

I posted. There was no real-life implication to what I posted. So, you know, I didn't understand really what TikTok was back in the day." In contrast, Stella Cole offers a critical assessment of her earlier work, particularly with regard to her vocal performance:

Watching that video, my first response is, like, oh my God, I sound horrible. [...] I've grown so much as a singer in the last couple of years. So TikTok is definitely an interesting way to, like, keep track of your progress. And it's interesting to look back at videos from a few years ago and be, like, I'm phrasing that so weird, why am I singing that up-tempo like a ballad, you know? (Stella Cole, interview)

6.5 Interacting with Users and the Algorithm

The process of professionalizing one's output on TikTok entails the development of a nuanced understanding of the platform's unique requirements. This encompasses not only navigating the intricacies of the platform's algorithmic system but also engaging with users. The musicians thus generally have both algorithmic and human actors in mind.

6.5.1 Trying to Identify Patterns for Success

All of the musicians interviewed described their focused and long-term observations of the platform's logic. Over time, as the interviews illustrate, certain patterns are discovered that are believed to make success more likely and which are then continuously repeated in a similar way. Consequently, the creation of platform-specific content is frequently predicated on specific assumptions regarding the functional logic of TikTok. The musicians interviewed individually identified disparate potential patterns of success, thereby demonstrating the impossibility of establishing a universal recipe that can be applied as often as desired in the context of jazz.

Kellin Hanas describes her experience in identifying patterns of success based on her previously discussed video captioned "depressive episodes? no. j a z z" (Hanas 2021b):

A girl playing the trumpet, that's the first thing that catches their eye. They go: this is weird, because there's not a lot of us. [...] Then they go: oh my God,

she's playing really fast. That's impressive. And then they go: why did she just scream? Four million views. So I was, like, this is a recipe that I can use. [...] If you want to get attention and views and get more following, you've got to do stuff that's going to catch people's attention. So I would put on a really fast backing track and then kind of my theme became, like, I'm going crazy and I'm so stressed out and depressed. And people were, like, this is so funny. And also she plays the trumpet really well. So that's kind of what took off for me. And I did a series of videos of basically just play jazz instead of being depressed. And everybody liked that for some reason, and that was kind of my thing. [...] I mean, the goal of a TikTok is to get it out and get it seen. So I was just, you know what? What are the up-tempo tunes that I know that I can blow over and just do a short little lick and then do something afterwards, because that kind of seemed to be the recipe that was getting me the views. (Kellin Hanas, interview)

While Kellin explicitly refers to a “recipe,” the other interviewees describe analogous scenarios in which they were able to discern specific formulas or patterns. Rachel Chiu, for instance, delineates this process through the use of the mouth trumpet, which is evident in numerous instances within her videos:

I remember one time, a video did really well and it was me doing the mouth trumpet and I think I have a little bit of, like, the jazz pop style integrated into my mouth trumpet and so people really liked it and it was new and that was my very first video that blew up and it gave me the encouragement to try and do another one. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

Stacey Ryan asserts that she has identified a specific genre of video that consistently garners a significant number of views over time:

I definitely saw all those videos, like, the looping harmony ones popping up all over TikTok. I love that idea because I love doing that, like, looping harmonies and stuff. But I was, like, I'm going to do it my way. I'm going to make it a little jazzier, a little more interesting. And the first one I did was “It's My Party.” That was a big song on TikTok at that moment. So I did that in a way. I think it got, like, six million views or something, it did really well. I kept it pretty simple, but there was a little jazziness in it and people really liked it. So I did another one. [...] These are all getting a million plus views every time I posted one. It's a formula that works. So I kept doing it. (Stacey Ryan, interview)

6.5.2 “Find What Makes You Different”

One key assumption shared by several interviewees regarding potential recipes for success is the importance of unique selling points. They frequently argue that, in the context of TikTok, it is essential to differentiate oneself from the crowd in a distinctive manner while remaining aligned with the mainstream. The interviewees indicated that it is necessary to employ certain techniques to ensure that one’s videos are easily recognizable. “That’s a selling point. Find what makes you different and let that be the thing that stands out,” says Brooklyn Stafford. Additionally, she emphasizes the importance of a “wow factor,” which can be defined as a distinctive feature or quality that sets a video apart and attracts users’ attention. In order to differentiate themselves from the vast quantity of content on TikTok, Brooklyn asserts that it is necessary to adopt a distinctive approach: “People are looking for a wow factor. People are looking for that wow moment. They need that wow moment. [...] If it doesn’t have that wow moment where you take a little bit into something that you know and changing it to something better, people don’t care how good it is, I would say.” Consequently, it is crucial to avoid an exclusive focus on musical performance in TikTok videos. Instead, it is essential to consistently incorporate additional elements that can enhance the overall presentation, as Sam Ambers has emphasized: “That can be a look or a bit of humor or a bit of extra creativity or a bit of a niche to your videos. But you have to have something that you’re kind of known for.” This is precisely why, according to Kellin Hanas, even a technically demanding musical performance is typically insufficient to capture the attention of a significant number of TikTok users. With reference to her previously outlined recipe for success, which entails the integration of rapid trumpet techniques with a degree of humor, Kellin proceeds to outline her perspectives on potential avenues for the popularization of this approach:

Most jazz musicians go on TikTok and they just play their instrument. But there are so many people who play the trumpet, it’s just not impressive anymore. It’s not really going to catch anybody’s eye, like, you playing a jazz standard. People are going to scroll right past that. They’re going to be, like, why do I care about this? [...] [Take] the first video that I had made with the trumpet in that context. [...] Nobody else had done something like that. There were plenty of people playing their musical instruments on TikTok. That’s not new, but the combination of just something so incredibly ridiculous plus, you know, somebody playing the instrument at a high level, especially as a

woman. [...] There are so many factors in this video that are, you know, jump fact. (Kellin Hanas, interview)

As the processes of professionalization described above encompass enhancing one's visual appeal, it is unsurprising that certain methods of staging and performance style are perceived as potential determinants of success. Brooklyn Stafford, for instance, asserts that she has tailored her performance over time with the objective of rendering her videos more engaging to a broader audience:

I also have changed the way I started performing, right? So I would start looking to the side. I'd be more expressive with my facial expressions, like, if I played something, I would move my body in that way. I would smile. I would put more energy into what I play because I noticed people like to watch people perform. They like to see the expressions on people's faces when they perform. And it takes you on the journey that I'm going through. So if I'm practicing, I'll probably just play practice like this: blank face. I won't make any faces, but when I get into performance mode, I purposely push myself more to make myself seem like a performer. And in a way it's like acting in a sense, too. (Brooklyn Stafford, interview)

The video features described by Brooklyn are evident in the majority of her successful videos.

Basically, it seems to be about being as creative as possible “within the confines of what TikTok thinks is popular. You have to be creative within what works on TikTok,” says Sam Ambers, adding that it is especially important to “spice things up” and “add some kind of twist.” It is not necessary for these techniques to be inherently musical in nature. To illustrate this point, Sam presents a specific example:

After I posted my third or fourth video, it became a thing that I don't blink, I keep my eyes open. So that was an intentional thing to keep my eyes open. There's, like, a checklist of things that I do. First of all, I'd make sure that the song was okay, that the singing was okay, that the camera work was okay. But then I also make sure I wasn't blinking and that there were interesting points within the video that people can comment on. You know, they had to tick those boxes, the videos. So I could probably go through every video and kind of break it down and give you the reason behind it all. (Sam Ambers, interview)

This statement indicates that TikTok videos are occasionally meticulously crafted, based on specific criteria that have been established over time through a process of deliberate observation of the platform's logic. In this sense, TikTok has the potential to structure action in a way that is interpreted individually and creatively by successful musicians.

6.5.3 Attention Economy

The aforementioned techniques are of significant importance to musicians, regardless of whether they are musical, visual, or performative in nature. This is largely due to the fact that a fundamental assumption about how TikTok functions is that the logic of the For You page necessitates the immediate and widespread attention of users. It is presumed that videos must possess a distinctive and appealing quality to prevent users from swiping away from them immediately. Brooklyn Stafford articulates her assumptions as follows:

We have to understand TikTok. When you're scrolling through, you have a very short amount of time to grab somebody's attention. People's attention spans are very short because of the way TikTok is. You scroll and if you don't like something within the first few seconds, you just skip, skip, skip. And in that way, it becomes so much harder to grab a listener's attention because you're competing with millions of other people, so many different pieces of content. (Brooklyn Stafford, interview)

As Sam Ambers notes, this phenomenon is clearly evident in the analytics data provided by TikTok to its content creators: "I can look at the analytics on my videos and the biggest dip of audience retention is within the first seconds. Most of the time it drops by a third because people just don't have the attention span. And if they don't immediately like a video, then you've got no chance of it doing well."

At this juncture, the capacity of the platform to facilitate the structuring of actions becomes evident once more, as content creators tailor their behavior to align with their interpretation of the platform's logic. One consequence of this is that some musicians opt to produce especially short videos, as their experience has shown that these elicit the most attention. For instance, Stella Cole posits that the platform logic of TikTok affects the duration of users' attention spans. Consequently, she has observed "that videos that are 30 seconds or a minute do much better for me." "It's got to be short and concise and get to

the point. Otherwise, they're going to lose interest and scroll past," says Kellin Hanas. However, the production of new videos represents a delicate balancing act, as it is important to ensure that the content is not lost in videos that are too short. In this context, Brooklyn Stafford offers the following insight: "You have to keep it short. And you start thinking, like, how do you get enough content but not lose the attention of somebody when you're making, like, a jazz TikTok." In some cases, videos are created with the express purpose of garnering as many views as possible in a relatively short period of time. Kellin Hanas explains: "I'm always looking for a way to make them in a way that has that shock factor that will grab somebody's attention. And I always make them very, very short because that's how you get the most replays. You get the most watch time." In the absence of user intervention, videos on TikTok will automatically restart from the beginning, suggesting that this strategy is likely to be successful.

6.5.4 Algorithmic and User Imaginaries

The aforementioned assumptions and strategies for action are specifically applicable to the experiences of content creators as they observe the logic of the TikTok platform. These assumptions also pertain to the functioning of the platform's algorithmic system, which is responsible for moderating the content of all users' For You pages and thus exerts a significant influence on musicians' assumptions about potential pathways to success. In this context, concrete *algorithmic imaginaries* (Bucher 2018) of the interviewed content creators are revealed. Nevertheless, it is not always possible to distinguish between assumptions about the algorithms and assumptions about user behavior. Once a video has been included on a user's algorithmically moderated For You page, the subsequent action is for TikTok users to interact with the video. This may entail a range of actions, including swiping away from it immediately, leaving a comment, or duetting with the video. In this way, users can also contribute to the dissemination of a video. In this regard, algorithmic imaginaries or *algorithmic practices* (Abidin 2020) in the context of TikTok typically encompass both the platform's algorithms and the actions of its users.

It is of the utmost importance for musicians to gain an in-depth understanding of the inner workings of the TikTok algorithm. The algorithmic imaginaries that emerge during this process frequently influence their actions. The experiences of the content creators play an important role here. Assumptions about algorithmic logics are generally based on long-term observation of what happens on the platform and sometimes lead to differentiated strategies for

action. In this context, Sam Ambers' statements are particularly instructive, as he indicates that he has engaged in extensive reflection on potential pathways to success. Sam primarily discusses specific and recurring patterns in his videos, which he hypothesizes are algorithmically prioritized. In this context, as Sam notes, it is crucial to exercise caution when integrating new elements into recently created videos, prioritizing the use of established techniques:

When I've diversified and when I've tried to do different types of videos, they haven't necessarily done as well because, you know, with TikTok, you have to hit kind of, like, algorithmic baselines and you have to tick boxes. So, you know, if I'm trying something new out, then I think immediately that reduces my chances of something going viral because I'm kind of known and people I guess have liked videos where it's just the Samsung remote. So, the Samsung remote is the key indicator. I think it's important to have a distinctive feature about your videos in order to best kind of get the most out of the algorithm basically, you know. (Sam Ambers, interview)

The Samsung remote control is a prominent visual element in numerous videos created by Sam Ambers, including his first viral video (Ambers 2021a). It has become a distinctive and recognizable feature in his videos, often appearing in close-up with a voiceover from the cameraperson: "Samsung? Nah, mate. More, like, Sam sings." Nevertheless, it remains uncertain to what extent the repetitive presentation of this sequence affects the purely algorithmic prioritization, and whether the videos appear on numerous For You pages primarily due to such features. It is similarly conceivable that users who are already conversant with Sam Ambers are more prone to be captivated by such nuances, and that video intros are, in general, a source of fascination for a considerable number of users. It is equally plausible that these factors are operating in conjunction with one another. These processes are opaque even to those who have achieved success in content creation. However, Sam Ambers can at least report from his experience that videos lacking this feature tend to receive fewer views. Furthermore, as previously stated, Sam has devised a series of techniques purportedly designed to influence the algorithm and maintain user engagement:

There are certain hashtags that do get pushed at certain times and your video will get artificial views, I guess, or views that it wouldn't necessarily otherwise get by utilizing a feature. Maybe it's a filter, a certain sound, a hashtag. You know, there are loads of little bits that you can really, really optimize, basically, to get as big an exposure as possible. [...] I kind of learned

from what I did well, and again: it's about manipulating the algorithm, you know. Algorithm rewards you if you get comments, shares, favorites, viewer attention. And in order to do that you include little soundbites, you include little peculiarities, whatever. You include things that are just a bit interesting and a bit unexpected. And people comment on it and it keeps people engaged. (Sam Ambers, interview)

Similarly, Stella Cole underscores the significance of adhering to the logic of the platform. It is imperative to discern which content is most likely to be prioritized by the TikTok algorithm. This can be achieved by observing the strategies employed by other successful content creators. In the nascent stages of her TikTok career, Stella employed this strategy with particular efficacy: “When I first downloaded the app, I watched just all the singers that would come across my For You page and you just kind of see what works. It's not just about what people like. It's about what the algorithm likes, of course, and it's definitely difficult.” In this regard, a deliberate examination of the algorithmic logic is a vital prerequisite for competing for visibility on TikTok. This is also a platform-related professionalization strategy. According to Sam Ambers, it is possible to gain a certain degree of expertise on how the TikTok algorithm functions:

I spend a considerable amount of time thinking about TikTok, on TikTok, making videos for TikTok. I think, generally, I've got a decent idea of what will do okay. [...] This sounds like I'm showing off. I'm trying not to. But, you know, out of my last, I think, like, 30 videos, none of them have less than 100,000 views. So I feel, like, I've got a decent idea of what will work consistently well. [...] I won't post a video if I think it's going to do badly. Every time I post a video, there are check points that I want to hit. I want to make sure that it seems okay and if it doesn't feel right to me – there's a bit of an instinct as well that you kind of tend to develop. It's very intuitive, but it's like with anything, you know. I am now familiar with TikTok and the kind of landscape because I spent so much time on it. (Sam Ambers, interview)

6.5.5 Interacting with Users

The musicians who participated in this study all agreed that any kind of interaction on the platform can be beneficial in utilizing the algorithmic system and subsequently reaching a broader audience (cf. Cotter 2019, 903–04). “Any interaction on a video helps and it tells TikTok that people are interested in your video,” says Stella Cole, which is why she sometimes posts promotional videos

that simply ask users to interact. For example, she may request that users provide commentary on a video, share it, or engage in a duet. Stella states that she is skeptical about the value of such videos, but does acknowledge their role as a necessary component of her professional career:

Sometimes you just got to be shameless about your self-promotion and make a bunch of videos that are short so that more people will see them and, you know, tell them you have new music out, and it never feels good to shamelessly self-promote and it embarrasses me sometimes. But it's just what you have to do in the world right now as an artist. So I'll do whatever it takes, you know, for that career I've always dreamed of. (Stella Cole, interview)

These assumptions about the necessity of constant interaction are, in turn, based on long-term observation of the platform's logic. With regard to this, Erny Nunez describes a learning process he has undergone in which identifying the optimal level of interaction is of paramount importance: "I found that commenting and replying actually sort of helps. I guess it boosts the video, you know, not replying to every single comment because I think that's kind of weird, but replying to some here and there, it does help."

6.5.6 Reading Comments

Observing the logic of the platform has resulted in the emergence of a number of platform-specific practices that are closely related to the various features of the TikTok user interface. Such analysis includes the regular and sometimes meticulous reading of comments written by other users about each posted video. The consensus is that this is particularly helpful in understanding what content might be particularly well received on the platform. "You look at the comments and you kind of know it works," says Brooklyn Stafford, and Stacey Ryan agrees that it's an effective way to better understand user preferences: "I definitely read the comments all the time. [...] And reading the comments does give you a good idea of what people like and what people want you to keep doing and what people don't like." Furthermore, an analysis of the comments allows for a deeper comprehension of the emotional responses elicited by specific songs or musical pieces among users. Stella Cole reports that she does not examine only the comments under her own videos; those under videos by other jazz musicians are also taken into account:

People saying, like, oh, wow, this is so relaxing. Or a lot of people comment, like, oh, I'm, like, crying right now. I don't know why, but this is really moving me. And it's, like, it's just a video of me singing, like, "The Nearness of You" or something, you know? [...] All of those thoughts are coming from comments that I get on my own videos or comments that I see on videos of other people on jazztok that I follow. (Stella Cole, interview)

In addition, key assumptions about the *tricks* that several interviewees said were crucial for succeeding on TikTok can be traced back to reading the user comments. For instance, Rachel Chiu states that the comments made her realize that it is the mouth trumpet that elicits the greatest inspiration among many people. Regarding her viral version of "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)" (Chiu 2021a), Rachel notes:

It's a beautiful song, and I think people also recognize that, even if they never heard it, and never get the chance to, and then I was happy to sing it and incorporate my mouth trumpet which is always very popular. So I think that also really helped, if you look at the comments [...]. They [...] love, like, my little trumpet part and just the energy of it. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

Nevertheless, since the aforementioned tricks are not exclusively related to auditory details, content creators occasionally attempt to obtain information about non-musical nuances, which could also potentially contribute to an increase in popularity, by perusing the comments. In numerous videos, Sam Ambers demonstrates jaw movements that he later refers to as a key aspect of his style. After posting his first video, he states that reading the comments helped him to realize that this could be a recipe for success:

I was still wanting to give myself a chance of the video doing well, you know, I tried to make sure that there were enough features within the video for people to comment about it. You can see that there's, like, some jaw movement and a lot of people were commenting about that, you know? So yeah, I tried to make sure that there were some kind of distinguishable features of the video and that it was a little bit shocking. (Sam Ambers, interview)

It would appear that Sam Ambers has been employing such strategies since the inception of his TikTok career. Over time, he has identified a number of criteria that he consistently incorporates when producing his videos. The comment feature can serve as a catalyst for the creation of new videos, as evidenced by

the fact that musicians frequently engage with their own videos and with users' comments, thereby fostering further interaction. Kellin Hanas shares the following perspective on this issue: "You can respond to the comment and then do a video based off of that comment and whatever idea gave you. So it's just a good way to kind of connect your videos together and also engage the audience that was already there."

6.5.7 Duets

The duet feature is one of the most significant and frequently utilized aspects of TikTok. The capacity to use existing videos as a foundation for a duet enables the rapid dissemination of videos, with users who perform duets with popular videos potentially achieving a considerable reach. This feature, which fosters interaction and iteration, is emblematic of TikTok and has undoubtedly contributed to the platform's remarkable success. It is somewhat unexpected to discover that this particular feature does not occupy a key position in the perspectives of the musicians who were interviewed for this study. Only on rare occasions do the interviewees place a strong emphasis on the fact that the duet feature represents a highly significant element, enabling them to distribute their own content. Rachel Chiu offers the following perspective: "I think also what helps is that people duet it, and so people use my sound for their videos. And that also helps it grow a lot." Concurrently, Rachel indicates that she does not explicitly request that users engage in duets within the context of her videos. This is despite the fact that such interactions are a common practice among content creators:

You know, there are people doing duets over duets. So I think it did work. There are also much more explicit ways to do it, which is by literally saying in the video: "duet me." I haven't done that yet. I don't know why. I just don't feel comfortable doing that. It just feels weird, but I definitely should try sometime. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

A review of the musician profiles reveals that duets do not occur frequently and are not a prominent feature in any of the profiles. Moreover, none of the interviewees commented in detail on this topic. At most, Sam Ambers, when queried, asserted that the production of duets is one of the platform-specific practices that could potentially be employed to attract the TikTok algorithm:

[Duets are] massively important. I mean, from an algorithmic point of view, TikTok loves it when you engage with the features that it provides. So if you are stitching videos, if you are duetting videos, that's instantly a thumbs up from TikTok. Secondly, if you duet a video that is really, really popular, that gives yourself a really good chance of getting views because the For You page works in a way that [...] [i]f you've already liked five videos of people duetting a certain video, if I then duet that video as well, there's a chance that more people will see my videos. So again, it's about being smart and what to do and what not to do. [...] I think in general, engaging with TikTok and its features is very important and it exposes you to new audiences. (Sam Ambers)

6.5.8 Captions and Questions

There are a number of additional strategies that can be employed to enhance the visibility of videos, whether with the objective of fostering user engagement or of facilitating the algorithmic prioritization of one's own content. One method for fostering audience engagement is to incorporate inquiries into video descriptions or text layers situated directly within the video frame. One illustrative example is a video by Caity Gyorgy in which she scats a cappella to the chord progression of the jazz standard "Bye, Bye Blackbird" (Gyorgy 2021a). Scatting means that she strings together sequences of syllables in a manner that is devoid of any textual meaning. The text layers in the video frame provide insight into her rehearsal process, indicating that this is her preparation for performing with a big band. However, Caity does not mention the song "Bye, Bye Blackbird." In the video description, she writes the following: "Can you tell which song I'm soloing on? Bonus points if you can count how many times I breathed!" Upon request, Caity concedes that this is an effective method for fostering user engagement. Consequently, according to Caity, this could be a strategy for influencing the TikTok algorithm in a manner that is advantageous to her:

I think posing a question caption is usually good. When I'm looking at TikToks, I don't typically read the captions very often. But previous to this video, I'd been doing a few other series where I would sing, I would scat a cappella, and I would say: Guess what song I'm soloing on, based on how well or not I'm making changes. And with this one, I noticed – it was actually my boyfriend who was, like, how many times did you breathe there? I didn't really hear you taking any breaths. And I'm, like, [...] maybe that'll be, like, a fun thing for people to listen for something. And I guess that I should actually proba-

bly do that more often because it was very effective because it makes people watch to the end. And for those that do know the song, then they can be, like, oh well, this is this song. If I did a good job of outlining the harmony, but the breathing thing was kind of good. I should probably do that more, it definitely creates engagement and creates more views. And I'm sure all of that melts together to boost the algorithm. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

Inserting lyrics into a video frame is a relatively common practice. "Putting the lyrics on the video works well," says Stella Cole. Additionally, she says that superimposed lyrics introduce a visual component that can enhance the visual appeal of a video. Concurrently, this methodology provides users with direct access to the songs played on TikTok, as Stella suggests:

My guess is that when you put the lyrics, it gives people one something else to look at, so they won't scroll past. And then the other thing is that when you read the lyrics of the song – anytime I'm listening to music, I like to read the lyrics to the song. Either while I'm listening for the first time or before just so you get a better idea of what the song is about and you can process it in a visual way as well as an oral way. So, you know, for those two reasons I think it's good. (Stella Cole, interview)

Consequently, one principal objective may be to make the videos more accessible to other users and content creators. Rachel Chiu presents a similar viewpoint: "That's why also the lyrics work sometimes, because people might not know that song, so they want to search up the lyrics." In light of the considerable amount of content on TikTok, creators sometimes take their own assumptions about audience convenience into account when producing their videos. At the same time, Rachel states that on occasion she deliberately excludes lyrics in order to differentiate herself from other content creators. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that she has discovered that lyrics resonate with a diverse audience and enhance the accessibility of the videos, she has elected to incorporate them on occasion:

Sometimes it's hard to hear the song that I'm singing, like, the words. [...] When there's words associated to what I'm singing, people are able to relate to it more because they're reading the poem as it's going. [...] Sometimes you can't really hear the words and sometimes people comment: "Oh, those are the lyrics! I never knew." And I think it just looks cleaner because it makes it look like a video where they can read the lyrics and they can also sing along

to it if they want to. I don't know, I always just did it because other people did it. I noticed that other people did it. I used to not do it because I didn't want my friends to think that I was trying to be like the other TikTok singers. But I realized that at some point it was needed, it was necessary, and it just helped. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

Occasionally, the musicians open the videos with brief interstitial remarks. These typically introduce the musical piece or address particular user feedback, frequently responding to song requests. Erny Nunez suggests that this methodology may be regarded as a prospective formula for success on TikTok. Based on a period of prolonged observation, he suggests that his announcements, which he presents at the beginning of the majority of his TikTok videos, contribute to enhanced visibility, particularly given their capacity to imbue the videos with a personal touch: "All my videos were introductory and I found that for switching from those to just start singing out of nowhere, there is a very big difference in views and whatever else that comes with that. So, I guess the more personal the videos are, I guess the better they do."

Another potential approach for making videos more personalized is to respond to user requests. It is not uncommon for users to leave comments indicating their desire to hear specific songs played by content creators, and for those requests to be fulfilled. In such instances, the user comments are typically displayed within the video frame, thereby indicating that the musicians are responding to specific song requests. According to Kellin Hanas, this is a "typical way that you can [...] gain more traction."

While these assumptions and corresponding strategies for action are fundamentally derived from observations of user behavior, the interviewees also report on their efforts to obtain specific insights into the inner workings of the TikTok algorithm and to adjust their own behavior in accordance with these insights. Stella Cole posits that the role of a content creator necessitates a certain comprehension of algorithmic logic, which is difficult to develop concurrently with her primary occupation as a musician, primarily due to time constraints. Consequently, she relies on external sources of information, and a community has emerged on TikTok itself that is dedicated to collating data about the TikTok algorithm, specifically for the benefit of content creators:

The TikTok algorithm is always changing, so I always am sort of reading about the most recent algorithm and what's working. [...] There's a community on TikTok also of people who just talk about influencer marketing and the al-

gorithm and content strategies. And I watch a lot of those videos because I didn't train in marketing. I don't know what I'm doing there. (Stella Cole, interview)

Furthermore, the data that TikTok automatically provides about video views and likes can be utilized to make predictions about future success. For instance, Sam Ambers states that he routinely monitors the “like-view ratio,” which can now accurately predict the potential success of a video. With regard to one of his most popular videos, in which he performs a cover version of the Earth, Wind & Fire song “September” (Ambers 2021c), Sam offers the following observation: “2.7 views to one like, and it maintained that for a long time.” In such a case, it can be assumed that success is inevitable, as he further argues: “If you get a video that has three views to one like, then you know it’s going to do well. So the fact that it was 2.7, I was, like, wow, this is crazy. Generally, as a rule of thumb, if you get below four views to one like then it’s a pretty solid video.” These statements reveal a meticulous observation of platform activity, which is sometimes conducted with great precision.

6.5.9 Hashtags

Some of the interviewees demonstrate a similar degree of precision in their use of hashtags. However, in this case, there was a certain amount of divergence in the approaches employed by the musicians interviewed. Some of them expressed difficulty in understanding the functionality of hashtags and in gauging their actual impact on the popularity of their videos. Nevertheless, all of the interviewees stated that they frequently utilize hashtags to categorize their videos. Nevertheless, this practice is often driven primarily by the observation that the majority of popular content creators employ this strategy, as Sam Ambers acknowledges: “I think hashtags – I mean, I still don't really know. I kind of do it because everybody else does it.” Kellin Hans notes: “It’s important to some aspect. I just don't know to what point it is. [...] I don't know how much that really matters or helps because there’s plenty of viral videos that go viral without any hashtags. So I don't know what that’s about, but I do it anyways just to see.”

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the impact of hashtags, Caity Gyorgy indicates that her record label occasionally encourages her to utilize specific hashtags. However, this has not resulted in the formulation of any discernible hashtag-related strategies on her part:

[Hashtags] used to be kind of important to me, but now I just usually do hashtag #jazztok. And then I'll do, like, #scatting or, like, #greatamerican-songbook, that kind of stuff. I don't use them as much now, but my record label has insights into certain hashtags that are popular for each week and we'll get sent hashtags. So sometimes I'll use those if they apply to my video, but usually I just do hashtag #jazztok and I pray. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

One evident strategy is to select hashtags that are as close as possible to the musical repertoire being performed. However, even this ostensibly straightforward decision entails processes of observation and learning, as certain effects that are anticipated to result from the use of specific hashtags may not manifest over time, as Stella Cole observes: "When I first started on TikTok, you wanted to use as many hashtags as possible and hashtag things like #foryoupage, #fyp, #viral. That stuff doesn't work anymore. You have to use niche hashtags and you should only use, like, five right now."

Nevertheless, some content creators have also developed highly specialized algorithmic practices when dealing with hashtags. This is exemplified by Rachel Chiu's detailed account of her extended hashtag experiments:

The typical hashtag #fyp – For You page – this one doesn't work that well anymore, because everyone uses it. I learned to try to be specific, but also general. What that means is that I can't be so specific that no one else uses it, but I also need to be specific enough that I'm not one of billions of videos; I need to be one in a million. That makes sense. [...] I have to make sure I strategize what hashtags that I use: that [they] describe what I do but aren't so specific. For example, #mouthtrumpet. I'm able to use that because it's quite specific, but there's quite a few people doing it. And it's a good number, it's up to a few million who use it. So, that one, if you click onto the hashtag, you'll see a lot of me as well, because I'm one of, like, the people who do mouth trumpet the most. And there's also other hashtags that I always use, like #acoustic, if it's acoustic. And then, whatever instrument I'm playing. And then after that, it's a lot of different ones. It would be the artist's name of the cover that I'm doing. Sometimes I would put in if it's jazz, or whatever style it's in. And usually, I'll put around four or five hashtags at most. I never do more than that. [...] I do have a secret account that is also a singing account, but it's anonymous and that's my experiment page. That's where I try all these crazy hashtags to see what works. I learn a lot from that one. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

This segment of the interview with Rachel demonstrates how content creators frequently engage in meticulous observation of the activities and interactions that occur on TikTok, as well as their deliberate experimentation with the platform's functional logic. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the strategies employed by Rachel are, by their very nature, somewhat speculative. This is a fact that content creators are aware of and that can, on occasion, cause frustration.

6.5.10 "TikTok Is Such a Mystery"

The preceding paragraphs illustrate that the particular methods by which successful content creators navigate the platform logic of TikTok can vary considerably. It is therefore erroneous to assume that there are universally applicable algorithmic imaginaries or practices. Nevertheless, all interviewees share a common motivation to comprehend the functional logic of the platform in the most optimal manner. This unquestionably gives rise to comparable, though not entirely homogeneous, behaviors. Moreover, all of the musicians interviewed emphasized that the precise functioning of the algorithmic system of the TikTok platform remains opaque to a certain extent, even for experienced content creators who are occasionally aided by their record labels. The interviewees highlight the opacity of TikTok, noting that their strategies on the platform are inherently based on a degree of speculation: "You never know what's going to take off on TikTok. You just post and see what happens," says Brooklyn Stafford, while Caity Gyorgy states: "I can't say how it works. I have no idea. [...] I don't know why they choose specific videos. I don't know." Stacey Ryan observes that periods of largely unsuccessful outcomes often follow on the heels of viral moments, even as new TikTok videos are constantly being created: "I just kind of kept posting and there would be some little viral moments that would pop up through all the other videos, or then I would just post videos for months with nothing that ever goes, you know, goes really viral. But you never really know what to expect on TikTok." Stella Cole concludes: "TikTok is such a mystery even to creators like me who seem to have figured it out. But I still don't totally understand all of the ways it works."

Nevertheless, the prevailing view is that it is possible to formulate preliminary hypotheses based on accumulated experience regarding which content is more likely to result in success. Rachel Chiu states that: "You never know which video will do the best. I've done it enough to kind of have an idea answer, to be able to estimate, but sometimes it's always unpredictable, you really never

know which one will do well.” According to Stacey Ryan, it is possible to “to speculate. [...] But at the end of the day, you don’t truly know.” Stacey has previously attempted to leverage the TikTok algorithm to her benefit, employing a variety of strategies. However, she has yet to identify a consistently effective approach. This experience has led her to a disconcerting realization:

I’ve tried over these past couple of years to try to post at a specific time or look at when my engagement is up compared to when it’s not. And I’ve tried different hashtags. I’ve tried no hashtags. I feel like I tried everything. [...] Writing stuff like putting a title in it, not putting a title in it. I’ve tried writing the lyrics to my original songs on the screen when it’s playing. I’ve tried not doing that, and I feel like I cannot get this clear idea of what works and what doesn’t. [...] We take so much time trying to understand this platform and we never will. (Stacey Ryan, interview)

Notwithstanding these almost resigned-sounding statements, the explanations provided thus far indicate that all the musicians interviewed have developed their own repertoire of platform-specific optimization strategies. These strategies have enabled them to achieve success on TikTok, at least in numerous instances. The fundamental challenge is the inability to predict the platform’s reaction to specific activities at any given point in time, while still developing and pursuing targeted strategies. As Sam Ambers aptly observed:

I feel like TikTok is this new, exciting food that nobody really knows. Nobody really knows the ingredients. It’s like KFCs herbs and spices. Nobody knows the exact combination of the eleven spices. No one knows how important it is to have viewer attention. How important a like or a comment or a favorite is or a hashtag is. But I think cumulatively having an awareness of the components that could make you successful is very important. But kind of the ratio of how important they all are, I’m not too sure. (Sam Ambers, interview)

6.6 “The Secret Sauce”: Jazz Repertoire on TikTok

The preceding sections have demonstrated that popular content creators interact with the functional logic of the TikTok platform in a multitude of ways. They formulate specific assumptions regarding which types of behavior, under what circumstances can help attract the attention of both the platform’s algorithms and its users. It has been demonstrated that, while there is no single, univer-