

TikTok Sounds and the Formation of Youth Media Rituals in Transnational Contexts

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of sound on TikTok as a central medium through which transnational youth engage in ritualized digital practices. Focusing on German youth culture as a case study, the research conceptualizes short-form audio clips on TikTok as “ritual infrastructures” that facilitate repetition, emotional synchronization, and identity negotiation. Drawing on media ritual theory (Couldry), mediatization (Hjarvard), and global cultural flow theory (Appadurai), the study examines how TikTok sounds function as modular cultural units that travel across linguistic and geographic boundaries. These sounds acquire quasi-linguistic and affective meanings, enabling youth to participate in globally shared media rituals while embedding local identities. The paper argues that music discovery on TikTok has transformed into a performative and emotionally structured ritual rather than a search-based activity, and that algorithmically circulated sounds foster a new form of cultural synchrony. Through theoretical synthesis and platform-based analysis, the paper advances a new understanding of sound as both a medium of participation and a symbolic anchor in the digital lives of a globally connected generation.

Keywords: TikTok, media rituals, transnational youth culture, platformization, sound memes, mediatization, algorithmic culture, cultural synchrony, emotional media practices, global cultural flows

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The trajectory of music discovery has undergone significant transformation in the past few decades, moving from centralized radio broadcasts to more personalized forms such as podcasts and streaming platforms. This evolution has culminated in the emergence of TikTok as a powerful agent in shaping contemporary music experiences, particularly among Gen Z users in Germany. These users,

often fluent in visual culture and mobile interaction, encounter music not through complete albums or curated playlists but through fragmented, looping sound clips embedded in short videos. These clips act as signals, triggers, and templates that structure user behavior in highly patterned ways. TikTok sounds have become the nexus through which cultural materials circulate, producing a distinct mode of transnational cultural engagement. In the German context, youth increasingly participate in these sound practices as part of a

larger network of content production, emotional expression, and cultural identification. The auditory elements are no longer mere background but operate as core components in shaping cultural rituals that are replicated and reinterpreted across national borders. Through repetition, synchronization, and emotional coding, TikTok sounds form the infrastructure of what can be understood as youth media rituals in a globalized setting.

1.2 Research Problem

The central question addressed in this paper concerns the role of TikTok sounds in constructing shared ritual behaviors among youth populations across different national and cultural contexts. Specifically, it investigates how certain sonic elements on TikTok are imbued with symbolic meaning through repeated acts of engagement, and how these repetitions come to define ritualistic media behavior. In the German youth scene, this process involves the appropriation of foreign and local sound bites alike, translating them into aesthetic performances that transcend linguistic and national barriers. The inquiry focuses on the affordances and constraints of TikTok's sound system, asking how it facilitates specific modes of cultural practice and identity work. These practices are not isolated phenomena but emerge within a global platform logic that encourages both mimicry and differentiation. The research problem also seeks to unpack how the algorithmic infrastructure of TikTok participates in shaping what becomes ritualizable, and how young users negotiate their agency within these platform-imposed patterns. The broader question is whether these emergent behaviors can be understood as a new form of media ritual that operates on the logic of modularity, scalability, and affective resonance.

1.3 Research Significance

By theorizing TikTok sounds as ritual objects, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of youth culture not simply as a demographic category but as an active agent in producing symbolic and emotional meaning in the digital age. The significance lies in repositioning short-form sonic media from an entertainment tool to a core mechanism of social organization and cultural circulation. In examining the German context, this research adds to the growing body of work on transnational digital youth culture by providing empirical and

theoretical insights into how media platforms mediate collective behavior across cultural boundaries. It suggests that sound operates as a low-threshold, high-impact medium through which affective communities are formed and sustained. The study also contributes to the field of media ritual theory by expanding its scope to include algorithmically shaped, platform-native practices that are globally diffused yet locally situated. In doing so, it bridges the gap between media anthropology, platform studies, and musicology, proposing an interdisciplinary framework for understanding the ritualization of sound in digital culture.

1.4 Theoretical Positioning

The theoretical framework is anchored in three interrelated bodies of scholarship that offer distinct yet complementary lenses for interpreting the phenomenon under study. The first is Nick Couldry's theory of media rituals, which conceptualizes ritual as meaningful repetition that produces symbolic order in media environments. Couldry's work emphasizes the ways in which media practices become ritualized through routine, symbolic actions that reinforce shared cultural frameworks. The second theoretical strand draws on Stig Hjarvard's mediatization theory, which views media not merely as channels for communication but as constitutive forces that reshape social institutions and everyday life. This perspective allows for an analysis of how TikTok structures daily behaviors and emotional rhythms, making media practices inseparable from lived experience. The third component engages Arjun Appadurai's model of global cultural flows, particularly his notion of the ethnoscape and mediascape, to account for the transnational mobility of sound and its role in forming global youth identities. Appadurai's emphasis on deterritorialization and reterritorialization provides a framework for understanding how sound travels across borders while being recontextualized in specific cultural settings, such as among German youth negotiating global influences and local meanings.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Media Ritual Theory

Media rituals, as conceptualized by Nick Couldry, provide a powerful framework for understanding how everyday interactions with media can acquire symbolic, communal, and

performative dimensions. Within the TikTok environment, sounds are not simply functional or decorative elements; they are ritual triggers that structure user behavior through repetition, emotional investment, and symbolic alignment. For German youth, performing a TikTok dance challenge using a globally trending sound is not merely an act of imitation but a ritualized performance that affirms one's place within a transnational media community. These sounds act as markers of belonging, signaling cultural literacy and emotional alignment with a particular mood or theme. The frequency with which users encounter, reuse, and recontextualize the same audio clips reinforces the ritualistic nature of their participation. By repeatedly engaging with these sounds, youth create patterns of behavior that echo traditional rituals in their regularity and affective resonance, but which are deeply embedded in platform-specific logic. Unlike religious rituals grounded in sacred time and space, TikTok rituals are ephemeral yet powerful, embedded in scrollable feeds and fleeting encounters, yet experienced as meaningful by participants who invest time, identity, and affect into their enactment.

2.2 Mediatization of Everyday Life

Mediatization theory, particularly as articulated by Hjarvard, posits that media are no longer external channels through which society communicates but have become constitutive forces that reshape the very structure of daily life. This perspective is crucial for understanding how TikTok, through its sound infrastructure, formats not just content but the emotional and temporal rhythms of young users in Germany. Sound clips on TikTok shape when and how emotions are expressed, how social roles are performed, and how shared experiences are crafted. The interface between user and platform becomes a site where cultural habits are formed and normalized. For example, the act of scrolling through TikTok before bed while listening to emotionally coded sounds like melancholic piano loops or nostalgic lo-fi beats has become a daily routine for many, a moment of introspection or emotional regulation that is deeply mediated. The platform, through its design and algorithm, subtly encourages this repetition, embedding media into the structure of everyday life not only as content but as a temporal and emotional organizer. In the German context, where media use intersects

with local cultural expectations around emotional expression and privacy, TikTok creates new forms of affective publicness, where feelings are both shared and stylized through sonic repetition.

2.3 Transnational Youth Culture

Transnational youth culture provides the broader socio-cultural framework in which TikTok sound rituals are embedded. Youth across different nations, including Germany, increasingly participate in a globalized media environment where cultural products circulate rapidly and are subject to reinterpretation across contexts. TikTok's sound system enables what can be called a transnational soundscape, in which users in Berlin might use a snippet of Korean pop, Brazilian funk, or Nigerian Afrobeat without needing to understand the language or cultural origin of the sound. These sonic elements become detached from their original contexts and are re-embedded within new, locally meaningful performances. German youth, often fluent in English and digitally literate, are well-positioned to engage in these flows, drawing upon diverse audio materials to perform hybrid identities. This engagement is not uncritical or passive; rather, it reflects an active process of cultural negotiation, where sounds are selected, remixed, and embodied in ways that resonate with both global trends and local values. The platform fosters a form of cultural simultaneity, where a single sound can support millions of different performances, each inflected by the cultural context of the user, yet bound together by the shared grammar of platform participation.

2.4 Platformized Cultural Flows

The concept of platformized cultural flows, as developed by scholars like José van Dijck, shifts attention from user agency to the infrastructural logic that organizes and channels media circulation. TikTok's sound system exemplifies how platforms fragment and recontextualize content, turning sound into modular units that can be endlessly replicated, appropriated, and redistributed. These units are not neutral; they are shaped by recommendation algorithms, metadata tagging, and user interaction metrics, all of which determine which sounds rise to prominence and how they are framed within the user interface. In the German TikTok ecosystem, popular sounds often follow a trajectory from global virality to local adaptation, guided by the

platform's logic of visibility and trendiness. A Latin pop track might become a dance challenge, then a comedic voice-over, and finally a vehicle for political commentary. This constant reconfiguration reveals the deep entanglement between cultural production and platform design. Youth engagement with these sounds is both creative and constrained, structured by the platform's affordances and algorithmic preferences. TikTok not only enables cultural flows but actively shapes their form, duration, and visibility, producing a new media ecology in which sound is a modular building block of identity, community, and ritual participation.

3. TikTok Sounds as Cultural Units

3.1 Short-form Sound as Communicative Symbol

On TikTok, short-form sound operates as a semiotic resource that functions in ways analogous to language, yet with distinct multimodal affordances. Within the German TikTok environment, these sounds serve as symbolic cues that trigger recognizable social meanings and affective states, even when stripped of their original lyrical or cultural context. A five-second audio loop of a distorted pop song, a snippet of a viral speech, or a slowed-down rap hook becomes a flexible communicative unit capable of encoding irony, desire, nostalgia, or resistance. These audio fragments are not merely background for visual performance but central elements that direct the mood, rhythm, and structure of the video. Their semiotic power lies in their polysemy; the same sound can support hundreds of interpretations, each conditioned by local cultural knowledge and platform subcultural literacy. For German youth, the reuse of a trending sound functions as a signal of in-group belonging and digital fluency, positioning the user within a broader affective and symbolic economy. These sound symbols become legible not through conventional language but through platform-native intertextuality, where shared listening and performance history constructs meaning in collective ways.

3.2 Meme-ification of Sound

The meme-ification of sound is a core mechanism through which TikTok transforms music into ritual content. In Germany, as elsewhere, full-length songs are rarely consumed in their entirety; instead, they are clipped into five to ten-second fragments that circulate as standalone audio memes. These

fragments undergo processes of decontextualization, where they are stripped from their original narrative or cultural setting, and recontextualization, where they are embedded in new video formats, genres, or moods. This transformation allows the sound to take on a ritualized function, becoming part of a familiar template that users can repeatedly perform. For example, a dramatic orchestral sting originally composed for a film trailer might be repurposed by German creators to parody moments of everyday stress, such as missing a train or failing an exam. Over time, the repeated pairing of specific sounds with recurring visual tropes hardens into what can be described as an auditory meme grammar. The meme-ified sound becomes recognizable not only through its acoustic features but through the social scripts it evokes. This ritualized reuse fosters a sense of continuity and familiarity, enabling youth to participate in a shared media practice while inflecting it with local relevance and personal creativity.

3.3 Emotional Coding of Sounds

Sounds on TikTok are not neutral; they are densely coded with emotional signals that structure how users interpret and respond to content. In the German TikTok sphere, emotional codes are often embedded in sonic texture, tempo, and tonal quality rather than explicit lyrical meaning. A slow, melancholic piano loop evokes introspection and sadness, while high-tempo electronic beats signal energy and playfulness. These sounds become affective templates that structure not only how a video is received but also how it is created. Youth creators in Germany often select sounds to frame their emotional expression, whether to signal heartbreak, joy, sarcasm, or existential boredom. These sounds offer a kind of emotional shorthand that simplifies complex feelings into performable cues. The popularity of themes like "soft sadness," "cozy night," or "weekend hype" illustrates how emotional genres are consolidated into auditory forms that youth can easily adopt and remix. The repetition of such emotionally coded sounds across different videos and users produces a shared emotional syntax, allowing for a kind of empathetic synchrony across linguistic and national boundaries. For youth negotiating the emotional turbulence of adolescence and early adulthood, these sounds offer not only expression but also recognition, functioning as

sonic affirmations of shared affective experience.

3.4 Cross-cultural Portability

The portability of sound across cultural contexts is a key feature of TikTok's transnational logic. In the German context, youth interact daily with sounds that originate from diverse regions, including South Korea, the United States, Brazil, and Turkey. The non-verbal or quasi-verbal nature of many TikTok sounds makes them particularly adaptable to cross-cultural use. Instrumental loops, rhythm patterns, or brief vocal hooks without intelligible lyrics can circulate freely without requiring translation, enabling participation from users with different linguistic backgrounds. This facilitates the formation of globally synchronous sound practices, where a German teenager might engage with a dance challenge using the same audio clip as peers in Tokyo or São Paulo. The platform's algorithm further reinforces this portability by promoting sounds that demonstrate high levels of user engagement across regions, creating a feedback loop in which transnationally popular sounds become even more visible. This cross-cultural portability enables German youth to participate in what might be termed an auditory cosmopolitanism, where global cultural fluency is expressed through sound adoption and remixing. At the same time, this process often involves cultural simplification or flattening, as complex cultural references are abstracted into digestible audio units. The portability of sound, then, is both an opportunity for connection and a site of negotiation over meaning, identity, and cultural representation.

4. Youth Media Rituals on TikTok

4.1 Repetition as Ritual Structure

Repetition is the foundational structure through which TikTok sounds gain ritualistic meaning in the lives of young users. In Germany, youth often engage in daily or weekly content creation practices that revolve around repeating specific sound templates. These may involve dance challenges, comic lip-syncs, or dramatizations of mundane experiences using trending audio. The repetitive nature of these performances is not merely algorithmically driven but also socially sustained; the very act of participating in a challenge involves recognizing a format, adhering to its constraints, and reproducing its core symbolic gestures. Over time, these repetitions stabilize into forms that carry

cultural weight. A sound originally associated with a dance in Los Angeles can, after weeks of circulation, become embedded in German youth culture as a humorous marker of school stress or weekend euphoria. This ritualized repetition transforms individual actions into collective practices, offering a sense of rhythm and order in the ever-scrolling landscape of digital media. Unlike traditional media rituals tied to scheduled events or institutions, TikTok rituals are constantly emergent and user-generated, yet they exhibit strong patterned behaviors that echo older forms of symbolic repetition. Repetition, in this context, is not only a method of engagement but also a mode of meaning-making that structures youth experience through sonic familiarity.

4.2 Embodied Participation

Embodied participation describes the way users physically interact with TikTok sounds, turning listening into movement and sound into gesture. German youth do not passively consume viral sounds; they embody them through coordinated dance routines, facial expressions, hand signs, and mimetic actions that render sound visible and spatial. The platform encourages this embodiment by integrating editing tools, filters, and real-time sound syncing features that reward precise physical alignment with audio cues. These bodily performances become highly ritualized over time, particularly when they involve globally recognized movements associated with specific sounds. Participating in a challenge often means learning a shared choreography, which is then reproduced, modified, and personalized in each new iteration. Through these embodied practices, sound is not merely heard but felt, enacted, and remembered through the body. In the German youth context, this kind of performative engagement offers an avenue for self-expression that blends digital aesthetics with physical discipline. It allows for visibility in the networked attention economy while also reinforcing shared cultural grammars. The body thus becomes a medium through which sound acquires meaning, and participation becomes a form of corporeal inscription in the digital ritual. The repetitive and public nature of these embodied acts transforms them into social rituals that mark belonging and creativity within both local and transnational youth communities.

4.3 Affective Synchronization

Affective synchronization refers to the collective emotional alignment facilitated by repeated use of specific sound clips across user communities. On German TikTok, this can be observed in the widespread use of sounds that carry strong emotional coding, such as melancholic melodies, ambient lo-fi beats, or dramatic monologues. These sounds often function as emotional templates that guide users in crafting videos around themes of loneliness, nostalgia, anxiety, or introspection. Youth scroll through countless iterations of the same sound being used to express subtly different experiences, creating a cumulative emotional atmosphere that transcends individual expression. This shared mood space fosters a sense of intimacy and co-presence, even among strangers. The ritual aspect emerges not only through repetition but through the patterned emotional responses that the sounds elicit. Users know what kind of affective engagement is expected with a given sound and respond accordingly, reinforcing communal feeling structures. In Germany, where emotional expression among youth is shaped by both local norms and global media influences, TikTok offers a new form of affective collectivity. These shared emotional rituals serve as a form of non-verbal communication, creating temporary communities of feeling that exist through sound. By participating in these moments of synchronization, youth tap into a transnational emotional field that both validates personal experience and connects it to a larger, platform-wide narrative.

4.4 Playlist-less Music Discovery

TikTok has fundamentally altered the process of music discovery, shifting it from a curated, list-based system to a ritualized encounter with sound driven by platform logic. German youth no longer rely primarily on playlists, radio charts, or album releases to find new music; instead, they engage in a scroll-based practice where discovery is contingent on repetition, attention, and emotional resonance. A user might stumble upon a song fragment while browsing and, after encountering it in multiple videos, begin to associate it with specific moods, movements, or cultural moments. This form of discovery is both serendipitous and structured, shaped by the algorithm but experienced as intuitive. The ritual here lies in the habitual action of scrolling, pausing, and entering what could be described as a sonic micro-world that each sound creates. The repeated encounter with

the same sound across diverse contexts encourages users to internalize its rhythm and emotional tone, effectively transforming casual listening into a form of media ritual. In the German context, this allows youth to encounter global sounds without actively searching for them, embedding them in daily routines and affective landscapes. The process becomes ritualized through its predictability and emotional rhythm, making music discovery not just a technical function but a meaningful cultural practice. The absence of traditional playlists is compensated by the emergent rituals of algorithmic co-presence, where sound is discovered not through intent but through repeated emotional contact.

5. Transnational Contexts of Youth Rituals

5.1 Globalized Sound Journeys

TikTok facilitates the rapid circulation of sounds across borders, enabling what can be described as globalized sound journeys. A track originating in the Philippines, a meme-sound from Chicago, or a Bollywood-inspired beat can appear on a German user's feed within hours of its viral takeoff. These sounds do not travel in isolation but are accompanied by performative templates that suggest how they should be used, interpreted, and re-enacted. Among German youth, this results in a form of co-presence where users across continents engage with the same sonic unit, often within similar performative genres such as lip-syncing or storytelling. The phenomenon of transnational co-listening chains emerges when thousands of users globally encounter and interact with a sound within a tightly compressed time frame, creating a shared auditory experience that transcends geography. German youth are not merely passive receivers in this chain; they actively contribute to it by producing their own interpretations, adding regional inflections, or modifying the sound for local memes. These sound journeys challenge traditional models of cultural diffusion by emphasizing speed, simultaneity, and user-driven adaptation. Through these processes, TikTok becomes a stage for sonic globalization, where the act of listening is inherently social, ritualized, and geographically distributed.

5.2 Cultural Hybridization

TikTok's global sound ecology creates fertile ground for cultural hybridization, where sounds from diverse linguistic and stylistic origins are

blended to create new, mixed-cultural forms. In Germany, such hybridization is particularly visible in the way youth interact with sounds that combine K-pop production aesthetics, Latin American reggaeton rhythms, and German-language captions or voiceovers. These sonic mashups are not mere entertainment; they are vehicles for constructing hybrid identities that reflect both global exposure and local rootedness. A TikTok video might feature a Korean chorus with a German punchline, performed through a dance style influenced by U.S. hip-hop. These combinations reflect the reality of a globally interconnected generation for whom cultural authenticity is less important than expressive fluidity. The hybrid nature of TikTok sounds allows German youth to experiment with identity through audio-visual collage, often in ways that challenge traditional notions of national or linguistic purity. This hybridization is not always symmetrical; some cultural forms dominate the soundscape while others appear in fragments. Yet the overall trend is one of constant recombination, where the boundaries between cultural categories are blurred and new forms of ritual expression emerge. Sound becomes the medium through which youth practice global belonging while articulating local sensibilities.

5.3 Platformized Global Youth Synchrony

One of the most striking outcomes of TikTok's sound infrastructure is the emergence of platformized synchrony, where youth around the world participate in the same auditory rituals within the same temporal frame. This form of synchronization is not coordinated by intention but orchestrated by algorithmic visibility and trend diffusion. A sound that begins trending in the morning in Seoul may reach Berlin by the afternoon, prompting thousands of users to create responses or adaptations by evening. This temporal alignment creates the conditions for globally shared ritual time, where youth experience emotional and performative alignment through the same auditory content. In Germany, young creators often express amazement at seeing how a sound they just discovered is being used simultaneously by users in different countries, highlighting a shared digital now that collapses geographic distance. This synchronous participation transforms TikTok into a platform for global ritual convergence, where the boundary between the personal and the

collective is suspended. Sound operates as a temporal bridge that allows users to feel connected in the same performative moment, producing a sense of being part of something larger than oneself. The speed and scope of this synchrony challenge traditional understandings of ritual as locally grounded and temporally fixed, replacing them with a model of constantly updating, globally distributed performance.

5.4 Negotiation of Cultural Identity

As TikTok sounds traverse borders and are adopted by youth in different national contexts, they become tools for negotiating cultural identity. In Germany, youth often use globally popular sounds to position themselves within a cosmopolitan aesthetic while simultaneously reasserting local or ethnic belonging. This negotiation is visible in the appropriation of trending English-language sounds paired with German dialect captions, or in the overlay of Turkish-German humor onto Latin American beats. These performances allow users to navigate the tension between being part of a global youth culture and maintaining distinct cultural reference points. For youth from migrant backgrounds, sound becomes a particularly potent medium through which to articulate dual or multiple identities. A user might engage with a sound that connects them to global popular culture while embedding references that speak to their diasporic heritage or community context. These acts are ritualistic in that they are repeated, socially visible, and emotionally charged. They provide a platform for identity experimentation and affirmation in an environment where cultural markers are often fluid and contingent. Through such negotiations, TikTok becomes not only a site of cultural convergence but also a dynamic field for identity work, where sound is the material through which selfhood is continually redefined.

6. Discussion

6.1 TikTok Sounds as Ritual Infrastructures

TikTok's sound architecture functions as more than an interactive feature; it serves as a ritual infrastructure through which global youth cultures structure their emotional routines, social participation, and cultural expressions. In the German context, sounds offer a blueprint for performance, establishing not only the aesthetic but also the temporal and emotional contours of participation. This infrastructure supports the

rapid emergence and stabilization of media rituals by offering pre-structured templates that can be easily replicated, recombined, and personalized. The ritual potential of TikTok sounds lies in their capacity to formalize behavior through repetition, align collective experiences through emotional cues, and embed symbolic meaning through performance. Youth do not merely encounter sounds; they inhabit them, allowing the sonic form to guide gestures, moods, and narrative framings. These infrastructures become the scaffolding through which users enter shared communicative zones, where each act of participation, although individualized, contributes to a broader, repetitive structure. Sound provides a spatialized temporality that users move through collectively, producing meaning not through isolated acts but through patterned cultural engagement. This system of ritual sound use reveals a deeper layer of media logic, in which platforms offer not only content but the very formats of cultural life.

6.2 Cultural Power of Platformized Sound

The circulation of sound on TikTok is governed by platform-specific dynamics that shape what becomes culturally meaningful, visible, and repeatable. The algorithm plays a decisive role in determining which sounds are amplified and which fade into obscurity, not based solely on aesthetic value but on quantifiable patterns of interaction. In Germany, as in other national contexts, youth creativity unfolds within this logic of visibility, where success is often tied to adopting trending sounds at the right moment, following the right template, and aligning with current platform moods. This algorithmic governance transforms sound into a mode of soft power through which platforms mediate cultural formation. The recommended sound clips, metadata tags, and remix features channel attention toward particular affective and performative registers, reinforcing dominant genres and marginalizing others. At the same time, users possess the capacity to reinterpret and subvert these structures. German youth creators often inject subcultural codes, local humor, or political critique into standardized sound formats, revealing a dialogical relationship between platform logic and user agency. Sound becomes the terrain on which this negotiation occurs, offering both a site of constraint and a space for rearticulation. The platform's cultural power operates not through

coercion but through the seductive rhythms of repeatable sound, which structure behavior while appearing to invite freedom.

6.3 Reimagining Music Discovery as Ritual Practice

TikTok reconfigures music discovery from a process of selection and listening to a practice of encounter, repetition, and performance. This shift represents a fundamental change in how youth in Germany relate to music, moving away from curated playlists or album-based listening toward ephemeral, immersive soundscapes embedded in everyday digital rituals. Discovery becomes a ritual not because of formal structures but because of the patterned, symbolic, and affective dimensions it acquires. Scrolling through TikTok and encountering a new sound involves more than auditory exposure; it initiates a process of emotional association, visual interpretation, and sometimes embodied performance. Over time, users come to anticipate these encounters, seek them out, and organize their emotional life around them. Music discovery is no longer about accumulating knowledge or taste but about entering a shared cultural moment. These moments are not passive but require users to decide how to respond, whether through imitation, parody, or reinvention. In this sense, TikTok produces not just music fans but ritual participants who co-construct musical meaning through practices that are both highly personal and deeply collective. Discovery is reframed as a mediated event that carries symbolic weight, offering users a repeated portal into aesthetic worlds that feel both spontaneous and structured.

6.4 Transnational Youth as Co-Creators

Youth across national boundaries, including those in Germany, participate in TikTok not merely as consumers of content but as co-creators of a globally resonant sonic culture. This co-creation occurs through the ritualized practices of sound use, in which young people interpret, remix, and reframe audio materials in locally meaningful ways while contributing to transnational flows. Each time a user in Berlin uses a trending sound from Seoul or São Paulo, they engage in an act of cultural translation, embedding that sound in new visual narratives, emotional contexts, and social meanings. These acts of remix are not isolated but accumulate into collective repertoires that define what it means to be part of a global youth culture

mediated through sound. Participation in these repertoires is both inclusive and stratified, shaped by access to technical tools, cultural fluency, and platform literacy. Yet despite these differences, the core ritual of co-creation remains a powerful mechanism for building shared symbolic worlds. TikTok sounds thus become the minimal denominator through which diverse users synchronize their creativity, producing a mediated cultural commons grounded not in linguistic or national identity but in the shared capacity to act within sound. In this process, youth become agents of cultural production who continuously reconstruct global sonic imaginaries from the bottom up.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined how TikTok sounds function as ritual infrastructures that structure youth participation, cultural expression, and emotional synchronization in transnational contexts, with a focus on German youth culture. Through a combination of theoretical perspectives—media ritual theory, mediatization, global cultural flows, and platform studies—it has shown that short-form sounds on TikTok are not incidental background elements but central cultural units that organize meaningful, repeatable, and embodied social practices. The research demonstrated that sounds circulate across borders with remarkable speed and flexibility, facilitating affective alignment and performative co-presence among youth in vastly different cultural settings. In the German context, sounds are appropriated and reconfigured in ways that express hybrid identities, local affiliations, and global belonging. Youth use sound not only to perform emotions but also to locate themselves within complex cultural networks. These practices are deeply ritualistic, rooted in repetition, symbolic coding, and shared temporalities, transforming TikTok into a space where global and local cultures converge through the medium of sound.

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to reconceptualize media consumption as culturally embedded ritual practice. It expands the scope of music discovery by reframing it as a participatory process shaped by platform logic, emotional resonance, and social imitation. By foregrounding sound as the analytical entry point, the paper advances the understanding of TikTok not merely as a platform for entertainment but as a site of

affective labor, symbolic production, and identity negotiation. In particular, the concept of sound as a modular and portable ritual unit allows for new insights into how youth build continuity, community, and creativity in fast-paced, algorithmically governed environments. The German case enriches this analysis by illustrating how national and regional cultural elements are woven into globally circulating sound practices, resulting in layered and hybrid media rituals. The study thus positions TikTok sounds as cultural bridges that connect youth across linguistic, geographic, and social boundaries, enabling new modes of symbolic cohabitation in digital space.

The study's theoretical scope, while comprehensive, is limited by its reliance on platform-wide patterns rather than detailed ethnographic or content-based evidence. Although it captures general tendencies in sound use and cultural formation, it does not fully account for the diversity of experiences among different youth subgroups within Germany. Variations across class, gender, ethnicity, and regional background may significantly influence how sounds are interpreted, appropriated, or resisted. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on the cultural functions of sound while leaving aside the political, economic, and technological infrastructures that underlie platform governance. A deeper engagement with the political economy of algorithmic visibility, content moderation, and platform capitalism would provide a more critical understanding of the power relations embedded in these ritual practices.

Future research should seek to complement this theoretical framework with empirical methods such as digital ethnography, visual content analysis, and in-depth interviews with young creators in Germany and beyond. Particular attention should be paid to the ways in which gender, race, and class mediate access to cultural participation on TikTok, especially in the context of sound-related performance. Investigating the regional variability of sound reception and reinterpretation would also enrich the understanding of how global rituals are localized and hybridized. Another important direction lies in examining the political dimensions of sound rituals, such as their use in protest culture, identity resistance, or counter-hegemonic narratives. Exploring the

intersections between sound, embodiment, and algorithmic rhythm may yield further insights into how users internalize platform time through affective engagement. Such research would continue to illuminate the complex and dynamic role of sound in structuring the digital lives of a globally connected yet culturally fragmented generation.

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