

The Algorithm Made a Musical: Performing Ratatouille on TikTok's Virtual Stage

Ellenrose Firth

Sapienza Università di Roma

Stefania Parisi

Sapienza Università di Roma

Abstract

La crescente presenza di piattaforme algoritmiche nella vita quotidiana richiede una riconsiderazione di cosa significhi oggi essere creativi, e di come le audience entrino in contatto con prodotti creativi: *creators* professionali e amatoriali devono affrontare la sfida di intrattenere un pubblico potenzialmente illimitato, inserito in un feed infinito e curato algorithmicamente. Questo articolo prende in considerazione il caso di studio *Ratatouille: The Musical*, un progetto (principalmente) amatoriale nato su TikTok durante gli anni della pandemia, per indagare le logiche di produzione e circolazione di produzioni culturali all'interno di piattaforme basate sul principio della visibilità algoritmica. Attraverso questo esempio, si esplora il ruolo degli algoritmi di raccomandazione nella popolarizzazione del fenomeno e si indaga come le *algorithmically imagined audiences* (Jones, 2023) partecipino attivamente al suo sviluppo. Si ridefinisce, inoltre, il concetto di *liveness*, tradizionalmente legato alla performance teatrale, osservando la sua evoluzione in contesti digitali, asincroni e mediati dagli algoritmi. Collocando *Ratatouille: The Musical* all'interno di questi quadri concettuali, l'articolo evidenzia che TikTok non svolge una funzione di semplice distribuzione di contenuti, ma opera in quanto spazio di attivazione di inedite produzioni culturali e performance *networked*.

The increasing presence of algorithmic platforms within daily life calls for a reconfiguration of how people create, and how audiences engage with creativity: both professional and amateur creators must now navigate the challenge of performing for a potentially limitless audience embedded within an endless, algorithmically curated feed. This article examines *Ratatouille: The Musical*, a (mostly) crowd-sourced project born out of pandemic-fuelled boredom on TikTok, as a case study of cultural production on a platform structured by algorithmic visibility. We use this to understand the role that recommendation algorithms play in the popularisation of a given phenomenon, as well as how algorithmically imagined audiences (Jones, 2023) can participate in the development of a project. Moreover, we interrogate the concept of liveness, traditionally tied to co-present theatrical performance, to question how it might be redefined within digital, asynchronous, and algorithmically mediated contexts. By situating *Ratatouille: The Musical* within these intersecting frameworks, the article highlights how TikTok functions not merely as a platform for dissemination, but as a site of emergent, networked forms of performance and cultural production.

Parole chiave/Key Words

TikTok; performance; cultural production; liveness.

DOI: 10.54103/connessioni/30206

Introduction

The growing entanglement of algorithmic platforms with everyday cultural life demands a rethinking of how creative work is produced, circulated, and received. On platforms such as TikTok, creativity unfolds within an environment defined by algorithmic recommendation systems, where content is addressed not to a stable or clearly bounded public but to an indeterminate, potentially infinite audience encountered through an endlessly refreshed feed. Both professional and amateur creators are therefore compelled to anticipate and perform for audiences whose presence is inferred through metrics, trends, and algorithmic feedback rather than direct interaction. In this paper our focus is on *Ratatouille: The Musical*, a crowd-sourced musical production borne out of pandemic-fuelled boredom and free time.

We advance the central claim that TikTok functions not merely as an infrastructure for the circulation of cultural content, but as a socio-technical environment that actively shapes the conditions under which creative production, audience engagement, and performance take place. The musical is approached as a paradigmatic instance of vernacular creativity emerging within an ecosystem structured by algorithmic visibility and platform-specific affordances. Within TikTok's algorithmically curated environment, creative artefacts acquire recognition and coherence through recommendation systems that privilege replicability, modular formats, and iterative reuse. The development of the musical exemplifies how creative production unfolds through processes of imitation, remixing, and adaptation that are structurally embedded in the platform's technical architecture and cultural conventions, orienting both aesthetic choices and forms of coordination among dispersed actors.

As the musical takes form through these interactions, it also generates a distinctive experience of temporality: although content on TikTok is predominantly pre-recorded, the serial emergence of new contributions and their uneven distribution across personalised feeds sustain moments of shared anticipation and collective attention. Liveness is therefore approached not as synchronous co-presence, but as an effect of algorithmic circulation.

Taken together, these dynamics allow us to position TikTok as a space of activation rather than simple distribution, foregrounding the ambivalent interplay between technological affordances, regimes of visibility, and contemporary forms of cultural production. It is within this broader socio-cultural and theoretical framework that the following literature review situates the case under discussion.

Creativity vs Standardisation (long story short)

Considered from a sociocultural perspective, the evolution of the web over the past few decades has sparked a wide-ranging and complex debate on the nature of digital environments – both as distinct cultural fields and as spaces in which to trace the transformations affecting creativity and cultural production. Any concise reconstruction of this debate must begin with the broader reflections of Nancy Baym (2010), who, after extensive and in-depth qualitative research on online sociality, describes the web as an *ambivalent* space, a field of tension between opposing forces and, ultimately, a site of compromise between, on the one hand, the constraints imposed by technological codes and standards, and, on the other, the multiplicity of communicative practices promoted by users. This *cultural* reflection encompasses both the everyday practices of inhabiting the web, such as the experiences, perceptions, and the meanings that are attributed and shared, and the sphere that is most relevant to this article: the production and circulation of cultural content online.

Looking at the realm of creativity, the ambivalence of the web emerges as a persistent tension between homogenisation (and *imitation*) and differentiation; between innovation (and *experimentation*) and conformism; between individual and collective agency, that the web promises to enhance, and the structural conditions within which that agency is exercised. This tension becomes particularly clear when we turn to Lawrence Lessig's reflections (2008) on the forms of participation in cultural production enabled by digital technologies and fostered by the web. Lessig highlights how in order to understand users' cultural practices, they cannot be interpreted solely through the read/only mode, comparable to the "passive" consumption typically associated to broadcast media, but must also be viewed through the read/write model, grounded in the possibility of actively intervening in the production and circulation of content. Lessig argues that practices such as the remix/mash-up, which is based on the creative reworking of existing digital materials, have become central to online cultural production; their expansion has been driven both by the abundance of freely reusable content, resulting from the weak enforceability of copyright in the digital realm, and by the spread of accessible technologies that have significantly lowered barriers to participation. This condition, seemingly conducive to the free expression of users' creativity, long sustained the perception of the web as a space of potentially boundless experimentation and innovation in creative practices.

Yet, even in the largely unregulated early phase of the web's development, digital environments revealed intrinsic forms of control and governance, inscribed *by design* within their architectures and corresponding to the technical and infrastructural constraints that define the limits and possibilities of users' cultural and creative practices: at a deeper level, on the web, "code is law" (Lessig, 2006). In this sense, software might be seen – borrowing Simmel's metaphor – as a kind of "hidden king", an invisible yet ordering presence that structures online interaction while remaining largely imperceptible to ordinary users, from seemingly neutral mechanisms of access (such as authentication systems or login procedures) to the more sophisticated tools for producing texts, images and audiovisual content.

As social networking sites – and later social media – gain prominence amid a broader transition towards online spaces increasingly shaped by large private economic conglomerates, earlier representations of "cyberspace" as an open and free network gradually begin to fade. Within this context, Geert Lovink (2011) offers a critical reading of this transformation, arguing that the decline of HTML, brought about by the rise of templates, first in blogs and later in platforms like Facebook, marked a decisive turning point in the erosion of early web creativity. He maintains that creativity was progressively reduced to textual composition, producing homogenisation and limiting broader creative possibilities for most users. Building on this line of argument, it seems plausible to suggest that in a structurally ambivalent space such as the web – potentially open to artistic and creative experimentation, yet simultaneously dependent on fairly rigid communicative standards that enable broad publics to participate in shared processes of meaning-making – the tension between creativity and standardisation tends to be resolved in favour of conformity. Large audiences with limited technical or artistic competence can indeed contribute to content production, but only insofar as they relinquish the possibility of developing genuinely innovative or experimental forms of expression.

In this sense, Nieborg and Poell (2018) conceptualise the process of platformisation as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries." This process reorganises the very foundations of cultural production and circulation, embedding creative practices within the infrastructural and algorithmic logics of platform providers. The authors ask whether reliance on these infrastructural services reshapes the modes and conditions of cultural production and circulation, locating creative

practices within platform logics, metrics, and governance. In this scenario, cultural commodities become *contingent*, “in the sense that they are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation,” reflecting the ongoing interplay between user data, algorithmic feedback, and creative (and collaborative, as we will see) adaptation. Platformisation thus reconfigures cultural production as unstable and dynamic, raising methodological and cultural challenges: cultural artefacts are no longer fixed, but continuously adjusted, distributed, and personalised according to time, location, user profile, and behaviour.

As proprietary digital platforms consolidate their role as gatekeepers and dominant infrastructures of the media ecosystem, *creators* – both professional and amateur – together with connected audiences, are compelled to negotiate spaces of visibility within environments where the production, circulation, and recognition of cultural materials are regulated by algorithmic logics, in turn shaped by specific business models. In this context, platforms can no longer be regarded merely as sites of dissemination or distribution of content, rather they function as cultural actors in their own right, actively shaping processes of production by orienting styles, prefiguring forms, and, to some extent, defining potential publics. Creativity within such environments thus appears constrained by regimes of visibility, technical standards, and performance metrics that determine what becomes visible and what remains marginal, what achieves success, and what is destined to invisibility.

Yet, as in any social context, even within such highly regulated digital infrastructures, it is possible to identify spontaneous forms of cultural production, often ephemeral and marginal, which thrive in the interstices of the algorithmic system, exploiting its logic to their advantage and deploying tactics of resistance (Bonini, Trerè, 2024, pp. 114 ff.). These tactics, whose contents may range from entertainment to the development of new aesthetics or to social and political activism, testify to the persistence of a diffused and adaptive creativity that does not directly oppose platformisation logics, but rather moves through and across them, continuously negotiating its own spaces of expression within an ecosystem deeply structured and governed by commercial imperatives. We will examine these practices and their - at times - unexpected effects through the analytical lens of performative practices on a *sui generis* platform such as TikTok.

Audiences' Performance on TikTok

In his introduction to *Performance Studies*, Richard Schechner highlights the polysemic nature of the term *performance*, observing that «In business, sports, and sex, “to perform” is to do something up to a standard – to succeed, to excel. In the arts, “to perform” is to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert. In everyday life, “to perform” is to show off, to go to extremes, to underline an action for those who are watching. In the twenty-first century, people as never before live by means of performance» (2002, p. 22). The term *performance* appears regularly in studies on social media, both in market research, where it is associated with performativity and thus with the success or failure of content or creators as measured by platform metrics, and in the field of media studies and communicative practices of connected publics, which can be expressions of digital culture as well as shaped by interactions with media affordances.

Amongst the actions encompassed in the semantic field to which the concept of performance refers, Schechner identifies one that is particularly significant for framing everyday practices that are mediated by digital technologies: *showing doing*, which means displaying, bringing to the attention of someone who is observing, an audience, what one is doing. This communicative form recalls the performative dimension of ordinary actions related to one's role and identity, such as «dressing up for a party, interviewing for a job, experimenting with sexual orientations and gender roles, playing a life role such as mother or son, or a professional role such as doctor or teacher» (ibid., p. 42). On social media, such practices underpin the incessant flow of content produced by connected publics, offering a renewed interpretation of the classic account provided by Abercrombie and Longhurst concerning the experience and role of contemporary audiences within the Spectacle/Performance paradigm: «the qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life. Being a member of an audience becomes a mundane event» (1998, pp. 36-7).

In the reconfiguration that spectacle and artistic performance have undergone in the transition from mass society to the network society, the protagonism of audiences emerges not only through the spectacularisation of everyday life but also through an active (and affective) engagement with artistic and cultural artefacts. These artefacts, as texts, are made available for users to appropriate and re-signify by digital platforms, through the mediation of specific affordances. It is also important to note that in these environments, users are not

alone in their interactions with cultural or artistic texts; as Lev Manovich observes in the context of software culture, «Instead of fixed documents [...] we now interact with dynamic software performance» (2013, p. 33, italics in the original): even non-human actors, in some measure, perform in a generative way. Extending this reflection to the specific context of a platform such as TikTok, where the algorithm plays a decisive role, it becomes possible to consider the content itself – whether created by professional creators or ordinary users – not as a stable entity, but as the outcome of processes that are produced and continuously reproduced in real time through interactions among creators, connected audiences, and algorithmic systems, constantly walking the line between creativity and imitation. In this sense, performing confirms its collective and relational nature: a relationship that involves both interactions among individuals and between individuals and algorithms. These broader considerations must be situated in relation to the specific vocation of a platform such as TikTok, enabled by its distinctive sociotechnical affordances, whose success is rooted in the intensification of the logics of imitation, datafication, and algorithmic personalisation.

An analysis of user experience on TikTok offers an up-to-date perspective on contemporary forms of creative production, as well as on emerging models of consumption and virality. Several studies (Zulli, Zulli, 2020; Bhandari, Bimo, 2020) highlight how its design tends to discourage the construction of stable and coherent identities, marginalising individual stories in favour of content produced through the replication of algorithmically generated trends (Darvin, 2022).

TikTok, to a certain extent, fosters anonymity and disincentivises sociability, giving more relevance to content (Abidin, 2020) than to the creation of networks. This distinctive feature, supported by specific affordances and useful for its business and monetisation model, makes the platform a privileged environment for entertainment rather than for the creation and maintenance of social connections; as stated by Guinaudeau and colleagues (2022),

TikTok represents the synthesis of three of the most powerful affordances in social media: the televisual medium that has always been the most broadly popular and powerful; algorithmic recommendation that structures the user's experience to a greater extent than any major social media platform to date; and a mobile-only interface designed to take advantage of a smartphone's user-facing camera.

Darvin (2022) also suggests that TikTok's distinctiveness lies in its *sound memes*, where sound operates as the anchoring mode for derivative video production. By privileging gestures and embodied performance over linguistic modes, *sound memes* facilitate global

circulation beyond language barriers, while simultaneously allowing creators to reinsert their embodied selves into local contexts, countering the decontextualising effects of imitation.

The relationship between users/creators and the specific affordances of the platform thus shape a new usage culture, in which identity and creativity are moulded by algorithmic expectations, and an ecosystem in which creativity is performative, adaptable, and continuously reconfigured (Mears, 2023). In this context, audiences recombine audiovisual materials originating from the cultural industries through memetic communicative styles and a renewed centrality of bodily performance, reworking their codes and functions and adapting them to the platform's vernacular creativity, understood *"as both an ideal and a heuristic device, to describe and illuminate creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions"* (Burgess, 2007). The drive towards visibility and virality, sustained by a particularly sophisticated algorithmic system, stimulates forms of engagement and participation – an effect that is especially evident when issues of public interest or culturally familiar content are mobilised. In this way, an environment designed to orient users' modes of production towards individualised practices and to privilege human–algorithm interactions, nevertheless lends itself to the activation of co-creative processes: in line with the notion of vernacular creativity as a widespread and non-elite practice, the collaborative cultures that develop around trends, sound memes and shared formats demonstrate that user participation is not exclusively confined to replication, but may constitute collective reworking processes capable of generating new meanings around already consolidated texts.

TikTok Presents...

To better understand the development of vernacular creativity within TikTok, as well as the opportunities to foster collaboration within an algorithmic platform, we choose to bring to the table the case of *Ratatouille: The Musical*. The show was developed in 2020 starting from a jingle created by Emily Jacobsen: from a TikTok video that was only a few seconds long it turned into a full musical production, through the work of composers, choreographers, theatre actors, and other TikTokers. In particular, composer Daniel Mertzluff wrote an arrangement which included full orchestration of the original jingle, which turned it into a Broadway number (Dickson, 2020).

The musical premiered on January 1st 2021, with ticket prices ranging from \$5 to \$100, and the money that was raised from the sale was donated to The Actors Fund, which was dedicated to helping actors during the pandemic (Wieringa, 2021). The show was preceded by a virtual red carpet¹, where actors and creators were interviewed and spoke about the project. The format likened it to a traditional concert performance or film premiere, showcasing the talent and creating anticipation for the actual show. The performance was later shown on TikTok, free to watch but with the opportunity to donate to the fund. The show that was streamed on the TodayTix website sold over 200.000 tickets, raising over \$1,5 million; the TikTok encore raised an extra \$500.000.

TikTok's identity has long been tied to diverse forms of creativity (Poell et al., 2021): be it because of lower access barriers, providing tools for creators to make their own videos within the platform, or a strong sense of authenticity associated with the content that is uploaded, audiences and creators alike have felt a pull towards the short-video platform when it comes to consuming, or creating, creative content. The platform's algorithmic feed, which works through datafication processes that connect users to their personalised content niche, allows for increasingly individualised – yet communal – experiences.

The iterative circulation of formats, motifs, and stylistic conventions on TikTok contributes to the emergence of distinct “sides” of the platform (Eriksson Krutrök, 2021), which Zulli and Zulli conceptualize as imitation publics: «networks [that] form through processes of imitation and replication, not interpersonal connections, expressions of sentiment, or lived experiences» (2020, p.2). Each imitation public develops its own conventions, including recognizable aesthetic features, recurrent thematic patterns, and established traditions. Within these niches, challenges, such as trend-based practices, including replicable dances, filter-driven templates, characteristic transitions, or creator-to-creator prompts, serve to consolidate group identity. Such challenges function as a primary means through which users attain visibility and cultural relevance during what Zulli and Zulli (2020, p. 11) describe as “live cultural moments.”

The concept of “live” on a platform such as TikTok can be of complex definition: although there are traditional live streams, which allow creators to share live content with their audiences and communicate with their fans directly, they are not what we refer to when talking about *live cultural moments*. We can define liveness as that feeling that

emerges when enjoying an event as a spectator and, in a sense, sharing its time and space (Gemini, Brilli, 2023), and, when looking at online social media events, expand its temporality beyond the *here and now* in order to adapt to the fast-paced nature of algorithmic environments. A live cultural moment can refer to any phenomenon that captures an audience's attention for a given period of time, and becomes significant amongst an identifiable group of people. According to Lupinacci (2021), a sense of liveness on social media emerges from the expectation that something noteworthy might suddenly appear on screen, and from the possibility that others, regardless of where they are, will encounter a similar disruption in their own personalised feeds.

...Ratatouille: The Musical

Viral content on TikTok normally has a very short half-life, rising and falling within days, sometimes hours. At times a video will strike a chord, and may inspire trends, duets, overall engagement, and be a setting stone for the creation of an imitation public. TikTok, as a platform, encourages the replication of content through its platform affordances: the possibility to use an existing audio, duet a video, or even respond to it, make it so that users can engage with videos and build upon them, at times expanding what is being said – or sung – in the original video. As TikTok is almost entirely algorithm-based, becoming part of an imitation public is a key part of the domestication process: given the nature of the platform, users' algorithmic identity (Cheney-Lippold, 2011) will be quickly tied to the content they engage with, and once they become a part of a TikTok side they will come into contact with any ongoing viral phenomenon.

Ratatouille the Musical's origin aligns with this platform dynamic: when Emily Jacobsen (@e_jaccs) posted her video singing «Remy the Ratatouille, the rat of all my dreams. I praise you my Ratatouille, may the world remember your name», she was creating a product which was similar to other videos she had posted, which all focused on different fictional characters. “Ode to Remy” gained widespread popularity when the popular TikTok creator Brittany Broski, originally known as Kombucha Girl, duetted a video which used the jingle, launching it into mainstream success. Users that became a part of the Ratatousical's imitation public

became the beating heart of the project, contributing to lyrics, choreography, arrangements in order to create a cohesive final product.

Videos were mostly grouped together by using the same hashtags and sounds, as well as through duets or stitches, creating an association that went beyond algorithmic categorisation and used platform affordances to ensure searchability. These practices can be defined as forms of vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2007; Zeng et al., 2021), as they are creative practices that “part of an elaborate memetic web, with references, shared sounds, and elaborate background knowledge needed to fully “get” the in-joke” (Kamela & Carpenter, 2023). The creation of content amounted to the decision to produce a full production, with Playbill (Fig.1), a magazine about theatre and Broadway, announcing in December 2020 that the musical would be getting a concert presentation, with the original content creators contributing to the full show.



Fig.1. Playbill magazine announcing the full musical production

The performance was edited by placing vertical clips into a horizontal screen (Fig.2); vertical short videos are not typically associated with theatre productions, as those would normally call for long-form horizontal videos, which allow for a more accurate representation of stages, as well as more space for performances, however this formatting choice made it so the original TikTok format could be maintained. Moreover, by showcasing the final product this way, the original platform vernacular was honoured, emphasising the key role it played in the development of the project.



Fig. 2. A screenshot from Ratatouille: The Musical

The actors that were involved used TikTok filters to clone themselves when performing choreography, and wore home-made costumes and makeup to play their parts. This is also in alignment with TikTok-style performativity, where props and accessories are usually sourced from the home, and characters are given one defining element in order to be identified (eg. Women are often played by men – or other women – with tea-towels on their head).

The (apparently) democratic nature of the algorithmic flow within the TikTok For You page entails the fact that all content that is posted has the potential to reach viral status, as long as users resonate with it. This is defined as eventfulness, meaning the potential for all content to reach “event” status through the media (Frosh, Pinchevski, 2018). Jacobsen’s Ode to Remy reached viral status not because of brilliant songwriting or clever editing: it simply fulfilled its potential for eventfulness by being used by the right person at the right time. The argument that can be made, however, is whether or not its fortune was given by algorithmic visibility - appearing on users’ For You page regardless of its quality - or the sheer luck of being the audio in a video duetted by a famous content creator. Although TikTok is allegedly more democratic than other content-based platforms, relying almost entirely on viewing information when choosing videos to promote – although there is more that could be said about this alleged dynamic – it is also true that trends are often launched by users with an established platform. Taking a further step back, in favour of the argument that it is through algorithmic visibility that some phenomena reach mainstream success, it has to be stressed that Brittany Broski achieved fame on the platform through one video that achieved viral status a year prior.

The affective reaction within the imitation public that was built around this video was such that, following the boost given by Broski's duet, it became a viral sensation, specially within its niche. Algorithmic platforms such as TikTok propose content not based on the moment in which it is posted, rather on what aligns with users' datafied profiles, as well as what is gaining traction in that moment: what matters is that videos, or sounds, appear *fresh*, and capture viewers' attention (Lupinacci, 2021). This contributes to generating a sense of liveness within a platform that thrives on pre-recorded content.

It is important to highlight how even with phenomena such as the *Ratatousical*, which broke out of the TikTok bubble into more mainstream platforms, the imagined audience (Jones, 2023) always refers to one of the aforementioned *sides* of TikTok: the inner workings of an algorithmic platform make it so that even cultural phenomena - which may have wide-spread appeal - will be datafied and shared with an algorithmic public that is believed to be interested in elements of the final product (eg. "Musicals", "Ratatouille", "Disney", "animation"). This does not greatly differ from ordinary cultural products: they are always created with a target audience in mind, and a given target audience will learn to expect a certain kind of product. When content is algorithmically delivered the process changes: although, as we have said, there is an imagined audience, content creators never truly know the audience that their videos will reach; at the same time, users on TikTok cannot predict exactly what content they will be shown. Although they may feel a sense of belonging towards their *side* of TikTok, and may enact strategies to ensure they do not leave it (Parisi, Firth, 2024), they do not know what new suggestion the platform may have, and what elements of their algorithmic identity will be taken into account when exposing them to new content.

The magic behind the *Ratatousical* phenomenon comes from the organic nature of the content that was created: the idea that a final product would someday be monetised was not contemplated, and therefore, by using a platform like TikTok, ordinary users were allowed entry within a production process usually reserved to paid professionals. This can be problematised when looking at the production of content, and subsequent monetisation of what was being shared: the co-creation of the *Ratatousical* can be seen as a form of audience labour (Fuchs, 2010), where audience members actively participated – for free – in the creation of a final product that was then monetised. In the case of the *Ratatousical* the ticket sales did not benefit private individuals, rather contributed to a fund with a hefty dona-

tion, and it is important to highlight that original creators were looped into every part of the development of the concert event, as well as being given ownership of their original songs and a small nominal fee (Evans, 2021). The creative endeavour contributed to bringing value to TikTok, as well as showcasing the talent of many creators. The fact that the project greatly contributed to a charity aimed partially at the people involved in it gave a clear example of ways in which forms of alternative media can provide support to communities. At the same time, the reputational value the project brought to TikTok through ordinary users' contributions amplifies the interpretation of the phenomenon as audience labour.

By creating an algorithmic public that resonated with the type of content that was being produced, the platform contributed to the creative development of the project, providing fertile ground for grassroots production. Moreover, as the project evolved, users were being exposed to every update, participating in what can be defined as a smaller scale media event (Jerslev, 2022): the project gained such relevance that it interrupted users' daily scrolling, with new musical numbers being posted – and consequently appearing in people's feeds – in unplanned moments. As the project gained momentum it also generated a sense of liveness amongst viewers who were following its development or directly participating to it. The final performance, although not performed live from a theatre in front of an audience, had a set time, allowing spectators to watch the show together. In this way the sense of liveness, typically associated with live theatre performances, could be preserved, albeit slightly redefined.

Musicals and Beyond: Performance in Algorithmic Platforms

The *Ratatouiseal* is not the only example of a TikTok musical: Mertzluft, the composer, had already participated in a musical trend with the Grocery Store musical, and after *Ratatouille's* success he moved on to work on an original musical titled *For You, Paige*, commissioned by TikTok. The project was built by encouraging TikTok users to upload their original songs, and those that were chosen were credited, with the creators being adequately compensated. The musical was broadcast live on TikTok from a theatre in New York exclusively for TikTok, and was hosted by Andy Cohen. This entailed that although the performance happened on a theatre stage it was shot vertically in order to match the app's interface. The show never reached *Ratatouille's* success, however it was a valid attempt at using the platform's affordances to share – and gather – new ideas.

Another important case-study is the development of The Unofficial Bridgerton Musical, a project that, once again, tried to ride the wave of the *Ratatousical*: in early 2021 Abigail Barlow posted a song captioned “What if Bridgerton was a musical?”. The song gained success, and the creator teamed up with a composer, Emily Bear, to produce a full-length album. The writing and recording sessions were live-streamed on Instagram (Curran, 2021), allowing fans and followers to participate in the creative process, and associating the project to a traditional experience of liveness. In the case of the Bridgerton musical, then, audience participation was not through native platform affordances, rather through a more traditional communication medium. Nonetheless, the project gained mainstream success, even winning a Grammy Award for Best Musical Theatre Album. As in the case of *Ratatouille: The Musical*, during the development of The Unofficial Bridgerton Musical Netflix took a step back and did not claim copyright; they did, however, start a lawsuit when Bear and Barlow started live performances, claiming there were already ongoing objections to the project.

Although the Bridgerton musical was also a case of remixed content, its more traditional development allowed for a different reception: the liveness viewers experienced was tied to actual live streams, rather than a collective feeling of togetherness generated by viral content, and its accolades were amongst those traditionally given to more mainstream productions. While being an excellent example of TikTok working as a starting point for the development of a new project, it was not able to carry forward the momentum garnered by the *Ratatousical*. The originality of the project, its *authentic* feel, the organic nature of its development, are some of the key motives as to why it had such resonance with the public. Moreover, the liveness it generated was not limited to periods of actual live streaming, rather was attached to an extended time-frame: if we read the creation of the *Ratatousical* as a form of media event (Dayan, Katz, 1994; Couldry, Hepp, 2010), in that it interrupted the normal content flow on TikTok bringing focus to an ongoing musical project, we can see how *being there* as it came together may have accentuated a feeling of togetherness.

Building the musical not through explicit requests (live stream prompts), but rather through casual exposure to other parts of a show that is coming together allowed the *Ratatousical* to snowball into the phenomenon it became. For those who remained simple spectators, witnessing its development over time contributed to the sense of belonging they felt towards *their* side of TikTok. The idea that everyone could be a part of the same in-joke was

essential in solidifying the Ratatousical community: who was creating could be certain that there would be someone watching, and those who were watching were eager to find out what the final product would be. The liveness that was experienced by the public, then, went beyond clearly identifiable temporalities, however – through algorithmic suggestions – maintained the feeling of sharing a performance’s time (the length of each video, over several months) and space (the For You page).

Conclusion

The platform fully encapsulates the ambivalence between cultural production and technological affordances, as well as the tension between industry and creativity: creating musicals on TikTok allows lower entry barriers for people who want to be involved in creating musical theatre. Democratising the creation process allows anyone to work on the project, and showing the final result live on TikTok makes it accessible to a larger audience, who may not have the means to pay Broadway prices. While these premises may be noble, the reality appears to be that on digital platforms such as TikTok, dominated by algorithmic logic and continuous flows of new content, what appeals the most to publics is authenticity: producing a musical by crowdsourcing material on the platform will appeal to a small(er) TikTok side than a viral phenomenon that uses as source material one of the most popular Disney films of the last twenty years.

As Lessig (2008) points out, remixes and mash-ups are central to online cultural production, as they allow vaster audiences to resonate with content; moreover, they encourage amateur production of content, guided by the desire to participate in a phenomenon, rather than profit from it. The emerging dichotomy, then, is between performances *using* digital spaces such as TikTok to emerge, and performances *emerging* from digital spaces. A product that is native to TikTok, such as *Ratatouille: The Musical*, will carry with it elements of the platform’s vernacular that will make it recognisable to users of the app; this can strengthen the perception of the project’s constructed authenticity (Poell, Nieborg, Duffy, 2022) and of the participating creators’ genuine intentions. The apparent absence of economic motives behind the production of the musical made it so that relying on platform logics (filters, memes) to create was not deemed *cringe*, such as in the case of *For You, Paige*, but rather a way to utilise platform affordances to find new ways to be creative.

Grassroots content, which in the case of TikTok goes beyond the distinction between amateur and professional, has, time and time again, suffered as a consequence of algorithmic logics and the standardisation of content driven by datafication. An (apparently) democratic platform such as TikTok, then, allows creative projects to flourish, giving equal chance to all creators to find an audience. Although the platform is not centred around communities, but rather prefers to keep the association between users intangible, there is a sense of mere belonging (Walton et al., 2012) that is developed amongst viewers, defined as “minimal, even chance, trivial, or potential, social connection with unfamiliar others”. This, much like it would in a real-life production company, can foster creativity and allow for the development of projects that might have been impossible to imagine, until now.

¹ Available to watch at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kfo1BfxX_Zk

References

- Abercrombie N., Longhurst N., *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, Sage, London 1998.
- Abidin C., *Visibility Labour: Engaging With Influencers' Fashion Brands and #OOTD Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram*, in «Media International Australia», vol. 161, 2016, pp. 86-100.
- Baym N., *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010.
- Bhandari A., Bimo S., *Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media*, in «Social Media + Society», vol. 8, 2022.
- Bonini T., Treré E., *Algorithms of Resistance: The Everyday Fight against Platform Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2024.
- Burgess, J. E., *Vernacular creativity and new media*, Doctoral dissertation, Queensland University of Technology 2007
<https://creativitymachine.net/downloads/publications/JeanBurgessAoIR2006.pdf>.
- Cheney-Lippold J., *A New Algorithmic Identity: Soft Biopolitics and the Modulation of Control*, in «Theory, Culture & Society», vol. 28, 2011, pp. 164-181.

- Couldry N., Hepp A., Krotz F. (a cura di), *Media Events in a Global Age*, Routledge, London–New York, 2010.
- Curran N., *Bridgerton the Musical: Does the Fate of the Stage Lie in the Hands of TikTok?*, in «Varsity», 2 aprile 2021, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/theatre/21086>.
- Darvin R., *Design, Resistance and the Performance of Identity on TikTok*, in «Discourse, Context & Media», vol. 46, 2022, pp. 1-11.
- Dayan D., Katz E., *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge–Massachusetts 1994.
- Dickson EJ., *An Oral History of 'Ratatouille: The Musical'*, in «Rolling Stone», 18 novembre 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/ratatouille-tiktok-musical-oral-history-1091547/>.
- Eriksson Krutrök M., *Algorithmic Closeness in Mourning: Vernaculars of the Hashtag #grief on TikTok*, in «Social Media + Society», vol. 7, 2021.
- Evans G., *'Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical': How Broadway Cooked Up The Perfect Appetizer For A New Year That Can't Start Soon Enough*, in «Deadline», 1 gennaio 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/01/ratatouille-tiktok-musical-benefit-disney-seaview-emily-jacobsen-tituss-burgess-actors-fund-1234663746/>
- Frosh P., Pinchevski A., *Media and Events after Media Events*, in «Media, Culture & Society», vol. 40, 2018, pp. 135-138.
- Fuchs C., *Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet*, in «The Information Society», vol. 26, 2010, pp. 179-196.
- Gemini L., Brilli S., *Gradienti di liveness. Performance e comunicazione dal vivo nei contesti mediatizzati*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2023.
- Guinaudeau B., Munger K., Votta F., *Fifteen Seconds of Fame: TikTok and the Supply Side of Social Video*, in «Computational Communication Research», vol. 4, 2022, pp. 463-485.
- Jerslev A., *Contemporary Ceremonial Media Events – Time and Temporalities of Liveness*, in «Nordic Journal of Media Studies», vol. 4, 2022, pp. 19-36.
- Jones C., *How to Train Your Algorithm: The Struggle for Public Control over Private Audience Commodities on TikTok*, in «Media, Culture & Society», vol. 45, 2023, pp. 1192-1209.
- Kamela M., Carpenter B., *We Should Talk About Bruno: Discourse on TikTok as a Model for Scholarly Conversation*, in «Current Studies in Librarianship», vol. 34, 2023, p. 5.
- Lessig L., *Code Version 2.0*, Basic Books, New York 2006.

Lessig L., *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, Penguin, New York 2008.

Lupinacci L., “Absentmindedly Scrolling Through Nothing”: Liveness and Compulsory Continuous Connectedness in Social Media, in «Media, Culture & Society», vol. 43, 2021, pp. 273-290.

Manovich L., *Software Takes Command*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2013.

Nieborg D. B., Poell T., *The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity*, in «New Media & Society», vol. 20, 2018, pp. 4275-4292.

Parisi S., Firth E., «Il magico mondo dell’algoritmo.» *Immaginario, percezione e interazione degli utenti di TikTok con l’algoritmo di piattaforma*, in «Sociologia della Comunicazione», n. 66, 2023, pp. 60-76.

Poell T., Nieborg D. B., Duffy B. E., *Platforms and Cultural Production*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2022.

Schechner R., *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, Routledge, London–New York 2002.

Walton G. M., Cohen G. L., Cwir D., Spencer S. J., *Mere Belonging: The Power of Social Connections*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», vol. 102, 2012, pp. 513-532.

Wieringa E., *Ratatousical: What the TikTok Musical Says About Society*, in «diggitt magazine», 26 aprile 2021, https://www.diggittmagazine.com/papers/ratatousical-tiktok-musical?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Zeng J., Schäfer M. S., Allgaier J., *Reposting “Till Albert Einstein Is TikTok Famous”: The Memetic Construction of Science on TikTok*, in «International Journal of Communication», vol. 15, 2021, pp. 3216-3247.

Zulli D., Zulli D. J., *Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform*, in «New Media & Society», vol. 24, 2022, pp. 1872-1890.

Biografia dell’autore-autrice/ Author’s biography

Ellenrose Firth (PhD, Sapienza Università di Roma) è assegnista di ricerca presso il Dipartimento di Comunicazione e Ricerca Sociale a Sapienza Università di Roma. I suoi interessi di ricerca si collocano all’intersezione tra l’evoluzione del medium televisivo e le piattaforme di media sharing, l’impatto che i sistemi di raccomandazione hanno sulle esperienze di fruizione e sull’agency degli utenti, e gli effetti che le piattaforme di social media esercitano sulle pratiche turistiche.

Ellenrose Firth (PhD, Sapienza University of Rome) is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Communication and Social Research at Sapienza University of Rome. Her research interests are at the intersection between the evolution of television and social media platforms, the impact recommendation systems have on user experience and user agency, and the effect digital media platforms have on tourist practices.

Stefania Parisi è Professoressa ordinaria in Sociologia dei processi culturali e comunicativi presso la Sapienza Università di Roma, dove insegna "Digital media studies" e "Sociologia dei media digitali – Laboratorio su Genere e Media activism". È componente del Collegio di Dottorato in Comunicazione, Ricerca sociale e Marketing e coordina l'unità di ricerca Spazio urbano, creatività e media. I suoi studi riguardano le trasformazioni socioculturali legate alla diffusione di tecnologie e piattaforme digitali; il rapporto tra media e città; le dinamiche di potere e resistenza che strutturano l'esperienza online, anche in prospettiva femminista. Le ricerche più recenti si concentrano sull'interazione utente/algoritmo e sulla mediazione digitale nell'esperienza turistica urbana.

Stefania Parisi is Full Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at Sapienza University of Rome, where she teaches *Digital Media Studies* and *Sociology of Digital Media – Gender and Media Activism Lab*. She is a member of the Doctoral Board in Communication, Social Research and Marketing and coordinates the research unit *Urban Space, Creativity and Media*. Her research addresses the sociocultural transformations associated with the diffusion of digital technologies and platforms; the relationship between media and the city; and the dynamics of power and resistance that structure online experience, including from a feminist perspective. Her most recent research focuses on user–algorithm interaction and digital mediation in urban tourism experiences.

Double-blind peer-reviewed article