation many faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Radovanović 2022, 59). At this time, many platforms, such as TikTok, presented a new form of social media, contrasting the more blog-focused output of already established social media platforms such as Facebook. A change in focus towards video-dominated feeds began to impact the interactions of users with music. While they hold many benefits for users, songs and concepts began to be completely reframed through this platformification. Reframing a song for short-form consumption, as a microsong, follows many of the same concepts challenging twentieth-century artists, set out by Walter Benjamin (1935) in his seminal work *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. The reframing of portraits, photography and film created new auras through mass digital reproduction and reframing. There have been calls for the view of digital reproductions to be seen as the “transformation of objects to information” and the redefining of the format as having a new “digital aura” (Betancourt 2015, 37). Benjamin (1935) critiqued the changes made to a work of art when it is recreated for consumption in non-original form, as microsongs lose a sense of the aura from the original musical composition. The sense of aura being lost is debated though and research such as Bolter et al. (2006, 35) see digital arts as leading the way in many areas and call on “the viewer to reflect on their own conditions of representation”. Bolter et al. (2006, 36) also question the claims of “auratic art” or art consumed in person as the only “legitimate style”.

Despite debate around the loss of aura in the music, microsongs are the sole way of listening to music through many social media platforms, such as TikTok. Streaming of works through established platforms, showcasing the original format, is not directly available. The challenge facing the modern musician is creating a work of art that can both stand alone as a full entity that can be consumed through traditional manners, as well as creating a clipped work that can draw in a listener. This challenge is further compounded by the fact that the musical creator may not be the one clipping the song, and therefore, may not be the editor or creator of the microsong. While the artistic value comes from the

musician, the perspective the microsong creator, or the one cutting the song to fit the video on the platform, brings to editing alienates the musician from how their work is used. This reworking of the artform affects a wide range of genres and musicians, not simply those involved in popular music. Working to promote music on the internet, established artists and music production teams are best placed to overcome these challenges, further alienating less established musicians and ensembles. To illustrate this, large record labels have developed partnerships with platforms to favour their musical output, such as the partnership between Sony Music Entertainment (SME) and TikTok, making SME artists' music more widely available (TikTok Newsroom 2020). In comparison, those new to the process must navigate this alone; although new markets may be easily accessible, they might still find themselves just as distantly placed in terms of reaching them (Nwagwu & Akintoye 2023). While this is a challenge across many platforms, this appears to be particularly true for TikTok users, who have a unique interaction with music. TikTok as a social media platform has a specific link to music creation and listening, with the prominence of audio and music features described as one of its unique selling points to users (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin 2022, 884). The relationship between TikTok and the artist is symbiotic. Evidence suggests that the wealth of user-generated content available from fans benefits musicians with connections and insights, such as topic ideas for songwriting and valuable marketing information (Nwagwu & Akintoye 2023). However, this is always conducted through the lens of an algorithm that tailors viewable content for users and musicians alike, shaping the discourse to confirm established positions (Bilic 2024, 20). This can create an echo chamber of social views and acceptable attitudes which could share misleading opinions, excluding those outside of the digital sounding board (Mosley et al. 2016). Nevertheless, the symbiotic relationship between TikTok, the musical audience, and the music artist has some benefits for all parties. More traditional forms of music making and their fields have embraced this platformification, including, for example, the Eurovision Song Contest's decision to brand TikTok as the official entertainment partner (Radovanović 2022, 64). Huge networks of listeners can be accessed, and music can be shared to create a global reach, which may not otherwise be possible.

Questions could be asked about whether the audience is connecting with the original work or simply the reframed microsong. Studies show that TikTok

users generally watch videos less than one minute long (Metricool 2023). Rapid movement between short videos suggests that listeners are unlikely to consider the music within each deeply. This dream-like slideshow of musical platformification through TikTok is also viewed with visual imagery that is often not at the control of the music artist themselves. Pellegrini (2022) stated that “emplacement and temporalization” of the experience is “completely disconnected from the original music,” describing the cultural input as akin to a “hallucinatory experience” (95). The artist is, in turn, completely unaware of how their artform has been ‘hallucinated’ or experienced in this new micro-form. Musicians are then powerless to interact with their audience and communicate further ideas that do not fit into TikTok’s short video format. TikTok may have the ability to predict a probable desired viewing for the audience, but without establishing the relationship that exists between audience and music artist, further listening to the artist’s work is not assured.

TikTok’s growing number of users and engagement with music through the platform could be linked to the algorithm powering the user experience. The experience of music on TikTok is individually tailored by an algorithm, with musicians or artists using the platform and algorithms promoting their work (Radovanović 2022, 69). Algorithmic usage shapes the experience of each individual user, blinding them from certain angles and opportunities and encouraging them to choose those that the algorithm believes best suits their previous positions (Bilic 2024, 15). Arguments have been made that the new media landscape only serves to maintain the existing power structures held within the global north and continues to exclude musicians without the financial means to adapt to the new landscape (Pal & Harris 2024, 243). Algorithms have been critiqued by many researchers, including Noam Chomsky (2023). Chomsky states in a 2023 New York Times editorial that the challenges of shaping the experience of the user centre in the complex space between what is possible and what is probable, with the algorithm unable to fully understand the balance between these (Chomsky 2023). Chomsky’s editorial goes on to explain that the human mind has a superior ability to “create explanations” regardless of the data available to the algorithm (Chomsky 2023). The editorial also explains that human understanding is not always correct, “we are fallible” but that our processing “gradually limits what possibilities can be rationally considered” (Chomsky 2023). To view this through a musical lens, the process of musical

experimentation allows us to limit what we do or do not do. Platformification predetermines “what could and could not be the case”, eliminating the holistic learning that takes place from listening to new music and listening to the possible over the probable (Chomsky 2023). This relationship between the probable and possible is the centre of algorithmic choice and platformification, including on TikTok. The platformification of the arts only empowers algorithms to choose the listening that is consumed. In turn, it is fair to say that this is not the algorithm choosing the music to be consumed but choosing the microsong. Choosing a small part of the music to be consumed is all that is available, as the full experience of the art form does not feature on TikTok. The choice of what makes the microsong rests with the human, deciding which part of the song should be exhibited in the video they create, which is often not under the artist’s control. This consumption of microsongs has only increased in the digital world through the growth of social media platforms, although it is not a new concept. Short pieces of music, listened to in isolation from the original work, have actually formed a part of our daily life away from social media.

Microsongs have long been around us, through humble elevator music or hold music that has soundtracked our lives prior to the Internet age. As a concept, however, this has not been placed at the forefront of musical consumption and has taken the role of background sound. On TikTok, user experience dictates whether the music is at the forefront or in the background for a listener, as videos are constantly paired with the microsong. The consumer, previously, has always been aware that the artwork is not original. For example, when listening to music in a lift, no passenger is under the assumption that they are listening to the entirety of a piece or a piece written for their lift experience. It is unclear if this is the case for TikTok users. Microsongs are also prevalent in advertising. More than 90% of advertising includes music; therefore, it is clear that a large number of musical compositions have been reimagined as microsongs to best reflect brand values in the advertising time available (Allan 2008). Music has been shown to be a powerful tool to influence consumer behaviour and a marketing approach, with songs being perceived to hold experiences that cannot be explained plainly in the limited time of a short television or radio advert (Anglada-Tort et al. 2022). The popularity of songs has also been shown to support advertising. Evidence suggests that familiarity with music is important within the advertising world, with Anglada-Tort et al. (2022) suggesting that

several studies have shown positive links between listening to known music and supporting a given brand. Within the digital world, microsongs may continue to promote or advertise feeds or videos on TikTok. Digital consumers are repeatedly fed the same clipped version of the musical work, which in turn has no clear link to the original full version unless it is already well known. This leaves the majority of the original artwork lost unless it is specifically sought out by the audience through another platform. This fragmented reality is well suited to a sense of cultural distraction, which has grown throughout the digital age (Pellegrini 2022, 89). The challenges of cultural distraction and microsongs may lie in TikTok's use of the vertically framed video.

Social media's usage of video was forced to adapt to the rise in platforms such as TikTok, increasing the use of vertically framed videos on other platforms. This led to the creation of Reels (on Instagram) and Shorts (on YouTube) competing with TikTok, which forced creators to focus on an almost entirely mobile phone-based consumption of content (Radovanović 2022, 54). This change in video format has led to the inevitable consumption of microsongs as longer videos are less comfortable to consume through vertically framed video. Musical content moved further away from the original artform even when the video was paired with it. The traditional music video, which had been created for consumption on television or computer screens, paired the original song with original artistic video content. Through forced adaptation, artists either created costly new videos specific to the new vertical format or tried to adapt videos by cropping and cutting the original. The habit of consuming music through vertical-framed videos has become the cultural norm for many. Established artists are able to support this reimagination and this change further challenges emerging artists to adapt to a multi-format market. While this new format has been viewed as initially easier for creators, there is no consensus on the level at which the situation impacts emerging artists (Caliandro et al. 2024, 12).

Methods

The research in this study is mainly descriptive and uses a range of secondary data sources. The aim was to utilise datasets highlighting the usage of music within TikTok and how this may relate to a wider movement of platformification. The advantage of this review process is that data existing in some format can be

evaluated to draw links with a wider understanding of how music is increasingly used on social media platforms, such as TikTok. Initially, publicly available datasets were collected using online scoping tools, including Google Dataset search, Matomo, Databox, and Statica. Datasets were reached when searching using the following keywords: TikTok, music, streaming, music usage, listen/listening, platformification, and microsong. Findings were then evaluated and coded with the data analysed and conclusions were drawn. Insight was also gained from journal articles and public articles to support this initial search, as well as the analysis of microsongs from TikTok presented in other formats, such as physical entities or Spotify streams. The research design centred on organising, collating, and assessing collected data samples before conclusions could be drawn. The scope of this study is limited to TikTok and its impact on music listenership, creation, and publication; therefore, other social media platforms and streaming services were only assessed when relating directly to TikTok music usage.

Results

Through analysis of the datasets, several key themes could be drawn. Evidence suggests that TikTok users are more likely to participate in music-related activities both on and away from the platform. A study for Statistica (2022a) found that TikTok users are more than twice as likely to meet an artist in person (17% of respondents compared to 8%), nearly twice as likely to purchase an artist's merchandise (29% compared to 15%) and discover an artist that would later go on to be repeatedly listened to (42% compared to 20%). There is also evidence that songs heard on TikTok may lead to listenership through streaming services, with more than half of the participants in a study (54%) stating that they had done this (Statistica 2022a). However, there are challenges to this final statement. A 2023 report conducted by TikTok in collaboration with Luminate provided a range of insights related to TikTok's impact on music. Music on TikTok is more global, with 77% of TikTok users in the United Kingdom wanting access to international music artists and 46% of TikTok users in the USA listening to tracks not in the English language (Luminate 2023). The study also found that those regularly listening to music on TikTok were more likely to use a paid streaming service, and evidence suggests that high levels of TikTok streaming was paired

with higher levels of streaming on other platforms (Luminate 2023). Evidence also suggests that new music discovered through TikTok within a microsong format is more likely to be shared in this format than the average user of another social media platform (Luminate 2023).

Information from a study conducted by PEX (2024) stated that measuring listenership and the impact of tracks can be complex, with clipping of songs combined with tempo alterations to circumvent copyright law or to best fit the creator's video content. Modified microsongs can "divert royalty payments away from rightsholders and into the hands of other creators" (MBW 2024). PEX (2024) estimates that more than one-third of songs are modified in this way by TikTok, making true estimations of the listenership for a specific song complex.

Despite the increased growth of TikTok and other platforms utilising microsongs, evidence suggests that when asked, more than two-thirds of consumers prefer streaming services for active consumption of music (IFPI 2022). With the growth of platformification the evidence is that this will only increase (Radovanović 2022, 59). Globally, studies have found that users are three times more likely to avoid regular adverts interrupting their listening and would rather seek out a paid subscription, with the choice of music video-based consumption, such as through YouTube, also being more popular than video streaming services with adverts (IFPI 2022).

TikTok's success is powered by the interactions individuals have with the platform, rather than business-focused accounts. Personal use accounts post, on average, three times more every month (Metricool 2023). Personal use accounts are also viewed more; on average there are 12,500 more views per video compared to business accounts (Metricool 2023). The video length for users is on average between 30 seconds and one minute, with the majority of videos paired with microsongs (Metricool 2023). A wide range of nationalities and song styles are popular across TikTok, with the popularity of songs leading to huge numbers of streams in a short period for some musicians (Metricool 2024).

Discussion

Does the evidence suggest TikTok is good for musicians?

Data clearly presents that TikTok users interact more frequently with music both on and away from the platform. The argument could be presented that

the format of microsongs may have a similar impact on the user to that of a traditional television or radio advert for an established product. It can be argued that the microsong provides an advert to the user for the more traditional catalogue of works that a TikTok user could find in another format. The impact this may have on Spotify streams or physical sales of leading TikTok artists could be further examined, though it may be unclear whether musical interaction away from TikTok is directly linked to the platform's impact.

The impact of artists producing microsongs as an advert for their work must also be considered in relation to their creative process. Arguments could be made that genres of music, such as pop or hip-hop, have been built on the strength of a catchy hook. The skill in writing a hook and building a song around this could then be established as key to the success of any artist, both on TikTok and away from the platform. This could be presented as a reason for the relative successes in listenership within genres such as hip-hop and pop. Even when comparing the use of classical music, for example, in platformification on TikTok or more traditional radio and television adverts, this could still hold true. The success of classical music in these fields has often centred on the 'pop-ification' of the work, reducing *Für Elise* or *O Fortuna* to a microsong of several bars.

Questions can be raised about how certain genres might evolve in an increasingly platform-centred music landscape. Will the future of jazz become a more popified, hook-centred style? How can folk music stay loyal to the population it represents while storytelling in a microsong? While the interaction of the TikTok user with music is clear, if the popularity of the microsong is linked to this then the likelihood of success centres on a microsong-centric process.

How does the microsong impact the listener's relationship with the musician?

The artist's relationship with the listener has changed through the movement away first from the physical form and then from the digital form in its entirety. Platformification, such as that of TikTok, and the increase in listenership of the microsong presents a new type of interaction in the music world. This interaction has altered the power structure between listener and creator, with an increasing number of factors creating a less direct and more distracted picture of the initial

song format. One part of this is perhaps the challenge of the listener 'knowing' the music artist or creator.

Evidence suggests that TikTok listeners are more likely to interact with music away from the platform (Statistica 2022a). This would suggest that some of the listening from TikTok may result in active listening away from the platform, interaction with full length tracks and developing a further understanding of the artist they have listened to. However, this does not account for the passive listening that may occur on the platform. When the music is presented in a microsong format, perhaps with video content that does not relate to the artist, questions can be asked about the understanding of the artist away from the platform.

PEX (2024) further questions this through the re-imagining of tracks and tempo changes. The reformatting of sections of a song into slightly different microsongs, with different tempos, may cause miscalculation in this area. These microsongs could be misinterpreted as global music if created by non-English speaking users or fused with other genres of music. The flexibility and creativity on the part of the content creator supports new microsong imagining, but further isolates the listener from the aura of the original creation through the increased layers of reproduction.

Does TikTok promote global music?

Data suggested that TikTok listeners were more likely to listen to songs from international artists (Luminate 2023, Metricool 2024). One possible reason for this could be that a popular artist in their own country would attract a lot of clicks, which could lead the algorithm to believe it is probable that users from other regions would want to listen to the song. Through systems like this it is more difficult for local artists without established profiles to break through within an increasingly global market (Nwagwu & Akintoye 2023). Some of the songs classified as global are also performed in English or Spanish, the dominant languages of many currently popular songs across the globe on TikTok (Metricool 2024). Evidence suggests that many languages may not be widely listened to on TikTok (Metricool 2024). "Alibi" by Sevdaliza, Pabllo Vittar and Yseullt is one of the most popular songs on TikTok at the time of writing; despite a range of international artists it is performed in English (Metricool 2023). The

opportunities for global artists are shown to be there, with the chance for music publicists to target TikTok and platformification for their publicity. Microsongs as a concept may promote a chance for artists to introduce their work to new audience.

TikTok and music in a state of distraction

TikTok listenership may present a divided picture of engagement with the music on the platform. Statistics presented by TikTok (Luminate, 2023) suggest that music consumers are not receiving music in a state of distraction and that listening to microsongs leads to increased listenership in other formats. This data though only provides positive interactions on both platforms and does not necessarily provide an outline of passive listenership. Passive listening in other forms, such as advertising, may not necessarily lead to wider interaction with a song or artist. Therefore, a greater understanding of how passive listenership of microsongs could impact interaction with a genre, artist or song is needed.

Viral TikTok songs and non-artist video content

Challenges such as lip syncing have helped to promote music across TikTok and have provided listeners with interactive experiences with the music (Metricool 2024). One challenge facing music artists is that they are not in control of the video content accompanying their music. This does, though, allow a personalisation of experience that is not available away from the platform. One example of this is a microsong form of “Help me” by Real Boston Richey, which is used by TikTok creators to pair with selfies or fail videos (Metricool 2024). The relationship between music and a context or a particular theme is evident on TikTok. For example, microsong versions of “beamer boy” by Lil Peep and Nedarb is linked to fashion or tattoo content (Metricool 2024). While these examples are successful microsongs, it is questionable whether these themes or topics are approved by the musician in the same way that contextual usage of a song would require to be approved in the fields of film or advertising. The longer TikTok is established as a platform it may prove to be more difficult for emerging artists to have success in promoting their work as algorithms favour existing and previous choices over the unknown.

Challenges and opportunities for musicians

Platformification offers musicians a new opportunity to promote their music to a diverse audience. Language and international opportunities are clear for artists, as well as the opportunity for engagement with an audience through new means such as challenges or dances (Metricool 2024). However, the challenge of developing successful microsongs faces music artists. Microsongs rely on short music clips and catchy parts of a songs, conveying values to the listener in less than one minute. Musicians must be careful to keep the integrity (or aura) of their original work and, if possible, direct their audience to listen to their artistic ideas in the complete form.

Conclusion

An analysis of a range of data provides a picture of how TikTok impacts the music industry and musicians. Platformification is established as having an increasingly important impact on listeners' interaction with music. Music is also key to the success of platforms such as TikTok and there is a symbiotic relationship between music and the platforms on which it is listened to. Musicians are impacted by the increased platformification of their work and there are a range of challenges and opportunities that face them. Financial means to support overcoming these challenges puts new music artists in an increasingly difficult position. The algorithms that direct listenership also challenge musicians when producing artwork and the microsongs that are created from initial artforms pose musicians work in a new light. The strategies that musicians use to work with microsongs requires further research and the impact of the microsong on the long-term future of platformification presents challenges and opportunities for musicians.

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**RISE OF THE MICROSONG:
THE PLATFORMIFICATION OF MUSIC ON TIKTOK AS AN ARTFORM
(summary)**

This paper examines the impact of platformification on music, focusing on the rise of microsongs on short-form video platforms like TikTok. It argues that the challenges faced by 21st-century digital musicians echo those faced by creators of newly mechanically reproduced art in the early 20th century, as critiqued by Walter Benjamin. The symbiotic relationship between social media platforms and artists is explored, highlighting the benefits and potential pitfalls of algorithmic-based user direction. The microsong as a concept is analysed with consideration to the role it plays in advertising as well as social media.

Using secondary data sources, the study finds that TikTok users are more likely to engage in music-related activities both on and off the platform. However, the true impact on listenership is complex due to song modifications. While TikTok promotes global music discovery, it also presents challenges for musicians in maintaining the integrity of their original work. The paper concludes that platformification significantly impacts listeners' interaction with music, and there is a symbiotic relationship between music and platforms like TikTok. Musicians face both challenges and opportunities in this landscape, with financial means playing a role in overcoming challenges. Further research is needed on the strategies musicians use to work with microsongs and the long-term impact of platformification on the music industry.

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