YouTube and Online Video in Lockdown: Digital Platforms, Culture and Coping During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Edited by
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This special issue of *Networking Knowledge* was initially planned during the end of summer 2020, relatively early in the pandemic. At the time it was assumed that due to the time-consuming nature of academic publishing, any research released on the lockdown period would need to take a retrospective role, looking back at the traumatic, but temporary upheaval of 2020 from the relative safety of a slowly recovering world. But as the pandemic continued, it became clear that this issue would arrive long before anything had returned to normal, into a context in which educational and cultural institutions have been forever transformed by the necessity for physical distance. This short editorial will first briefly outline the context for this special issue, and then introduce the themes and some key points of interest raised by the scholarship presented within.

Though the lived reality and shared trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved significantly over the last two years and has differed greatly based on socioeconomic stability, vocation and location, the earliest months of lockdowns were understood by many as a collective experience, mediated online through social interaction, media consumption and popular culture. This reflexive mediation of a shared 'lockdown experience' was particularly visible in social media discourse but could also be seen in other media through its response to the needs of a traumatised, isolated audience in the form of an increase in the consumption of comfort media and journalistic coverage discussing the impact of lockdown measures along with the pandemic itself. Media events such as the popularity of new video games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and bingeable TV shows like *Tiger King* (and to some extent *Squid Game* the following year) were experienced entirely online, as discussion and audience engagement of any form was necessarily digital. Of course, this was already the way many people engaged with media on a daily basis before the pandemic, but was nonetheless entirely recontextualised by becoming audiences' only available option. There were also occasional departures from 'bingeable' content, such as the weekly episodic release of shows like Marvel's *WandaVision* – the show itself acting as a nostalgic celebration of television's history as a storytelling medium. In the context of the pandemic, this release mode gave audiences the opportunity for collective viewing, though as usual, the specific times the episodes dropped prioritised some global audiences over others.

Meanwhile, the shared social experience of adjusting to the awkward navigation of human interaction via video call was in some respects a universal experience, but also one defined by age, and unequal access to digital technology, and the privilege of an uninterrupted home-working environment. New connections between the private and the public have resulted in complicated relationships with digital intimacy, which have been anxiously articulated in many

ways, fr om Twitter accounts like Bookcase Credibility (@BCredibility) humorously analysing bookcases in Zoom backgrounds, "Zoom fail" video compilations, to comedians such as Caitlin Reilly enjoying viral TikTok fame through impersonating the passive-aggressive online presence of over-enthusiastic colleagues. The resultant 'zoom aesthetic' was reflexively explored in media created about *and* under these very constraints in shows like BBC comedy *Staged* (2020) as well as numerous YouTube series such as *Reunited Apart*, which is explored in detail by Hayley Louise Charlesworth later in the issue.

This special issue was originally imagined as potentially focussing on the stars of online video platforms (working title: 'Social Influence, Social Distance') and the isolated consumption of online content. To our minds, the very nature of lockdown necessitated a focus on individual users and influencers. But on the contrary, even early in the pandemic many of the proposals received chose instead to focus on group behaviour – collaboration, collective efforts to survive socially and financially, and more generally the *shared* experience of the internet mediated pandemic. Another, related quality shared by many proposals was a multi-platform scope – accounting for the fact that while video hosting platforms like YouTube and Netflix played key cultural roles during the pandemic, some of the most innovative or noteworthy behaviour was found on more socially orientated platforms like TikTok (and the aforementioned Zoom). TikTok's rise to cultural prominence in 2019 has only been spurred on during the intervening years, becoming a centre of online collaboration and creativity to rival any other on the internet (Stokel-Walker, 2021). Meanwhile, Zoom and other conferencing platforms like Discord became the primary spaces for sociality, as millions of people simultaneously grappled with leisure and communication conducted through cameras and tinny microphones.

Another important factor linking each of the articles in this issue is how they examine the role of digital platforms in the mediation of lockdown communication online. The platform capitalist model has gradually grown in prominence online since the mid-2000s with the advent of major social networking and video hosting sites. During the 2010s this process continued to shape the nature of user-generated media online through the corporate conglomeration of popular social platforms and the booming popularity of YouTube. Meanwhile, streaming platforms for music, TV and film rebuilt the distribution model for more traditional media, all but completely killing the peer-to-peer culture that had previously replaced it. By 2020, platform owners were well-positioned to take advantage of the conditions brought about by lockdown, expanding their social, cultural and economic influence as millions of users were forced to retreat into online spaces for work, communication and comfort.

Platformisation has been described as 'the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life' as well as simply a 'reorganisation of practices and imaginations around platforms' (Poell et al. 2019). In this way, despite growing rapidly the internet is also becoming more homogenous, as a small number of incredibly powerful and far-reaching corporations have come to control a relatively small number of extremely popular services and social platforms. Each platform's particular limitations and affordances also play a central role in

shaping the content hosted and mediated on those platforms. Where most online socialising, discussion content creation and other cultural activity once took place across a vast variety of largely independent forums, websites and blogs, now many of the most notable and influential aspects of online culture take place on giant, corporate platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr and Instagram. By fostering certain communities and cultural modes, these platforms exert significant power on online cultural practice, an influence made all the more powerful by their ability to absorb and assimilate the practices, cultures and communities of users that had previously gathered in a larger number of smaller, less centralised digital locations.

But despite the continued acceleration of the platformisation process during the COVID-19 pandemic, the scholarship in this special issue demonstrates that even under these circumstances, the evolution and development of media practices is still as driven by users as it is by the platforms on which they exist. Our contributors examine numerous video-based content creators from bedroom musicians to the Hollywood elite and their innovative, frequently blended use of platforms and platform affordances to express themselves under exceptional circumstances. Despite the homogenising influence of platform capitalism, internet users are still able to successfully produce and disseminate media with a broad range of purposes from artistic expression at both the professional and amateur level to niche and mainstream content designed to appeal to the sensibilities and requirements of pandemic-stricken audiences. In this context, we are very excited to present four fascinating articles written by scholars from around the world.

In our first article, Rachel Berryman investigates intersections between lockdown entertainment, celebrity and nostalgia by turning her analytical focus towards Josh Gad's charity film reunion specials, *Reunited Apart*. Building on previous scholarly work around nostalgic consumption and celebrity fandom, Berryman examines how Gad capitalised both on his status as a well-connected film star and elements of his specific personal brand to respond to the lockdown-induced audience demand for comfort media. In her consideration of comfort media aesthetics Berryman posits that nostalgia is seen as a fallback when one's selfhood is threatened; and *Reunited Apart* is specifically designed to 'both trigger and indulge the audience's desire' for comforting media from the past. We particularly think you will enjoy her discussions of the 'Zoom aesthetic' – a new global cultural touchstone that renders Gad's celebrity guests more relatable than ever, normalising technical difficulty and social awkwardness at the same time as offering intimate glimpses into the private homes and lives of the celebrity elite. This new approach is combined with long existing trends of '80s nostalgia through Josh Gad's role as 'fanboy auteur' and audience surrogate (Salter and Stanfill 2020; Scott 2012), seamlessly blending the lockdown-specific media experience with more established affective strategies to seemingly philanthropic ends. In *Reunited Apart*, Gad successfully maintains his relatable, dorky, good-natured personal brand even as (thanks to social media), the economic and lifestyle divides between celebrities and the public have perhaps never been more evident.

Our second article, by Steven Buckley, also focusses on the strategies for producing comfort media during lockdown, delving deeper into the concept of 'digital intimacy' and arguing that its 'importance and value' has been transformed during the pandemic. Buckley uses his expertise in political communication and news values to frame a critical overview and content analysis of COVID-19 themed autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos, many of which perform a function a similar to an intimate digital roleplay exercise, offering their audience a sense of both physical and contextual comfort. The results of Buckley's inquiry reflect an uneasy relationship between the drive of content creators to capitalise on existing trends, and the constraints of the YouTube algorithm and Google's official policies regarding monetisation on videos deemed to be COVID-19 related. In addition to acting as a good introduction to the fascinating media form of ASMR content, the findings of this article clearly demonstrate the need for further scholarly work on the motivations of creators engaged in the production of 'coping' content focussed on relaxation, escapism and support to audiences in deeply distressing times, while also navigating an online environment in which independent creators exist at the mercy of uncaring and unpredictable corporate and algorithmic power structures.

Our third article continues the issue's exploration of pandemic media with an examination of the affordances and challenges of digital theatre during the pandemic. Hayley Louise Charlesworth discusses the production of online content in 2020 by theatre company *Starkid Productions* as a future model for the creation of accessible and profitable theatre, with a specific focus on strategies for designing and disseminating musical theatre in the context of online video. Charlesworth's research interests typically focus on the contemporary and/or queer Gothic, but in this article she takes a step back from the manifest content of her subject (comedy-horror series *Nightmare Time*), looking instead at the circumstances surrounding its development, performance and monetisation of the show. Key among the article's contributions is its insight into the practicalities of performing live music on the internet: compensating for technological factors such as poor connectivity, lag and sound issues, as well as potential discomfort from actors who are no longer able to create music in the same room as each other. Many of these threads are continued in the following article's exploration of video-mediated jam sessions, and additional depth is also provided through Charlesworth's interview with one of *Starkid*'s regular actors, which is provided in full as an appendix.

Our final article, from Bondy Kaye also makes effective use of interview to engage with the logistical challenges of mediating collaborative artistic expression via digital video platforms. Kaye borrows approaches from platform studies to demonstrate the relationship between specific platform tools in the creation and maintenance of a loose, jam-based musical collective on TikTok. The app's fast paced, highly reflexive culture has generated several notable moments of musical virality during the pandemic, but rather than analysing a single trend or example, Kaye looks towards JazzTok, a community based around continued collaboration and focussed on a specific genre of music. As a genre focussed on immediacy, intimacy and close collaboration, Jazz is perhaps uniquely suited to the new modes of digital mediation represented by short-form video apps. Kaye argues that the JazzTok community's use of a

blend of platform affordances and independent community management have been able to foster a form of 'distributed creativity' on the platform. Focussing on a collectively managed TikTok account specifically developed by users to act as a hub for musical creativity, Kaye is able to track the account's emotional and professional impact of this community on its members, reporting a 'real, tangible impact on the personal lives and professional careers' of nineteen informants. Thanks to a blend of existing platform affordances end the organisational efforts of key community members, each of these individual musicians were able to productively engage with a new community during the pandemic, despite their considerable diversity of experience in music making, digitally mediated or otherwise.

Though they are concerned with a range of cultural products, platforms and academic framing devices, there are numerous meaningful connections between the papers in this special issue, beyond the shared context of lockdown. As outlined above, each contribution shares some common themes or elements with those either side, but links can also be drawn between the non-adjacent articles that shine yet more light on the collective experiences and struggles that took place in the production of online media during the early stages of the pandemic. For example, the first and third articles focus on previously offline or live media forms moved onto a combination of Zoom and YouTube during COVID, in both cases a mobilising the existence of an audience from previous work to maintain the success and momentum of the creator during a period of turmoil for artists of all kinds. The same might also be said of JazzTok, as it is in many ways a transplant of pre-digital musical practice into a video-mediated platform environment, but on the other hand, musical collaboration and creativity was a core aspect of TikTok culture before the pandemic. Similar musical actitvity was already under way on TikTok by the end of 2019, positioning the platform at the cutting edge of online music promotion and audience engagement, giving activity like that on JazzTok a particularly complex relationship with the pandemic. ASMR is certainly the most internet-specific genre under scrutiny in this issue, meaning that while the other articles offer insight into the ways a shift to online video can impact various media forms, Steven Buckley's article can provide a small but important comparison between the aesthetic and economic dynamics of online content pre- and post-pandemic.

This special issue brings together a fascinating range of cultural touchpoints from the pandemic, but the insights of each paper extend far beyond the difficult times we find ourselves in. We'd like to thank the *Networking Knowledge* editors, the peer-reviewers and most of all, the contributors, for their patience, dedication and collegiality throughout the process of creating this issue. We are incredibly proud to present their work to you and hope this issue will inspire academic discussion and further investigations into the case studies presented.

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'Reunited Apart': Charity Reunion Specials on YouTube in Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the immense popularity of celebrity cast reunions on YouTube amid the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. As one of the most successful (and self-reflexive) examples of this trend, it analyses *Reunited Apart* (2020—), a lockdown web series created and hosted by actor Josh Gad, dedicated to bringing together the casts and crews of beloved Hollywood films from the 1980s and beyond. Using *Reunited Apart* as a case study, the paper evaluates the ontological security afforded by nostalgic consumption in lockdown; discusses the remediation of celebrity and nostalgic fan experiences within YouTube (as platform) and Zoom video conference (as aesthetic); and draws attention to the effectiveness of these reunions in mobilising the influence and attention generated by Hollywood celebrities to fuel the 'affective economics' (Jenkins 2006) of fan philanthropy—an endeavour streamlined by the series' use of YouTube's native fundraising affordances.

In April 2020, amid the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns worldwide, Hollywood actor and Broadway star Josh Gad uploaded the first episode of his new web series *Reunited Apart* (2020—) to YouTube. Dedicated to one of Gad's favourite childhood films, *The Goonies* (1985), the pilot episode of *Reunited Apart* reflected the aesthetic of lockdown, orchestrated and recorded via Zoom video conference. Featuring actors Sean Austin, Corey Feldman, Ke Huy Quan and Jeff Cohen, creator Stephen Spielberg, writer Chris Columbus and director Richard Donner, the episode invited *Goonies* fans to listen to recollections of the cast and crew's time on-set, learn behind-the-scenes trivia, and observe the group's continued rapport, almost four decades since the film's production. The reunion was the first of many Gad would go on to organise with the casts of beloved Hollywood films released since the 1980s. Featuring an all-star line-up of celebrity guests—among them Tom Hanks, Michael J. Fox, Bill Murray, Ralph Macchio, Sigourney Weaver, Jennifer Grey, Ron Howard, Liv Tyler and Mike Meyers—Gad's *Reunited Apart* series was a popular and critical hit. At the time of writing, *Reunited Apart* spans eight official 'episodes', dedicated to a variety of popular films and franchises, complemented by twenty-one supplementary videos also housed on Gad's YouTube channel, including teasers, bloopers, outtakes and highlight reels. In just nine months, Gad's *Reunited Apart* series attracted over 22 million video views, continuing its promise to reunite the creative teams behind Hollywood's most beloved films into a second season.

Though one of the most popular examples, the conceit of *Reunited Apart* was not unique; lockdown inspired a multitude of cast reunions from properties spanning stage and screen(s). Responding to theatre closures and precarious production schedules, for example, American performing arts charity The Actors Fund hosted weekly 'mini-shows', broadcasting live

interviews and performances by Broadway and television stars as part of a lockdown web series entitled *Stars in the House* (2020—). Similarly, Netflix's comedy-focused YouTube channel (Netflix is a Joke) produced live table-reads by several of the streaming service's favourite comedic ensembles, including the casts of *Big Mouth* (2017—), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019), *Grace and Frankie* (2015—) and *Dead to Me* (2019—). Like *Reunited Apart*, this wave of virtual reunions took place on YouTube, attracting hundreds of thousands of viewers with their invitations to revisit and share memories of beloved pop culture artifacts. Their frequent fixture as trending videos on the YouTube homepage affirmed their status as a lockdown phenomenon at once borne from and celebrated by the platform itself. While designed primarily as entertainment, these videos were also united by a charitable focus, encouraging donations to organisations and communities impacted by the pandemic. In this endeavour, they were incredibly successful: as of February 2021, *Stars in the House* had raised over US$700,000 for The Actors Fund (Home | Stars in the House n.d.); *Big Mouth*'s live table-read raised almost US$100,000 for Feeding America (Goldberg 2020); traffic from the *Grace and Frankie* cast reunion overloaded the server for the Meals on Wheels website, with viewers raising an additional US$30,000 through a Facebook fundraiser hastily created while the site was down (Grace and Frankie for Meals on Wheels America n.d.); and by the start of season two, *Reunited Apart* had generated more than US$1 million in fan donations for the charities nominated throughout its first seven episodes.

As one of the most effective, long-standing and self-reflexive examples of this trend, *Reunited Apart* is used in this article as a case study for examining the prevalence and popularity of the charity reunion specials that emerged on YouTube in lockdown. Drawing on Maria Schreiber's (2017) approach to analysing visual communication on social media, this study combines 'visual analysis, text analysis and platform analysis' (38) of *Reunited Apart*'s eight episodes (including video descriptions and user comments) with close textual analysis of the series' online press coverage. This is used to explore the interrelating 'practices, pictures and platforms' (38) involved in the production and reception of the series. Setting this analysis in dialogue with scholarship on cinema, social media, nostalgia and fandom, the article begins by recognising the ontological comfort of revisiting beloved media properties from the past, and situates the appetite for YouTube's reunion specials within a lockdown mediascape characterised by nostalgic consumption. It proceeds to ask what happens when these media properties are remediated within and by the affordances of social media, and, in turn, when the nostalgic sentiment they evoke is drawn into the 'affective economics' (Jenkins 2006) of charitable fundraising. Given the substantial success of *Reunited Apart*, specifically, it also considers the dual characterisation of Josh Gad as host and 'fanboy auteur' (Salter and Stanfill 2020; Scott 2012), as well as the series' use of YouTube's native fundraising affordances to streamline its philanthropic efforts. In so doing, this article draws attention to YouTube's utility as a platform for charitable endeavours, and contributes to the growing body of research on celebrity use of social media platforms to attract, direct and monetise attention in times of need.

'Bringing some much-needed joy to each and every one of you': Finding comfort in consumed nostalgia

One of the defining characteristics of popular culture in the twentieth-first century, argues music journalist Simon Reynolds (2011), is its preoccupation with revisiting, recycling and revamping cultural artefacts from its '*own immediate past*' (xiii, original emphasis). 'As a trend,' American studies scholar Kathleen Loock (2016) explains, this fascination with the past 'pervades almost all areas of cultural production, including music, fashion, toys, food, and interior design' (278). It is perhaps most evident, however, in the ouroboric output of the film and television industries; infamous for remaking, rebooting and reviving existing properties. The popularity of these products has contributed to what media theorist Katharina Niemeyer (2014) calls a 'nostalgia boom' (1) in popular culture, normalising the production and consumption of media specifically designed to evoke a sense of nostalgia, defined as a 'feeling of loss or a yearning for an idealized past' (Loock 2016, 292).

Nostalgia's cultural ubiquity grew even more pronounced in 2020, swiftly flavouring the pop culture and behaviours of lockdown. Amid the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK and US, for example, heritage tourism scholars Sean Gammon and Gregory Ramshaw (2020) were quick to identify a rise in 'leisure nostalgia', with (mandated) time at home increasingly occupied by 'young and old reflect[ing] on, and vicariously escap[ing] to, more predictable times' (3) through their choice of media consumption. The trend permeated industry press releases: in April 2020, Spotify reported significant growth in nostalgia-themed playlists, and streams of music from the 1950s to '80s (Spotify Listeners Are Getting Nostalgic 2020); while in June and July, the US box office was dominated by a slate of classic Hollywood blockbusters, with titles such as *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Jaws* (1975), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *E.T.* (1982) and *Back to the Future* (1985) topping the charts some thirty years after their original theatrical release (D'Alessandro 2020a, 2020b). Press outlets including the *New York Times* (Campoamor 2020), *The Guardian* (Rickett 2020), *Forbes* (M. Klein 2020), *National Geographic* (Johnson 2020) and *Glamour* (Macauley 2020) chronicled nostalgia's heightened popularity in 2020, coining terms like 'corona-stalgia' (Macauley 2020) to characterise the retrospective sentiment and patterns of behaviour adopted in the 'new normal' of lockdown life.

This rise in leisure nostalgia was overtly encouraged by media industries, whose programming selections 'appeared to both fuel and react to this apparent surge in nostalgic interest by offering reminders of the ways things were before the virus spread' (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020, 4). US film distributors embraced the unique setting of the drive-in theatres that remained open during lockdown, organising nostalgia-fuelled screenings of classic films leading to new box office success (D'Alessandro 2020a), and for those at home, reruns of iconic sports broadcasts, music, television series and films frequented radio airplay, television schedules and video-on-demand services (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020; Verheul 2020). At once reflecting the precarity of production schedules during lockdown and the comparative accessibility of historic media titles (see Verheul 2020), the growth of nostalgia programming also seemed to indicate a recognition of the 'psycho-social benefits of leisure nostalgia' from industry and audiences alike (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020, 1). Contrary to early conceptualisations of

nostalgia as an illness or malady (see Boym 2001), recent studies have observed the positive psycho-social effects of nostalgia, noting its efficacy in 'generat[ing] positive affect, increas[ing] self-esteem, foster[ing] social connectedness, and alleviat[ing] existential threat' (Sedikides et al. 2008, 304; see also Routledge et al. 2013; Newman et al. 2020). Amid a global pandemic such benefits are all the more appealing, with the trauma of the present and uncertainty about the future combining to elevate nostalgia's appeal and effectiveness as 'a palliative tonic in times of crisis' (Gammon and Ramshaw 2020, 2).

When it comes to unlocking these psycho-social benefits, '[m]edia, and new technologies in particular, function as [central] platforms, projection places and tools' for nostalgic expression (Niemeyer 2014, 7). Indeed, social media platforms (and YouTube especially) are in large part designed to encourage this retrospective mode of media consumption, offering a plethora of affordances that streamline access to archives of historic content, interactions and (mediated) memories (see Areni 2019; Burgess, Mitchell, and Münch 2018; Niemeyer 2014). Historian Gary Cross (2015) captures this mode of consumption with his notion of 'consumed nostalgia', describing the impulse to revisit (and consume) 'those goods and media experiences (toys, dolls, movies, etc.) associated with brief periods of their own personal childhoods' (15). This has parallels in fan studies scholar Rebecca Williams' (2015) analysis of behaviours that occur when beloved fan objects end; such as when a television series is cancelled, a character exits a show or a band announces their separation. In such instances of 'post-object fandom', Williams notes that fans often return to mediated texts from the(ir) past as a way to reconcile their sense of self-identity. Like Cross, who suggests that consumed nostalgia is most likely to occur when people feel 'that their selfhoods' have been 'threatened' (11), Williams positions media as an intermediary between nostalgia and 'ontological security' (24) in times of crisis; in other words, when one's sense of ontological security—defined by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) as 'the confidence that most humans beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of [their] surrounding social and material environments' (105)—is challenged or threatened, consumed nostalgia can provide a way of (re-)affirming one's sense of safety, self-identity and environmental continuity. During the early months of in the COVID-19 pandemic, especially, when worldwide lockdowns were first demanding their unprecedented reconfiguration of daily life, consumed nostalgia became an attractive and ubiquitous method for regaining a sense of ontological security: as Gad observed in an interview about *Reunited Apart* with AP News, 'I think nostalgia is so important right now because we all want to go back to simpler times. We all are hoping for something we can connect with that reminds of us better days' (qtd. in Elber 2020).

Directly responding to this retrospective lockdown mediascape, *Reunited Apart* makes little pretence of the nostalgic sentiment it intends to elicit, immediately evoking retro aesthetics with the '80s-inspired colour palette, visual style and soundtrack of its title sequence. Each episode of *Reunited Apart* opens with a close-up of an animated film strip, its many 'frames' stamped with different years in bright pink digits (a visual nod to *Back to the Future*'s DeLorean time machine). 'Long, long ago,' its theme song begins, a soprano voice singing atop a synth-heavy pop beat, as the film strip begins to flicker, visually denoting a shift from 2020 back to the year 1974 – 'when,' the singer continues knowingly, 'life was just hunky-dory…' Two film reels roll across the screen, and a rotating 3D-model of a Super 8 camera

appears, 'A group of people made a piece of cinematic glory…' The screen splits in two, with a thick black line separating a cellular phone (styled after the Motorola DynaTAC), and vintage Ray Ban sunglasses paired with a one-way plane ticket. 'Now they're getting back together…' A plane flies across the screen before an old Macintosh computer appears, swiftly splitting in two, its two mirrored monitors joined at the CPU, as the singer clarifies, 'Not in person, only virtually—but it's a start! They're reunited apart!' The series' title appears on-screen as the song ends, a post-script 'with Josh Gad' scrawled underneath. Setting the tone for the episodes to come, this visual parade of analogue technologies (Schrey 2014), neon gradients, self-referential lyrics and energetic soundtrack immediately conjure a playful and rose-tinted vision of the past, foregrounding products and aesthetics that both trigger and indulge the audience's desire for consumed nostalgia in lockdown (Reynolds 2011).

The series' nostalgic intent is also clear from the filmic focus of its episodes. With the exception of the more recent *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), *Reunited Apart* reunites the casts and crews of films released from the mid-80s to early '90s. Beginning with *The Goonies* (1985), the first season reconnects the casts of *Back to the Future* (1985), *Splash* (1984), *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), returning after a brief hiatus to reunite the casts of *Wayne's World* (1992) and *The Karate Kid* (1984) in season two. Taken together, this selection of films privileges a particular era of filmmaking, and a specific generation of cinematic audiences. As Loock (2016) observes, popular culture from this period has retained a particular hold on the collective consciousness of Hollywood and its audiences as 'an entire generation of today's filmmakers, actors, and cinema goers grew up with and still remembers television shows and films of the 1980s' (278; see also Ewen 2020). The success and influence of this period of popular culture can be found in the form, style and content of countless productions since, at once codifying their status as 'classic' texts and inculcating younger generations to their legacy through an omnibus of spoofs and intertextual references (Loock 2016).

Reunited Apart's episodes are similarly punctuated with clips of iconic scenes, quotes and memorable songs from the films, at once highlighting their continued cultural currency, and encouraging what Loock (2016) calls the 'pleasure of recognition', offering viewers numerous opportunities to acknowledge their familiarity and reflect on their personal histories with the films. Some viewers share these recollections in the comments beneath each episode, observing that the film was the first they ever saw in theatres, recalling the experience of renting it on VHS, or reflecting on the countless youthful hours they spent in its company. The longevity of these fan-object relationships (Williams 2015) is visually emphasised throughout the series, with guest introductions paralleled with clips, stills and icons from the original productions, in turn literalising literary theorist Linda Hutcheon's (1998) description of nostalgia as 'what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight' (22). The series' intention to access this 'emotional weight' is acknowledged in the first episode when Gad explains, 'It is my sincere hope that catching up with some *old friends* of all of us will bring some much-needed joy to each and every single one of you' (emphasis added, S1E1 0:58). True, too, of the wider catalogue of virtual cast reunions that appeared on YouTube in lockdown, *Reunited Apart* foregrounds content and aesthetics specifically designed to engage and distribute the psycho-social benefits

of (consumed) nostalgia, offering audiences the sense of relief, refuge and connection that may be accessed by revisiting media(ted) memories from the past.

'I can sit back and fanboy like my audience': Josh Gad as fanboy auteur

Reunited Apart was not Gad's first lockdown project: prior to the series' release, Gad pledged to create nightly Twitter video broadcasts reading children's bedtime stories, featuring the voice of his most popular animated character, the snowman Olaf from Disney's *Frozen* (2013), as a source of entertainment for families in lockdown (Blackwelder 2020). In comparison, *Reunited Apart* was a significantly more ambitious undertaking. In an interview with ET, Gad recounts that inspiration for the series struck while he was (re-)watching *The Goonies* with his own family in lockdown:

> I [had] been doing a lot of revisiting of movies that were so important to me during my childhood. […] One night [my family and I] were watching *The Goonies*, and it's always been a dream of mine to reunite that cast. I sort of just decided on a whim that I'm gonna do this, [so] I started reaching out individually, one by one. (Gad, quoted in Willis 2020)

Undertaking a project so intimately involved with such beloved films was not without its risks, however. As Loock (2016) highlights regarding the many 'retro-remakes' of '80s movies since the early 2000s, the significant sentimental weight attached to the original films means 'there is a general apprehension among audiences that cinematic remaking will destroy [their] personal ties to the past' (279); accompanied by the possibility that their (mis-)handling could instead evoke 'that all-too-familiar feeling that accompanies the desecration of a childhood memory: anger, resentment, and a deep, almost primeval sense of sorrow' (Adams 2010, qtd. in Loock 2016, 293). It was therefore crucial that *Reunited Apart* quickly and effectively build a sense of trust with its audience, assuring viewers of its intentions to pay tribute to the films and the fond, formative memories associated with them – a responsibility that primarily fell to Gad himself.

Throughout the series Gad repeatedly emphasises his own fannish history with the films, a motif that serves to assure viewers of his intention to respect and preserve the films' legacies. Often visually accentuated by childhood photographs (e.g. S1E1 2:09; S1E2 1:41; S1E3 2:07; S1E6 2:03; S2E1 1:29), Gad opens each episode with his earliest recollections watching the films, estimating, for example, that he has seen *Back to the Future* 'no less than 350 times' (S1E2 1:32); admitting to sneaking into a restricted screening of *Wayne's World* as a pre-teen at his local cinema (S2E1 1:29); and stating that 'no other film in [his] earliest childhood memories made a bigger *Splash*' (S1E3 2:44). These anecdotes help to explain Gad's visible excitement and incredulousness when meeting the casts and crews that produced them. 'If I were to tell my younger self that this was happening,' he marvels in the series' first episode, staring at the virtual window of *Goonies* cast members populating his computer screen, 'I would probably have, like, a 1980s Hodor fit' (S1E1, 5:43). The same sentiment is echoed later in the episode, when Gad concludes simply, 'Today has brought me more joy than any day of my life' (S1E1 24:26). These recurring displays of 'performative fannishness' (Stewart 2019) characterise Gad as what media studies scholar Suzanne Scott (2012) calls a 'fanboy auteur', an authorial figure whose 'fan credentials […] are narrativized and (self) promoted as an

integral part of their appeal' (44). When attached to a new project, these fan credentials are often used as shorthand for 'a guarantee of quality media-making' (Salter and Stanfill 2020, ix), evincing the auteur's interest in preserving the integrity of the text (see also Scott 2012). Indeed, Gad's fannish identity is both recognised and accepted by viewers, who regularly mention that they 'get the feeling' or 'can tell' Gad is a passionate fan in the comments, sometimes pointing to specific elements of Gad's performance, such as his 'giddiness' or that he appears to be 'about to cry' each time he introduces a new guest. The numerous moments evidencing Gad's fannish identity combine to affirm his status as a fanboy auteur and assist in legitimising his role as the series' host, assuring viewers of his intentions to honour (and delicately handle) the films' substantial (affective) legacies.

Gad's fannish identity also enables him to traverse the boundaries of industry, text and audience, lending him a sense of relatability (Scott 2012). As Gad explains to the cast of *Back to the Future*, 'I like to let you guys ask each other questions, which allows me to sit back and *fangirl like my audience*' (S1E2 7:22, emphasis added). Here, and throughout the series, Gad 'equates his close proximity to the fans with an understanding of their textual desires and practices' (Scott 2012, 44), in turn characterising his visible joy, wonder and surprise as a model for the viewer's response. However, there is a disparity between Gad's fan identity and that of his audience. As fan studies scholar Mark Stewart (2019) observes, celebrity fan performances differ from those enacted by non-celebrity fans due to the privileged level of access their 'celebrity capital' (Driessens 2013) affords; their public visibility and influence unlocks opportunities unavailable to the wider fan population, such as interactions with the cast and crew, private interviews, set visits, and/or access to rare memorabilia. Gad's privileged celebrity fan position is evidenced by his ability to organise and host *Reunited Apart*'s star-studded reunions in the first instance, an undertaking requiring an extensive network of exclusive contacts, as well as his own celebrity persona and prominent public platform. The exceptionality of his fan access is further reinforced by appearances from other celebrities throughout the series, including 'ultimate *Back to the Future* fan' writer and director JJ Abrams (S1E2, 18:08), *Karate Kid* 'superfan' Amy Schumer (S2E2 29:58), as well as 'special guest[s]' Jake Gyllenhaal (S1E6 29:43**)** and Taika Waititi (S1E4 39:33), as quizmasters in short segments testing the casts' knowledge of their films. Like Gad, the fan credentials of these celebrity guests are highlighted from the outset, and quickly evidenced by their emotive response to seeing the other participants on the call, modelling the awe and excitement extended by the series' invitation to reunite viewers at home with their childhood cinematic heroes.

'Someone was apparently under water during this recording': Remediating celebrity with(in) a Zoom aesthetic

Recommending *Reunited Apart* in a roundup of nostalgic programming for *Forbes*, journalist Matt Klein (2020) remarks, 'If watching or re-watching [films] wasn't enough, *The Goonies* [recently] came together for a virtual reunion, better scratching that itch.' Klein's recommendation implies the potential insufficiency of returning to media object by nature static and unchanging, and presents *Reunited Apart* as a solution to this stasis. Offering behind-the-scenes commentary and insights from those directly involved in the films' production,

Reunited Apart functions as a form of intertextual 'annotation' for audiences to layer onto the original film, offering a new lens through which to view (and enjoy) well-known texts (Kalir and Garcia 2021). In the process of creating new 'paratexts' for these classic Hollywood films (Gray 2010), the series evokes new media theorists Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin's notion of 'remediation', a representational shift from one medium to another, characterised by the 'twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy' (1999, 5), which at once erase and draw attention to the specific mediums involved. In the case of *Reunited Apart*, remediation can be observed in two regards: in both aesthetic (as Zoom conference call) and form (as YouTube video), together achieving in relocating (and mobilising) the audience's nostalgic attachments to beloved Hollywood films (and their stars) within the networked affordances of social media.

COVID-19 lockdowns have heightened scepticism of celebrity platitudes—best encapsulated, perhaps, by the viral backlash to the celebrity singalong of John Lennon's 'Imagine'—but *Reunited Apart* seeks to collapse the sense of distance (and difference) between its celebrity guests and non-celebrity audience by remediating the former's fame within a social media environment. Whereas cast reunions would typically take place on a talk show or at a fan convention, with lockdown restricting physical gatherings and travel, *Reunited Apart*'s celebrity casts and crews, in Gad's words, 'still have no choice but to be reunited apart' (S1E2, 0:34). As a result, the gatherings of *Reunited Apart* are conducted virtually, orchestrated and recorded via Zoom video conference. Reproducing a sight familiar to many required to work or socialise from home under lockdown, *Reunited Apart*'s Zoom aesthetic involves a densely populated pane of virtual windows, its manifold split-screen view aesthetically and symbolically transcending the guests' physical separation through their 'visual and/or aural closeness' on-screen (Hagener 2020, 37).

By mirroring the interface seen live by the celebrity guests, *Reunited Apart*'s Zoom aesthetic encourages viewers to feel as though they themselves are participants in the call, investing their viewing experience with the same immediacy characteristic of this form of virtual communication. This invitation is reinforced by the domestic backdrops and appearance of the celebrity guests: speaking from the comfort of their own homes (adhering to the same lockdown and shelter-in-place orders as the audience), most of the celebrities wear minimal make-up and casual clothing, substituting their usual 'perfection […] with good-enough to make these performances happen' (Hatfield 2021, 175). These behind-the-scenes glimpses of the 'ordinary' people behind the celebrity personas (Marshall 2013) heighten the plausibility of participating in such an exclusive assembly. At the same time, however, the series' technical composition repeatedly interrupts this fantasy with reminders of the series' mediation: the Zoom interface shown, for example, has been manipulated in post-production, replacing the regular black background with a bright pastel gradient (recalling the series' colourful title sequence). Moreover, the stream is often interrupted by cuts to secondary camera views offering higher-quality close-ups of the celebrity participants from additional angles (see Shoard 2020). Perhaps the most overt reminders of the series' mediation, however, are the technical glitches that occur throughout, with participants wrestling to connect their microphones, adjust their camera quality and focus, and falling victim to lag from poor internet connections. However, whereas *Reunited Apart*'s stylistic post-production techniques disrupt the verisimilitude of the Zoom aesthetic, the participants' technical difficulties act to reinforce

its credibility, resonating with the unpredictable ordeal of participating in an important video call, and further bridging the usual distance between the celebrity guests and the audience at home by highlighting that—in this capacity, at least—they are 'just like us'.

'Only together can we make a difference': Translating celebrity attention into charitable action

Inviting fans to revisit a beloved, nostalgic media object with an innovative twist proved a highly successful formula for *Reunited Apart*: the series attracted more than 16 million views with its first eight episodes, with an additional six million views across the supplementary videos posted to Gad's YouTube channel. However, the series was not solely designed for entertainment; each episode of *Reunited Apart* was aligned with a different charitable organisation promoted by Gad at the opening and conclusion of each episode, often accompanied by screen recordings of the charities' websites, promotional videos and stills. As Gad recounts in the series' second season: 'When we started *Reunited Apart* at the beginning of quarantine, we did so for two purposes: to bring a little joy in these incredibly hard times, and most importantly, to help raise money for charities in desperate need of those resources' (S2E2, 0:42). Over the course of the first seven episodes, he continues, the viewers of *Reunited Apart* together raised over US\$1 million for charity (S2E2, 0:55), benefitting the Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, Project HOPE, DigDeep, No Kid Hungry, the Equal Justice Initiative, CORE (Children of Restaurant Employees) and Children of First Responders.

The series' success in generating these funds aligns with a long tradition of celebrity involvement in philanthropic projects (see Hunting and Hinck 2017; Jeffreys and Allatson 2015; Van Krieken 2012); a trend celebrity studies scholar Chris Rojek (2014) has labelled 'celanthropy'. In these instances, celebrity figures draw upon their recognisability—conceptualised by celebrity theorist Olivier Driessens (2013) as 'celebrity capital'—to convert their command of public attention into increased awareness of and (financial) support for charity and relief efforts (see also Hatfield 2021). While clearly aligning with this tradition, *Reunited Apart* more specifically intersects with a growing tendency for celebrities to utilise digital platforms to inspire collective philanthropic action from their fans (Bennett 2014). However, unlike previous scholarly accounts of fan activism by communities such as the Nerdfighters (Lillqvist 2020), fans of actor Ian Somerhalder (Hunting and Hinck 2017), or Lady Gaga's Little Monsters (Bennett 2014), the charitable efforts of *Reunited Apart* do not call upon an established fandom centred around a stable fan object or figure. Rather, by focusing on a multitude of classic films and franchises, *Reunited Apart* encourages the formation of ad-hoc and ephemeral fan communities, united by their (historic) enjoyment of disparate media texts. As Cross (2015) observes: 'Today nostalgia binds together not communities or families but scattered individuals around seemingly ephemeral things that are meaningful to them personally' (14). Combining Hollywood celanthropy with the noted success of nostalgia-based charity appeals (Ford and Merchant 2010; Merchant, Ford, and Rose 2011), *Reunited Apart* at once foregrounds the celebrity capital of its guests and 'harness[es] fan nostalgia' (Booth 2015, 156) for a catalogue of beloved Hollywood films to attract and translate audience attention into charitable action.

This process, I argue, exemplifies what celebrated media and fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) calls 'affective economics', a term he uses to describe 'a new configuration of marketing theory […] which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions' (62-63). Fellow fan studies scholar Matt Hills (2015) expands this concept in his discussion of fan crowdfunding, observing the 'collision of fan affects and neoliberal consumer logics' (184) that underscores this collaborative approach to financing new creative projects. Viewers of *Reunited Apart* highlight a variety of physical manifestations of their affective responses to the series in the comments; noting, for instance, that they were unable to stop smiling throughout; that they had 'goosebumps' or 'chills' hearing cast members re-enact iconic dialogue; and admitting that the episode made them cry (sometimes multiple times). Aligning with the process of affective economics, the series' overtly nostalgic design and retro aesthetics explicitly 'draw on the affective memory of the fans' interactions with the original media entity' (Booth 2015, 154) to elicit affective responses that may be translated into support for the episode's fundraising efforts.

To mobilise this philanthropic action, *Reunited Apart* uses the fundraising affordances native to YouTube's interface—including description boxes detailing the charities' missions, call-to-action buttons and a 'totalizer' of the funds raised to-date—framing its episodes with the visual language of the telethon (Lury 2020). Gad explicitly references these features, gesturing to the position of YouTube's blue 'Donate' call-to-action buttons in his opening monologues, and even clarifying that viewers 'can either donate below, if you're using a mobile device, or if you're using a desktop, click right over there' (S1E2 1:05). These fundraising affordances at once streamline the act of donating and affirm the efficacy of these efforts. Like the comment sections where viewers share affective, nostalgic and supportive responses to the episodes (and each other), the totalizer displayed alongside each episode attests to the sense of community inspired by the series, prominently displaying the combined result of individual viewers' charitable action. Interestingly, however, despite YouTube's incorporation of fundraising features into its interface as early as 2007, there is little scholarship detailing their history. As such, it is worth pausing briefly to recount YouTube's efforts to establish itself as a tool for promoting and crowdsourcing charitable support.

'Click the donation button, right now, on your screen': The evolution of YouTube's charitable affordances

Paralleling the incorporation of fundraising features across other social networking sites, as well as the rise of dedicated crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and GoFundMe, the 2010s saw YouTube developing and expanding of a toolbox of features to facilitate charity fundraising. YouTube's Nonprofit Program first launched in 2007, encouraging non-profit organisations to use video storytelling to reach and engage new audiences and donors. Organisations in the program could overlay call-to-action prompts on their videos and include buttons on their channels, streamlining the path to donation for viewers of their content (Raghavan 2009; Raghavan and Toff 2012; Streit 2012). In 2014, the site's monetisation features expanded significantly with the launch of the Fan Funding program. While initially conceived as a way for audiences to 'support' their favourite creators with financial donations,

the program's release teased at the eventual roll-out of charity-focused features: according to a press release in *Forbes*, 'the Fan Funding section on any given page will eventually have a space where creators can link to Kickstarters, Change.org and similar sites, so as to help them in their cause' (McIntyre 2014). This vision was realised in 2016 when YouTube rolled out a new donation card feature, allowing creators to associate their videos with prompts to donate to US-based non-profits, ideally '[t]ransform[ing] a view into a donation' (Hamdy 2012; see also Cotcamp and Hamdy 2016). Two years later in 2018, the platform introduced YouTube Giving, 'a suite of features designed to strengthen the way creators and fans can make a difference through charitable giving on the platform to over 1M non-profits' (Turner 2018). Incorporating features with a greater degree of interactivity than preceding releases, the YouTube Giving beta allowed a select pool of prominent users to add donate buttons directly to their videos and livestreams, eradicating the need for third-party crowdfunding services and transforming the content itself into digital fundraisers (complete with 'totalizer' progress bars) for charity.

YouTube claims to have modelled these new features after organic behaviours and trends from the site's community of users. 'Our inspiration for building YouTube Giving tools has been you,' wrote Erin Turner (2018), Product Manager for YouTube Giving, in its launch announcement blog, '[and] the way you use your voices to create impact on important issues, whether helping out in a crisis or championing a cause'. In recent years, a number of high-profile YouTube fundraisers have assisted in showcasing YouTube's efficacy as a site for charitable action. In October 2019, for example, Jimmy 'MrBeast' Donaldson celebrated reaching twenty million YouTube subscribers by launching a fundraiser for US$20 million in support of the Arbor Day Foundation, supporting them to plant as many trees. In addition to a vlog announcing the initiative, Donaldson ran several fundraising livestreams, making full use of the platform's affordances to raise awareness of the project and incentivise donations. Assisted by contributions from high-profile backers such as Tesla CEO Elon Musk and YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki, as well as hundreds of the platform's top creators, the #TeamTrees campaign met its fundraising goal in just two months (Leskin 2019).

Creators have also found many of their own, innovative methods for mobilising the attention of the YouTube community to support worthy causes. Indeed, *Reunited Apart* and the other charity reunion specials that lockdown inspired emerged at the same time as some activists were leveraging the site's algorithmic logics (Bishop 2018) as a form of fundraising. In a grassroots trend inspired by beauty vlogger Zoe Amira in June 2020, for example, several YouTubers aligned with the Partner Program began uploading lengthy videos, containing little content but multiple ad breaks. Encouraging viewers to play the videos in the background, the creators promised to donate all AdSense proceeds derived from the videos' in-stream advertisements to community bail funds supporting the Black Lives Matter movement (Holmes 2020). The initiative was quickly intercepted by YouTube, who claimed the videos were 'gaming' the algorithm and were therefore against the platform's Terms of Service. Warning that the use of similar tactics in future would see users' accounts (and membership to the Partner Program) suspended, YouTube nonetheless recognised the positive intent behind these videos, pledging to match the contributions of the most successful of these grassroots campaigns with donations of their own (Hale 2020). Perhaps recognising the limitations of the

restricted YouTube Giving beta in an increasingly urgent socio-political climate, the program received a slightly wider roll-out in December 2020, granting fundraiser access to all channels in the Partner Program across the US, UK and Canada (Mishra 2020). Users from more than forty countries also became eligible to donate, signalling the growing potential of future creative projects like *Reunited Apart* to attract and monetise the attention of the YouTube community for philanthropic endeavours.

Although *Reunited Apart* was conceived as a vehicle for charity fundraising, unsurprisingly, the interest it generated was quickly recognised for its commercial potential: its fundraising efforts were aligned with corporate backers in S1E4 (cereal brand Cheerios), and S1E5 and S1E6 (Californian winemakers Barefoot Wine). Most notably, however, the second episode of season two was designed as a mash-up reunion for the original *Karate Kid* film franchise and the contemporary Netflix series *Cobra Kai* (2018—), a reboot of the original film franchise featuring many of the same cast and characters thirty years on. The episode was also uploaded to Netflix's YouTube channel, and featured ringing endorsements of *Cobra Kai* throughout, differentiating it from other episodes by positioning it as clear 'transmedia promotion' for *Cobra Kai*'s forthcoming third season (Grainge and Johnson 2015). Moreover, unlike the other *Reunited Apart* episodes, its fundraising efforts (dedicated to Action Against Hunger) were also hosted off-site, rather than within the YouTube interface – a decision perhaps related to the US$25,000 kick-off contribution made by *Cobra Kai*'s production studio, though perhaps more generally reflecting the incongruity of YouTube's fundraiser features with content so overtly commercially aligned.

'You're not the only reunion show in town, Josh': Remembering the lockdown charity reunion special

Reunited Apart's release from April to December 2020 coincided with a steady stream of celebrity collaborations online, including director Taika Waititi's (2020) star-studded reading of Roald Dahl's 1961 novel *James and the Giant Peach*; director Jason Reitman's scene-by-scene re-enactment of *Princess Bride* (1987) for (now shuttered) smartphone streaming platform Quibi; and NBC's one-shot episode 'A *Parks and Recreation* Special', bringing the sitcom's (2009-2015) cast back together for a glimpse of the characters' lives in 2020. Much like *Reunited Apart*, these specials were produced remotely, relying on favours from celebrity friends (and friends-of-friends) and largely filmed without professional equipment, relying on webcams and smartphones to quickly film and distribute new material that could provide entertainment and comfort in lockdown. These specials were also often designed to satisfy consumed nostalgia—variously returning to beloved stories and characters from literature, film and television—as well as to encourage philanthropic action, directing their audiences to support, in the case of the examples listed above, charities such as Partners in Health, World Central Kitchen, and Feeding America, respectively.

Of this wave of lockdown charity reunions, however, *Reunited Apart* was undoubtedly the most self-reflexive, overtly responding to the rise of leisure nostalgia in lockdown, and unabashed in its aim to widely disseminate the ontological comfort of consumed nostalgia in a time of great uncertainty. Remediating fan nostalgia for classic Hollywood films and franchises within a Zoom video conference aesthetic, and in the form of a YouTube charity fundraiser, the series

engaged the process of 'affective economics' (Jenkins 2006) to motivate collective charitable action from its audience, utilising the platform's native fundraising affordances to raise more than US$1 million in donations to its nominated charities. As of early-2022, although the comments sections of existing episodes and Gad's personal Twitter mentions remain inundated with fan requests for new episodes, whether *Reunited Apart follows* in the footsteps of fellow lockdown web series *Some Good News* (2020—) in a network acquisition (Hatfield 2021), or, indeed, whether it continues at all, is unclear. Markedly more certain, however, is the series' success in engaging and translating the attention (and affection) of the YouTube community into collective philanthropic action in lockdown.

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Filmography

Films

Back to the Future (1985)

E.T. (1982)

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)

Frozen (2013)

Ghostbusters (1984)

Jaws (1975)

Jurassic Park (1993)

Princess Bride (1987)

Splash (1984)

The Empire Strikes Back (1980)

The Goonies (1985)

The Karate Kid (1984)

Wayne's World (1992)

Television

Big Mouth (2017—)

Cobra Kai (2018—)

Dead to Me (2019—)

Grace & Frankie (2015—)

Parks and Recreation (2009-2015)

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (2015-2019)

Veronica Mars (2004-2019)

Web Series

James and the Giant Peach with Taika & Friends (2020)

Reunited Apart (2020—)

> S1E1: *The Goonies Are Back!! | Reunited Apart with Josh Gad.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SF_VyXQpyo [Accessed 17 September 2021]

> S1E2: *It's Time to go BACK TO THE FUTURE! | Reunited Apart with Josh Gad.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crdYlUdUOhc [Accessed 17 September 2021]

> S1E3: *Reunited Apart Makes a SPLASH – with Tom Hanks, Daryl Hannah, and more!* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbFIgQoHSJM [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E4: *One Zoom to Rule Them All | Reunited Apart LORD OF THE RINGS Edition.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_U0S6x_kCs [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E5: *GHOSTBUSTERS Reunited Apart.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JtOHr4IJHQ [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S1E6: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off | Reunited Apart with Josh Gad.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOaa3Znh75w [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S2E1: *Wayne's World Reunited Apart – PARTY TIME!* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4rKd9xB6cE [Accessed 17 September 2021]

S2E2: *The Karate Kid and Cobra Kai REUNITED APART.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYwPHqKvdJM [Accessed 17 September 2021]

Stars in the House (2020—)

Some Good News (2020—)

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Coping with COVID through ASMR

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several years, the genre of autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR videos, has exploded on YouTube with a multitude of channels dedicated to the creation of ASMR content with videos often getting millions of views. ASMR videos seek to trigger a tingling sensation through the use of specific aural and visual stimuli. These stimuli often involve whispering, scratching and tapping sounds. The recent COVID pandemic has helped spawn a new sub-genre of ASMR videos that approach the global situation in a number of ways ranging from roleplaying getting tested for COVID to simply attempting to debunk myths about the pandemic to help with people's anxiety. Given the reported increase in stress/anxiety caused by the COVID pandemic, this paper aims to explore how content creators have sought to capitalise upon the new situation in which society finds itself, through the production of COVID related ASMR videos.

KEYWORDS

COVID, YouTube, ASMR, Content, Stress.

Introduction

Over the past decade, a large Creator economy has developed in conjunction with the rise of digital social media platforms. Not only has this allowed individuals to be able to express themselves in a variety of ways, but they have been able to connect with audiences who share their values and interests. This phenomenon has been explored from a multitude of angles by other scholars ranging from the use of YouTube as a news platform (Sumiala & Tikka 2013) to the influence that celebrities have on fashion brands on Instagram (Herjanto et al. 2020). Across this wide range of literature, one common theme relating to the content creators themselves is that continued success is in part determined by the Creator's ability to evolve and adapt (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016; Deuze & Prenger 2019). Often these adaptations have been explored by scholars in the context of changing technologies such as platform algorithms (Fouquaert & Mechant 2021), or through the continual changing cultural trends in society (Chuah et al. 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced all elements of society to adapt to the changes brought about by the disease, and this is certainly the case when it comes to the production of content on YouTube.

As a video sharing platform YouTube has seen continuous growth in its user base since its inception in 2006, making it currently the second most popular social media platform (Moshin 2021). This large userbase stems from the platform's ability to cater for a wide variety of interests and tastes, ranging from popular, corporate-controlled music channels to individuals who upload their own personal home videos to share with family and friends. One genre of

channels that has developed a significant audience over the past several years has been 'autonomous sensory meridian response' (ASMR) channels. With the pandemic influencing all forms of content creation, it is important to consider whether content that is often specifically geared towards helping people relax during stressful situations has adapted to create COVID-19 tailored content and if so, what form this content has taken. Given these questions, one can explore how both the most popular channels as well as the broader ASMR content creator community have adapted. However, before attempting to answer these questions it is first important to explain the phenomenon of ASMR and the perceived utility that such videos bring to their audience.

What is ASMR?

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) has been defined as 'a perceptual phenomenon in which specific stimuli, known as 'ASMR triggers,' frequently elicit tingling sensations on the scalp, neck, and shoulders, often spreading to the body's periphery' (Fredborg et al. 2018, 1). These tingling sensations are often associated with feelings of calm or having an overall positive effect on a person's state of mind (Barratt & Davis 2015). The triggers that cause these effects range from audial and visual to being more tactile in nature. Despite the potential for a wide range of things to be considered ASMR triggers, the most popular trigger is believed to be audio-visual, typically in the form of whispering and close-up attention (Barratt & Davis, 2015). The sensations derived from ASMR are distinct from other forms of sensory experiences such as synesthesia or frisson. Firstly, other forms of sensory emotional experiences tend to only last for several seconds whereas from ASMR, these experiences may last for several minutes after the initial ASMR trigger (Del Campo & Kehle 2016). Secondly, audiences engaging with ASMR triggers are typically in control of their experience and can determine the intensity of the response that they feel, unlike those who experience synesthesia (Fredborg et al. 2018).

Work by Smith, Fredborg & Kornelsen (2020) identified 5 categories of triggers that stimulate ASMR. These were watching, touching, repetitive sounds, simulation and mouth sounds. Other work by Fredborg et al. (2017) identified similar categories of stimulus being: watching individuals interact with objects, watching individuals perform a socially intimate act, soft repetitive sounds, viewing simulated social interactions, and hearing whispering or chewing. The descriptions of these categories can be seen to be exceedingly broad and generic in that taken at face value, someone who is prone to experiencing ASMR could potentially be triggered by almost anything. Fredborg et al. (2017) did split these five broad categories into separate items in their study, such as for the category of 'Watching' which included ''Watching others paint,' 'Watching others draw,' 'Watching others open a package,' and 'Watching others cook'' (Ibid, 7). These separate items were created through self-reporting by participants, and with currently no comprehensive content analysis across ASMR videos on YouTube it can be argued that it is appropriate to maintain a broad categorization approach towards an ASMR taxonomy.

A common theme that has been identified within ASMR videos is the concept of digital intimacy (Andersen 2014). This intimacy is created through what Zappavigna calls 'ambient embodied copresence, that is, the use of visual and aural resources to invoke or simulate the perspective of the ambient viewers and their bodily copresence in the performed interaction' (2020, 3). The concept of digital intimacy has been explored from a range of viewpoints such as how young people develop relationships through apps (Gardner, Davis & Gardner 2013), to its value in fostering a sense of authenticity on platforms like Instagram (Reade 2020).

The importance and value of digital intimacy has arguably shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic where physical proximity to other humans has been severely restricted. Everyday interactions such as going out to dinner or getting a haircut have been all but stopped and so a way to experience these intimacies is through digital content. Across most literature concerning ASMR content one of the commonly agreed upon genres of video is 'Roleplay'. These videos generate a sense of digital intimacy by addressing the viewer with 'expressions of care, interest and affirmation' (Gallagher 2016, 1). Whilst engaging with this content cannot act as a full replacement of the original experience, given that such videos are associated with the easing of symptoms experienced through stress and anxiety (Barratt & Davis 2015) and given the rise of these symptoms during COVID-19 (Gritsenko et al. 2020; Vinkers et al. 2020), it is important to consider whether ASMR content creators have attempted to provide content to act as a substitute for the experiences that people are missing out on.

YouTube allows content creators to embrace a range of multimodal resources to simulate a dialogic interaction (Zappavigna 2020). Through the creative employment of communicative strategies to encourage participation in what is effectively one-sided role play, (such as by pausing as if to allow someone to respond to a question) the content creator cultivates a sense of direct attention, affirmation and intimacy. The affordances of YouTube as a platform, combined with the fact that a majority of people who experience ASMR find that 'having close personal attention paid to them' triggers their ASMR (Barratt & Davis 2015, 11), means that it is prudent to consider the extent to which such videos have been proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASMR content on YouTube

ASMR content on YouTube can be traced back to around 2009 where there were roughly twelve channels that were dedicated to whispering content (Keiles 2019). Despite ASMR content beginning on YouTube as a niche area which was often discovered through discussion on internet forums or word of mouth (Del Campo & Kehle 2016), the total amount of ASMR content has exploded over the past few years. This growth can be illustrated via a simple comparison to Zappavigna's 2020 work, where at the time of writing they reportred approximately 97,600,000 results from a basic *Google* video search for ASMR (2020). At the time of writing this paper, the same search now returns 274,000,000 results.

Arguably, there are two types of channels that upload ASMR content. The first of these are channels where ASMR content is not the primary focus. An example of this would be *W Magazine* (2018) who as part of a series of interviews with celebrities, asked them to perform some ASMR. The second type are channels where ASMR content is the sole focus of the videos uploaded. Many of these have 'ASMR' in their name in order to indicate this focus. These dedicated channels are predominately run by women, with over five hundred such videos being uploaded each day (Keiles 2019). The scale of these dedicated channels runs from those with just a few hundred subscribers with videos receiving a few thousand views, to channels such as *Gibi ASMR* which have millions of subscribers and videos regularly achieving over a million views. It can also be argued that ASMR content is no longer a niche topic given that the popularity of this type of online content has even breached more traditional forms of media as seen in a Super Bowl advert in 2019 (Glas 2019).

As is the case from most forms of cultural content, YouTube channels are subject to trends and fads within wider society that subsequently influence the content they produce (Ferchaud et al. 2018). As Jamie Keiles has put it, 'Any trigger that starts to find fans is endlessly taken up and reperformed — ripped off by different channels for ad dollars — at least until the next trigger takes its spot. One month, cranial nerve exams are in. The next month, creators are all shaving bars of soap, chewing bricks of raw honeycomb or eating buckets of KFC' (2019). One of these recurring trends in content has been the roleplay of medical exams, which Ahuja believes is possibly due to 'a natural confluence point of jargon, scrutiny, and personal contact' (2013, 444). Given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent testing and vaccination process, this can lead one to speculate as to whether there has been an increase in the amount of ASMR content relating specifically to COVID-19. It is important to see whether this is the case due to the purported stress and anxiety with these processes (Shimaa et al. 2021) and the easing of these symptoms that ASMR can cause (Barratt & Davis 2015).

Methodology and sampling

In order to explore how ASMR content creators have capitalised on the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper will consider two questions. Firstly, how often have the most popular ASMR dedicated YouTube channels created COVID-19 based content? Secondly, among all ASMR videos on YouTube related to COVID-19, what is the type of content in those videos? To answer this first question a simple content analysis of the most popular ASMR channels on YouTube was conducted. The top ten channels (based on total number of subscribers) were selected, and each of the videos uploaded to those channels since 1st March 2020 were analysed according to whether or not the subject of the video related to or mentioned COVID-19. This was determined through whether the video's title mentioned COVID-19 or related medical terms. The 10 channels that were analysed were: *Zach Choi ASMR, SAS-ASMR, Jane ASMR 제인, HunniBee*

ASMR, Gibi ASMR, Kim&Liz ASMR, ASMR Darling, ASMR PPOMO, Gentle Whispering ASMR, and *ASMR Glow.*

In order to answer the second question, a random sampling method was used wherein a search on YouTube for 'covid asmr' was performed. Of the videos present in the search results, the first hundred from channels with the word 'ASMR' in their channel's name were chosen for the sample. This was to ensure that data was only taken from channels dedicated to ASMR content. It should of course be noted that that the notion of random sampling on platforms like YouTube are only as random as the platform's algorithm allows (Ahmad et al. 2017). Due to the 'black box' nature of these algorithms (Finn 2019), and the revenue incentive of the platform to promote videos that will generate the most money from advertising (Postigo 2016), one can only say the sample is random within the confines of the platform's algorithm.

Once the sample had been selected, each video was then categorised according to the type of content in each video. The list of categories used was based upon the categories set out by Fredborg et al. (2017). The categories used were interaction with objects, socially intimate acts, repetitive sounds, roleplay and whispering sounds. Within these final two categories, separate subcategories were also used. For roleplay, the additional subcategories were 'medical' and 'other'. This was done to more clearly distinguish between the different types of roleplay. For whispering sounds, the subcategories were 'explainer', 'personal story' and 'other'. 'Explainer' pertains to those videos attempting to give facts and explain the nature of the disease to the audience. 'Personal story' videos involve the content creator relating their own personal experience of having COVID or COVID-like symptoms to their audience. This was done because after an initial analysis of the sample it was determined that the broad category of 'whispering sounds' would not be sufficient to capture the range of videos that fell within it.

Findings

During the first content analysis of the top 10 most popular ASMR YouTube channels, across all ten channels a total of one thousand, seven hundred and sixty-three were uploaded between 1ˢᵗ March 2020 and 1ˢᵗ March 2021. Out of all of these videos a total of six, or 0.34%, made a reference to COVID-19 in their title. The largest contributing factor to this tiny proportion of COVID related content was that several of the channels (*SAS-ASMR, Jane ASMR 제인* and *Kim&Liz ASMR*) had each uploaded over three hundred and twenty videos on their channels,but all of these videos were dedicated to food-based ASMR.

These results highlight some key issues that future research into ASMR content must consider. The first of these is the risk of conflating ASMR content with 'mukbang' content. Mukbang is a type of audiovisual broadcast where the host consumes a wide variety of food (Kang et al. 2020). The term stems from the portmanteau of the Korean words for 'eating' and 'broadcast'. This type of content rose in popularity in Korea over the past decade and has subsequently begun to be

produced and consumed by Western audiences (McCarthy 2017). Research around this content has largely focused on the potentially negative public health implications of the promotion of this style of eating (Kang et al. 2020; Kircaburun et al. 2020). However, during the first content analysis in this paper it became clear that several of the most popular ASMR channels could easily be classified as mukbang channels given that their content is solely dedicated towards the eating of food and the sounds that it generates. Under Fredborg et al's taxonomy of ASMR content (2017), the category of 'hearing whispering or chewing sounds' clearly captures these types of channels. Given how ASMR content has grown in popularity over the past few years, with an increasing number of people experimenting with the genre, future research in this area may wish to consider developing a more nuanced taxonomy of ASMR content, beyond Fredborg et al's model from 2017. This would enable researchers to more concisely select the specific genres and formats of ASMR. Alternatively, researchers wishing to explore the totality of ASMR content on YouTube may want to simply exclude all food focused ASMR channels, given their apparent homogeneity.

A second issue raised by this paper's first content analysis is the extent to which ASMR YouTube channels need to engage with and acknowledge current trends and real-world events. There is currently limited evidence as to whether the addition of extra context of environments and triggers used, would enhance a viewer's ASMR experience (Barratt, Spence & Davis 2017). Given that the top ten most popular ASMR exhibit very limited acknowledgement of real-world events in their content, this would suggest other factors are at play when determining the success of an ASMR channel. Given that several of the top YouTube channels looked at in this paper were uploading almost one video every day, this lends support to research which suggests that upload frequency plays a determining role in the popularity of a YouTube channel (Budzinski & Gaenssle 2018; Buckley 2020).

The data from the second content analysis pertaining specifically to COVID-19 related ASMR videos was as follows.

Table 1: The type of content found in COVID-19 related ASMR YouTube videos

Type of content		Number of videos
Interaction with objects		3
Socially intimate acts		6
Repetitive sounds		2
Roleplay	Medical	43

	Other	8
Whispering sounds	Explainer	9
	Personal story	12
	Other	17
Total		100

The data presented in Table 1 raises a number of interesting issues concerning the way ASMR content creators have capitalised on the COVID-19 pandemic. The first of these is that over half of the analysed videos relied upon a roleplay format to trigger ASMR in their audience. Building upon the work of Zappavigna, in which one of the core types of roleplay ASMR videos are 'service encounters in domains such as shopping, medicine, and beauty' (2020, 12), it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic presented ASMR content creators an opportunity to play out typical medical scenarios that are associated with the disease, namely getting tested and vaccinated. These types of videos can be seen to draw upon several key concepts within the field of media production, namely digital intimacy and news values.

Digital intimacy can be broadly construed as personal connections that are mediated through digital technologies (Dobson 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of intimacy achieved through digital technologies (particularly video calling software) has already been established (Watson 2021). The role that digital intimacy plays in both how creators produce their videos (Andersen 2014; Gardner, Davis & Gardner 2013) and why audiences choose to engage with it (Gallagher 2016) has also been acknowledged. Particularly when it comes to roleplay ASMR videos, this intimacy is established through the use of various 'visual and aural resources to represent the ambient viewer's perspective' (Zappavigna 2020, 13), so that the viewer feels as if they are seated directly across from the content creator. Given that a significant number of videos within the sample are of a medical roleplay nature, it could be argued that ASMR content creators are capitalising on the COVID-19 pandemic by using it and its associated experiences as a backdrop for their roleplay content. This supports Ferchaud et al's (2018) point that cultural content is often influenced by ongoing trends in society. Whilst it is difficult to assess whether these COVID-19 roleplay videos performed better in terms of engagement metrics compared to the other ASMR videos uploaded to the channels within the second sample of videos, a case could be made based upon Keiles' (2019) work that if some channel's COVID-19 roleplay videos were seen to be performing well, that other channels would attempt to copy this type of content.

It could also be argued that these videos are, in part, capitalising on some news values typically associated within the field of journalism, in order to reach as large an audience as possible. When reflecting on Galtung & Ruge's (1965) taxonomy of news values, values such as 'frequency' and 'reference to persons' can be used as explanations as to why COVID-19 roleplay ASMR videos were the most common among those found in the data sample. The value of frequency can be found with the medical roleplays often involving COVID testing or vaccination; common experiences to many people. The value of reference to persons, or what Harcup and O'Neill (2001) label 'relevance' can be seen as a result of audiences' need to identify with a video's subject matter, and due to the widespread nature of COVID-19 the reenactment of getting tested for it clearly exhibits this value. This in turn can be linked to the notion of digital intimacy through what Chris Peters calls the 'experience of involvement' (2011, 305), wherein audiences are more likely to engage with content they can be emotionally invested in. The 'personal story' type of content found in the sample can be seen as a clear example of this experience of involvement, as the content creators are relying upon the audience to empathise with the experience they have gone through, as it is possible that members of the audience have themselves gone through a similar experience.

The use of news values as a theoretical framework to explore COVID-19 related ASMR content is also useful when considering the 'explainer' type of videos found in the data sample. While making up less than 10% of the total videos analysed, these videos engage in what can be described as fact dissemination. An example of this is a video uploaded on the YouTube channel *AlexAuAsmr,* wherein the creator discusses the COVID-19 virus by 'talking about the background, some of the timeline of the virus, how it spreads, symptoms, prevention, and any other notable topics regarding the virus' with all of the information being sourced from 'reliable sources such as the CDC and the WHO' (2020). An argument could be made that one of the ways in which ASMR content creators have capitalised on the COVID-19 pandemic has been by engaging in the practice of citizen journalism through the form of ASMR. This style of delivering information is ripe for further study. Recent work by Bogueva & Marinova (2020) exploring the effectiveness of using ASMR content to engage with people on the topic of climate change found that some participants felt that 'it can influence positive climate change behaviours' (Ibid, 1). Given the recent turn in journalism to place greater emphasis on the role that emotions play in conveying information (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti 2021), future scholars could consider how the digital intimacy created within ASMR content impacts how audiences receive news content.

From the two data samples, it is clear that a distinction can be drawn between the most popular ASMR YouTube channels and all channels that are dedicated towards producing ASMR content. Even excluding mukabang channels, the former does not appear to have attempted to capitalise on the COVID-19 pandemic whereas the latter clearly has in some form. The distinction between

ASMR channels in general and those that are the most popular could be understood from a financial perspective.

Over the past decade the term 'content creator' has emerged as a 'catch-all to describe digitally enabled cultural producers who create and circulate content on social media platforms' (Arriagada & Ibáñez 2020). Now considered a legitimate career by many people (Miege cited in Deuze & Prenger 2019, 78), the importance of maintaining a consistent revenue stream through the production of digital content is vital to remaining within this field of work. While there are many factors at play in terms of determining the financial success of a content creator such as the frequency with which they upload content (Arriagada & Ibáñez 2020), when it comes to YouTube a critical factor is what content the platform allows to be monetised.

It has been well documented by both scholars (Caplan & Gillespie 2020) and the media (Alexander 2019) that YouTube content creators are anxious about the ever-present risk that their videos could become demonetised, resulting in a loss of their main income stream. When YouTube has made significant changes to the way in which videos can become monetised on its platform this has been commonly referred to as the 'Adpocalypse'. The first of these occurred in 2016 when YouTube wanted to promote more family friendly content and has since gone through four more of these adpocalypses (Alexander 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic social media platforms have attempted to restrict the spread of misinformation about the pandemic and in YouTube's case, this has involved demonetising videos that discuss or mention the pandemic in order to disincentivise the creation of such content (YouTube 2020). COVID-19 was determined by YouTube to be a sensitive topic and 'as such, all videos focused on this topic will be demonetized until further notice' (Leung cited in Alexander 2020). The risk of losing revenue may be one of the reasons why the most popular ASMR YouTube channels chose not to try and capitalise on the pandemic to get more views. With these channels being run by full-time content creators, by performing ASMR roleplay that deals with scenarios linked to COVID-19 they would run the risk of having their videos demonetised and hence not be worth the time and resources it would take to create them, Given their already established popularity and large audience, there would appear to be little incentive to engage with or reference this particular ongoing issue within wider society.

Conversely, smaller, less popular ASMR YouTube channels who engage in what could be called YouTube hobbyism wherein they maybe do not seek or care about the monetary rewards of their labour, but simply produce content for the fun of the process and audience's appreciation of that content (Abidin 2017), may capitalize on the COVID-19 pandemic by creating ASMR COVID role play content. If this is the case, then this would go against Keiles' assertion that 'Any trigger that starts to find fans is endlessly taken up and reperformed — ripped off by different channels for ad dollars' (2019).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how ASMR content creators on YouTube may have sought to capitalise on the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the content they were producing. Based on a primary content analysis of both the most popular ASMR YouTube channels as well as a random sample of COVID-19 related videos uploaded to dedicated ASMR channels, several key insights can be made.

The first is that the most popular ASMR channels do not seem to have capitalised on the pandemic at all, given that only 0.34% of their content related to it. This is somewhat surprising given the extra stress placed on society by the pandemic, combined with the well understood stress-relieving effects of ASMR. One would have expected these channels to tailor some of their content to help combat COVID related stress that their audience may be feeling. The potential reasons for this lack of capitalisation are threefold. Firstly, some of the most popular ASMR channels have a very clear brand and are geared towards a very specific form of ASMR content, namely food-based chewing sounds. Deviating from this may have alienated their fanbase (Baysinger 2016). Secondly, given that YouTube was demonetising many COVID-19 related videos (YouTube 2020), there may have been little incentive for the content creators to invest their time in producing content for which they would receive little to no remuneration. The third reason may be that rather than directly capitalising on the pandemic by producing COVID-19 related content, these popular ASMR content creators were instead responding to the widespread media coverage of the pandemic by allowing their audience a form of escapism, away from COVID-19. One of the predictors of internet use is escapism (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011), and by directly avoiding the topic these content creators could be seen as capitalising on the pandemic in some way.

A second point this article makes is that ASMR content creators who have produced COVID-19 related content have largely done so through the form of roleplaying scenarios, with 51% of the videos analysed using this format. Roleplay videos afford a certain sense of digital intimacy and given that having close personal attention paid to oneself is one of the main triggers of ASMR (Barratt & Davis 2015), the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed for novel scenarios to be acted out by these content creators. With COVID-19 related videos being demonetised on YouTube, this exploitation of the pandemic is not necessarily motivated by financial gain, sugesting the motives driving such content creation is an area that requires further research. Whilst work has been done looking at the reasons for digital content creation in general terms (Cantillon & Baker cited in Deuze & Prenger 2019), as well as platform specific such as in the case of Pinterest (Wang et al. 2016), there is currently little research pertaining to why ASMR content creators produce the videos they do.

Overall, it would appear that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the ASMR content creator community to varying degrees. While many dedicated ASMR YouTube channels have

capitalised on the pandemic by producing related role play videos, the most popular content creators have seemingly not felt the need to acknowledge this trend. In order for a fuller picture around the creation and use of ASMR during the COVID-19 pandemic, further qualitative research is required to understand both why content creators produced this specific type of content, and to what extent audiences find value in this content.

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Nightmare Time and a Case Study for Digital Theatre During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This short article assesses a case study in creating digital theatre during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining the impact of COVID restrictions and overviewing union regulations on small, independent theatre productions, the article focuses on one theatre company, *Starkid Productions*, and how they utilised their prior worldwide digital audience via their *YouTube* channel to both create theatre content and generate a profit during a total industry shutdown. It draws conclusions on how, in the future theatre companies can use new technologies and techniques developed throughout the pandemic as tools to enhance their creative practice and improve the accessibility of theatre.

KEYWORDS

Musical theatre, digital theatre, YouTube, COVID-19, content creation.

Storytime

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused untold damage to several industries, but one of the most notable is the arts, particularly live performance. Several national lockdowns in countries across the globe; restricted numbers at gatherings both indoors and outdoors; and stringent COVID-safety measures at workplaces have all impacted the ability to stage live performances in many instances. *Broadway*, the world's largest theatre industry closed doors on all productions on 12th March 2020 (Paulson, 2020), with London's *West End* following suit a few days later (Daniels, 2020). While the *West End* re-opened its doors on 20th May 2021 (Thompson, 2021), *Broadway* is not due to begin productions until September 2021 (Moynihan, 2021). Smaller, independent theatre faces an even more uncertain future.

With live performance impossible, several projects were launched to make theatre more accessible. One of the most notable was Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Shows Must Go On* (Longman, 2020), a *YouTube* channel on which hitherto pay-per-view only recordings of live productions of popular musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Phantom of the Opera* were made available for free viewing over the space of a weekend, before returning to pay-per-view status. Other initiatives launched similar schemes, with the *National Theatre* (Moyseos, 2021) offering limited online viewing of their productions for free. Others made more permanent changes to accessibility, such as *Shrek: The Musical* (Wood, 2021) becoming available as part of a *Netflix* subscription, and *Disney* bringing forward their highly anticipated release of *Hamilton* to their streaming service *Disney+* on Independence Day weekend in 2020 (Gartenberg, 2020). Still, while this may have allowed for theatre fans to continue to enjoy content, employment rates of actors and crew in the theatre industry plummeted (Brown, 2020, Marrone et al. 2020), and with no traditional work available, for many of them it was necessary to innovate using technology.

Bringing recorded theatre to the internet has not always been straightforward. Prior to December 2020, the capability to distribute filmed theatre in the US was complicated by a stalemate between two unions: *Actors Equity* and *SAG-AFTRA*. As the pandemic prevented live theatre productions a legal battle was launched as to which union had jurisdiction over filmed theatre. As reported in *Playbill*:

> The jurisdiction battle between *Actors' Equity* and *SAG-AFTRA* continues over who has representational rights over streaming theatrical productions […] *Equity* maintains that *SAG-AFTRA*'s governance in the live streaming theatricals arena results in lower income and health insurance coverage deficits. In addition, *SAG-AFTRA* does not represent stage managers, which are part of *Equity* for in-person productions, and has allegedly resulted in the laborers either being fired or told they can work as independent contractors (Meyer, 2020b).

This followed a rejected proposal from *SAG-AFTRA* that would have allowed '*Equity* to handle streaming theatrical projects through mid-2021—provided that *AEA* acknowledges *SAG-AFTRA*'s general control in the domain of filmed media, streaming or otherwise' (Meyer, 2020b). An agreement was eventually made between the two unions on 19th December 2020, stating that *Actors Equity* would represent 'work that is recorded and/or produced to be exhibited on a digital platform, either as a replacement for a live theatre production that cannot take place because of the pandemic or for a partially virtual/digital audience that supplements a live audience during the pandemic period' (Meyer, 2020a). But this uncertainty regarding who holds the rights for recorded theatre has long been an issue for digital theatre productions. For example, actor Dylan Saunders is a member of *Actors Equity* and also a performer in the independent theatre company *Starkid Productions*.

Starkid Productions is a musical theatre company whose selling-point is utilising the internet to make theatre accessible to a mass audience. Established by Nick Lang, Matt Lang, Darren Criss and Brian Holden at the *University of Michigan*, the company first gained prominence thanks to the viral success of *A Very Potter Musical* (2009)*, uploaded to *YouTube* in 2009 with the initial intention of showing the *Harry Potter* parody to friends, and instead amassing a global audience. Over the course of their transition from student project to professional theatre company, *Starkid Productions* have written and performed eleven musicals and one staged script reading for live audiences, releasing each production for free viewing on their *YouTube* channel. Sister project *Tin Can Brothers*, established by *Starkid Productions* members Joey Richter, Brian Rosenthal and Corey Lubowich, has similarly released the full-length musical *Spies are Forever* (2017) and the one-act play *The Solve-It Squad Returns* (2017) to their own *YouTube* channel. Due to their independence and university-troupe beginnings, many of their productions have been non-Union, meaning that previously regular performers such as Dylan Saunders were excluded from productions for several years due to his union membership (Team Starkid, 2018a). However, the tentative new deal between *Actors Equity* and *SAG-AFTRA* has granted performers the freedom to participate in a variety of digital projects during the pandemic, and as veterans of accessible digital theatre, *Starkid Productions* may have found the solution for creating new theatre in a time of crisis.

Prior to the shutdown of all theatre performances, productions by the *Starkid Productions* were funded through *Kickstarter* campaigns promising rewards to backers and the sale of merchandise, with further revenue generated by the sale of live tickets to performances, advertising revenue on *YouTube* uploads, and DVD and soundtrack releases of productions. In some instances, as with the recent 'Hatchetfield Series' productions *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* (2018) and *Black Friday* (2019), the release of paid digital tickets to performances in advance of the *YouTube* release allowed an international audience to watch the production at the same time as a live audience. With an online presence built into their business model, a dedicated worldwide online audience, and a decade of experience in bringing musical theatre to *YouTube*, *Starkid Productions* appeared to be well-positioned to respond to the challenges facing the theatre industry in light of the COVID-19 pandemic; yet all productions to date had still required the regular trappings of live theatre: a live audience and a stage on which to perform. While prior productions could continue to generate revenue through *YouTube* advertising, COVID-19 restrictions prevented the company and crew of *Starkid Productions* from working. In response, a new project was formed combining live script-reading via *Zoom* with pre-recorded musical numbers. *Starkid Productions'* attempt to create new stories with COVID-19 restrictions was unchartered territory, yet Curt Mega, one of *Starkid Productions'* regular actors, believes that despite this the company's established international digital audience allowed the transition to livestreamed theatre to be relatively simple:

> *Starkid* has already built this idea that for most people, being online is their point of contact, so it seemed very logical for the audience to buy a virtual ticket and interact in a livestream chat. The people behind *Starkid* and *Tin Can Brothers* have already been thinking about this for a very long time, so it made the experience of creating in this year where all of our lives changed overnight much more straightforward. Moving to performing digitally was a big learning curve for many, but those of us involved in *Starkid* were already set up for this. This is why I believe *Nightmare Time* was a success. (Appendix A)

Nightmare Time (2021) is a series of six hour-long horror-comedy plays set within the 'Hatchetfield' universe, focusing on characters introduced in the musicals *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* and *Black Friday*; and described by writer/director Nick Lang as 'something for [the audience to] make new content; keep the momentum of the story going forward a little bit' (Julia Delbel, 2021). The decision to create plays within this universe was in part due to the third musical in the 'Hatchetfield' trilogy, *Nerdy Prudes Must Die* being cancelled as a result of the pandemic. The six plays were performed over three nights, the first consisting of 'The Hatchetfield Ape-Man' and 'WatcherWorld' premiering live on *YouTube* alongside a live chat. Episode Two (consisting of 'Forever and Always' and 'Time Bastard') and Episode Three (consisting of 'Jane's a Car' and 'The Witch in the Web') were made available to watch live via a paid digital ticket. The performances took place during October 2020 to coincide with Halloween, and episodes two and three made their premieres on *YouTube* in February 2021 to mark the one-year anniversary of *Black Friday*'s debut on the platform. The plays were all written by Nick and Matt Lang with music and lyrics written by Jeff Blim, as with the other productions in the 'Hatchetfield' series.

Nightmare Time featured actors performing live on *Zoom,* interspersed with pre-recorded musical segments. These were usually at the introduction and conclusion of each story though some (as in 'WatcherWorld'), included their musical numbers in the middle of the performance, in a more traditional musical theatre format. The combination was then streamed live on *YouTube*, or on a private streaming service for Episodes Two and Three. These two episodes featured some minor editing between the live broadcast and their later debut on *YouTube*. Stage directions to illustrate actions that could not be performed on *Zoom* were read aloud by writer/director Nick Lang. As such, the *Nightmare Time* plays functioned as a 'hybrid series' of both live and pre-recorded content (Lang, 2021). Nevertheless, an improvised piano score was still played live throughout the performances by musical director Matt Dahan. A cast recording was also made available on *iTunes* in February 2021.

Starkid Productions were certainly not the only theatre company to experiment with livestreamed theatre during this period. Other notable examples include a *TikTok* trend that culminated an unofficial musical adaptation of the *Pixar* film *Ratatouille* written and performed online to fundraise for out-of-work theatre actors (Alter, 2020); and a star-studded remake of *The Princess Bride* filmed remotely and edited together for broadcast on *YouTube* (Breznican, 2020). However, while these projects may have been novel experiments for the celebrity casts of *Ratatouille* and *The Princess Bride*; for *Starkid Productions*, *Nightmare Time* presented a unique opportunity to flesh out the mythos of the 'Hatchetfield' universe by telling stories that would not fill a full-length stage musical.

Each *Nightmare Time* story focuses on a select number of 'Hatchetfield' characters, previously introduced in *The Guy Who Didn't Like Musicals* and *Black Friday*. One of the selling-points of the livestream performances was giving fans the opportunity to interact more with these characters, as the parallel universe structure of the 'Hatchetfield' series and the ensemble casts of the stage shows prevent the opportunity for specific character studies. While maintaining the parallel universe element of the series (with almost every tale ending with the death or otherwise complete transformation of the protagonist), the inability to create elaborate staging and musical numbers inspired a more intimate focus. Additionally, the *Zoom* script-reading format of the tales freed up the writers to present narrative ideas that could not be realised on a live stage.

In comparison to other digital theatre projects of the time such as Rob Myles' *The Shows Must Go Online* (2020-2021) (which performed the works of Shakespeare through a *YouTube* livestream utilising *Zoom* and replaced stage directions with props being passed on and off screen), *Nightmare Time*'s reading of stage directions allowed writers Nick and Matt Lang to create grand-scale terrors in their horror-comedy stories without being limited by budget and practicalities. 'WatcherWorld', for instance, is set in a haunted amusement park, with the climax of the tale transpiring during the perilous descent from the summit of a faulty rollercoaster. Psychological horrors, such as the time travel torture of protagonist Ted in 'Time Bastard', could also be staged without concern for special effects. Stage directions being read aloud by Nick Lang throughout the performances assisted the audience in imagining elements

of the story they could not see, while background images projected via green-screen added to the sense of placing the performers within the setting described.

The absence of a live audience in the livestream productions was compensated by the actors' presence on screen performance throughout the performances. Presented via a gallery view on *Zoom* (aside from the pre-recorded musical segments), the full cast remain on screen throughout, serving as a live (though muted) audience for scenes in which they do not participate. Watching the actors function as an audience adds another layer of enjoyment for the streaming crowd. For example, in 'Jane's a Car', the audience (communicating via a livestream chat function) derived pleasure both from the comedic yet disturbing of actors and narration in a sequence depicting a sexual act between a man and a possessed car; and from responding to the horrified faces of the other actors witnessing the performance in their own windows on the *Zoom* gallery screen. Additionally, despite the remote locations of each performer, some cast members living together were able to create an in-person live rapport. For Curt Mega, sharing the screen with his wife Kim Whalen in 'The Witch in the Web' made the process of remote performances easier than with his isolated co-stars.

> What we missed [making *Nightmare Time*] was being with each other. It's a strange thing to only have an in-ear as the only point of contact. Normally when you're working with an actor, you feel their body language, if they make a slight adjustment you can take in what they're doing. Over Zoom, it's hard because you're struggling to even see them […] My character, Duke, who shared almost all his scenes with Kim's character Miss Holloway, was great because we could play off each other more naturally […] Getting to perform my scenes with Kim in person had me thinking about how cool it would be if we could all be together, having that kind of interaction as a group, and perform the show virtually. With vaccinations, that may become more of a possibility in the future. (Appendix A)

Another challenge facing the creators of *Nightmare Time* was the ability to perform musical numbers via the internet. Even with the pre-recorded music videos, lag issues necessitated the editing of Episodes Two and Three before their upload to *YouTube* (Delbel, 2021). The music videos also required the actors to serve as camera operators, cinematographers and editors. For example, Whalen's solo number 'Time Bastard' was filmed and edited by husband and co-star Mega, then additionally re-edited by Lang, while co-habiting stars Joey Richter and Lauren Lopez similarly filmed, directed and edited their duet 'Peanuts!' In Mega's view, the *Starkid* company's previous digital content experience simplified this process. 'I had spent five years directing and editing short films for a studio I used to work at. The reason [*Nightmare Time*] was incredibly successful was because we knew how to handle it' (Appendix A). Musical numbers were not limited to solo or co-habiting performers, however. Pre-recording and editing also allowed for duets between actors in different locations, such as Mariah Rose Faith and Robert Manion performing 'Forever and Always' from different cities. These filmed clips were interspersed with stock footage to provide a more cinematic quality. This is especially noticeable in the theme song played at the introduction of each broadcast, which features an extended animated sequence taken from a stock images website (Delbel, 2021). Through prior agreements on filming backgrounds, costuming, and the inclusion of stock footage, remote duets and group numbers were given a cohesive visual style.

The script-reading format of the *Zoom* performances additionally permitted *Nightmare Time* to serve as a testing ground for future projects following the lifting of restrictions. In addition to a planned third 'Hatchetfield' stage musical titled *Nerdy Prudes Must Die*, Lang claimed that 'we possibly want to make an anthology film out of *Nightmare Time*. We've written several stories specifically to be filmed' (Delbel, 2021). While *Starkid* charged for Episodes Two and Three in a similar vein to their previous digital tickets, the informal-looking nature of a script reading allowed the company to experiment with ideas and compensated for mistakes, such as actors beginning their performances with their mics muted, or misreading lines. The three performances were also followed by a conversational livestream, in which the cast, Lang, Lubowich and Dahan took questions and immediate feedback on the performance from fans (Team Starkid, 2020c), cultivating once more a personal, collaborative connection with fans online.

At the time of writing this article, *Nightmare Time*'s debut Episode stands at over 277,000 views on *YouTube*, while views for the *YouTube* upload of Episode Two are at 76,000 and Episode Three at 62,000. This does not take into account the figures from the digital tickets of Episodes Two and Three, which are not publicly available. While lower than the audience numbers for their live staged musicals (*Black Friday*, for example, currently stands at two million views), these videos' permanent presence on the *Team Starkid YouTube* channel will only allow this digital audience to grow. This is in stark contrast to other initiatives, such as *The Shows Must Go On*'s limited free viewing (broadcasts usually being made available for 48 hours), and the lack of an official upload of *Ratatouille: the Musical* following its performance. The continued accessibility of their content has allowed *Starkid*'s audience to grow, encouraging loyalty, promoting re-viewing, and keeping audiences invested in a multi-layered narrative arc. By making *Nightmare Time* a permanent presence online, *Starkid Productions* also serves as a historical document for future audiences, demonstrating how the arts can adapt and survive in the most catastrophic of global circumstances.

While the US has now made it possible for all adults to book their COVID-19 vaccinations (Gambino, 2021), Los Angeles (where *Starkid Productions* is currently based) was not so accommodating to theatre actors in the months surrounding *Nightmare Time*'s production. On 12th November 2020 Governor Gavin Newsom announced that film actors in Los Angeles would be deemed essential, granting them earlier access to vaccines and stringent COVID testing on sets. However, Gov. Newsom only specified film and TV actors, with theatre actors being excluded (Schow, 2020). As for the future of the industry following the pandemic, Mega is very confident that live theatre will not be replaced by digital theatre, but the lessons learnt from projects such as *Nightmare Time* add new tools to the arsenal of ways to perform:

> What's so great about what we've learnt over the last year, it's not that we're never going to go back to live theatre, but it adds new points and possibilities for performance. Maybe we still want to do a big show, but maybe we also want to put together a more accessible, low-key thing, where we get the cast together and rehearse it as an interactive live-stream performance to be able to do more stuff throughout a year versus having one shot to do one massive show where we crowdfund and find

investors. We can still do that, but there are other ways to create throughout it (Appendix A).

With live theatre in the UK now reopening and *Broadway*'s imminent relaunch, it remains to be seen whether theatre will continue to develop digital accessibility initiatives alongside traditional productions. Through *Nightmare Time* and previous productions *Starkid* have shown that a global audience can be a benefit to independent productions, and projects such as theirs, *The Shows Must Go On* and others have enabled theatre to be accessible to disabled patrons, those on low incomes and those otherwise denied access to traditional theatre. The COVID-19 pandemic may have had a significant personal and financial impact on theatre workers, but it has also provided the industry the opportunity to make changes for the better.

Note: Between the writing and publishing of this article, Starkid aired Season 2 of Nightmare Time using different production method. Therefore, the article only refers to the first season.

Appendix A

Curt Mega. 2021. *Interview with Curt Mega*. Interviewed by Hayley Louise Charlesworth. [Zoom video conference] Manchester 30th March 2021.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: As an actor who works in both film and theatre, you have experience with adapting to COVID regulations in both media. How do you feel trying to create content during the pandemic has influenced your practice and allowed you to innovate?

Curt Mega: Theatre really finds itself at a difficult crossroads because with film, of the nature of it, you're able to isolate and contain it. I did an hour-long feature in October where you had the ability that there was at max 15 people at any given moment, everybody was testing and isolating. You can do it safely. With theatre, it's hard because, you could rehearse a cast, I suppose, but the whole aspect is the live audience. Even now with the vaccine rolling out, I don't think there is, from what I can find, I don't know what kind of plan there is. I know they have announced that Broadway might reopen in December. I think that's great. It seems very optimistic, and I hope that it's right, but the challenge is that there's so many potential points of transmission that logistics are overwhelming. And so, I think theatre has found itself at a very difficult crossroads because how do you continue to do this thing when the medium itself is not safe. There is an immediate rush towards people doing some things like augmented reality as a way of not needing an audience. I still think that this is only another tool and in the current timeline it is only a temporary fix. I hope what it doesn't mean is that people decide we can just do theatre on the internet, and we don't need theatre. I think it's another way and a point of accessibility, but this idea that it just replaces the live audience, speaking for myself it doesn't compare to the experience of being able to connect to a live audience, and get to meet them at the stage door, and these things that make theatre so wonderful. However, I do think that it adds another tool to the arsenal of ways to perform. I was recently talking to Corey who I think is on the ground floor of pioneering these things through his work with *Starkid* and *Tin Can Brothers*, and he was saying that what's so great about what we've learnt over the last year, it's not that we're never going to go back to live theatre, but it adds new points and possibilities for performance. Maybe we still want to do a big show, but maybe we also want to put together a more accessible, low-key thing, where we get the cast together and rehearse it as an interactive live-stream performance to be able to do more stuff throughout a year versus having one shot to do one massive show where we crowdfund and find investors. We can still do that, but there are other ways to create throughout it. *Starkid* found an audience because we performed shows for a small audience, but then we filmed it and put it on the internet. There's a totally realistic world where we're able to rehearse and create together and still have the connectivity of live performance.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: Do you think that the success of *Nightmare Time* might lead to further experiments with digital theatre, both from *Starkid* and the wider industry?

I *love Nightmare Time*, *Nightmare Time* was so much fun, but everybody's takeaway was that this was great, but what we missed was being with each other. It's a strange thing to only have an in-ear as the only point of contact. Normally when you're working with an actor, you feel their body language, if they make a slight adjustment you can take in what they're doing. Over *Zoom*, it's hard because you're struggling to even see them. A lot of the time in *Nightmare Time*, we would keep all the other actors' thumbnails as a very small sidebar as *Nightmare Time* was more of a table read than a fully-fledged production, so we did a rehearsal but we weren't memorised so our scripts filled the screen. It was weird because you were sort of more listening auditorily to what somebody else was saying which doesn't replace getting to do something with someone else. But the inclusion of the music videos opened my eyes to a combination of live performance and pre-recorded material, alongside green screen, and VR, and the live audience through the chat. It created this very interesting hybrid of all these disparate tools. You get this really interesting new kind of medium that I think arose during the pandemic. My takeaway is I think it will stay with us, and it will be a tool to make more accessible content, but I hope that it serves a greater purpose to continue bringing people to the theatre. Theatre obviously has a long history of being very inaccessible and often for very privileged, rich people, so I think it's amazing to break down those walls, but I also hope it encourages people to still see live theatre. And I think that's something that *Starkid* has been doing for so long. So many people who I met at *Black Friday* would say "I have been watching *Starkid* for ten years, and this is the first time I've been able to come to a show." It was so cool to be able to see how special it was to be there the first time they were able to experience this live thing that they have been engaged with for so long. To me, the perfect circle of things is that it is accessible for anybody, but it still excites people about the possibility of being able to come back to theatre.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: Do you think that if *Starkid* didn't already have such a core, world-wide digital audience, that they'd even be able to do anything like *Nightmare Time*, especially getting some kind of financial gain from it?

Curt Mega: I think they could probably still do it, but I don't think anybody would show up. I know lots of people who did online theatre throughout 2020, and continue to do so, and the blood, sweat, tears and passion is remarkable, but the incredible thing about *Starkid* is that thousands of people turned up which did not happen for a lot of people I know. *Starkid* has already built this idea that for most people, being online is their point of contact, so it seemed very logical for the audience to buy a virtual ticket and interact in a livestream chat. The people behind *Starkid* and *Tin Can Brothers* have already been thinking about this for a very long time, so it made the experience of creating in this year where all of our lives changed overnight much more straightforward. Moving to performing digitally was a big learning curve for many, but those of us involved in *Starkid* were already set up for this. This is why I believe *Nightmare Time* was a success. They were able to do this project to its full potential right off the bat. I had spent five years directing and editing short films for a studio I used to work at. The reason this show was incredibly successful was because we knew how to handle it.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: Do you think that being able to play off Kim in episode 3 in person rather than on screen was an advantage?

Curt Mega: My character, Duke, who shared almost all his scenes with Kim's character Miss Holloway, was great because we could play off each other more naturally. I already loved Duke because Nick has a way of being really infectious when he pitches a character he really loves, and it was a very different character to the ones I've played with *Starkid* and *TCB* before. Getting to perform my scenes with Kim in person had me thinking about how cool it would be if we could all be together, having that kind of interaction as a group, and perform the show virtually. With vaccinations, that may become more of a possibility in the future.

Hayley Louise Charlesworth: The agreement between *SAG* and *Equity* didn't happen until after *Nightmare Time*. Did that cause any issues?

Curt Mega: Not really. I don't know the logistics now. What was happening was that a lot of theatre companies tried to do existing shows like *The Sound of Music* on *Zoom*, and I can understand why Actor's Equity stepped in to say they couldn't do a full production, and why *SAG* got involved. I can understand where there was a butting of heads, though I thought that the way they fought publicly was shameful. But it wasn't an issue for *Nightmare Time* because of the table read aspect of it, which is not a consideration for a full production. The difference when we did *Black Friday* which was a full production was that we were fully with *AEA* and I was the union *Actors Equity* deputy, where I reported to them with the official paperwork. That's a much more intensive process, but for this, even whoever said they had jurisdiction only had jurisdiction over produced, fully staged shows virtually. Table reads aren't covered by *SAG* or *Actors Equity*.

I think both of these unions need to do more digital forward-thinking. Years ago, I became a *SAG* signatory, producing content, and they had no idea what I needed contracts for in terms of digital content. This would include every video I post on *Instagram* under current language, which the implication is that it would require filing a contract six weeks before, and having $150,000 of insurance, to go on *TikTok*. They need to learn to adapt to a growing social media presence for performers. Technology has developed so quickly and the unions didn't know how to respond. The pandemic may have encouraged them to revisit the digital regulations.

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Please Duet This: Collaborative Music Making in Lockdown on *TikTok*

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of musicians worldwide to put their careers on hold, avoid in-person collaborations, and find new ways to make music during global lockdowns. *TikTok*, the popular short video platform, has become digital space for musical artists to create new content and collaborate directly other creators using unique platform features. One particularly notable feature is Duet, which allows creators record new videos that place them alongside other creators' existing videos. Duets can be paired or chained together by numerous creators, each building on or adding to the previous video. Musical artists on *TikTok* used this feature to pass time, participate in jams, and create new music while in lockdown. This article explores instances collaborative music making on *TikTok* through a case study of @JazzTokOfficial, a collectively managed *TikTok* account formed in late-2020. Findings draw on eighteen (n = 18) qualitative interviews with members of the JazzTok community who have used the platform's Duet feature to create new musical collaborations while socially distanced. This article argues that musical artists engaged in distributed creativity facilitated by a short video platform to overcome the strains of making music during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; TikTok; music; lockdown; creator studies

Introduction

In 2020, COVID-19 lockdowns forced millions of people around to world to shelter in place and practice social distancing. Despite efforts to contain the virus throughout mid to late-2020, full or partial lockdowns remained in effect for much of the year in many countries around the world, spiking at various points when new waves of the virus surged. The global lockdowns had a pronounced impact on revenues and careers in the international music industries. Live music industries lost an estimated $30 billion (USD) globally as concerts and performance series were postponed indefinitely and finally cancelled (Aswad 2020). Well-established artists that had access to professional recording facilities like Charlie XCX and Taylor Swift proved it was possible to produce music while in quarantine with the proper resources (Cragg 2020). However, for millions of hobbyist, amateur and aspiring musicians around the world, the 2020 lockdowns posed major challenges on the ability to make and play music collectively with others. In moments of isolation, millions of musical artists sought out creative new ways to make content on their own or with others while remaining socially distanced (Banks 2020). Digital media proved to be a simple and effective means to continue doing music for income or fun – some began live streaming, several started YouTube channels, and others finally caved and downloaded the popular short video platform *TikTok* to see what all the fuss was about.

For musicians, an immediately appealing feature of *TikTok* was Duet, which allows TikTokers to create a new video side-by-side an existing video.

This article describes processes of making socially distanced musical content using the Duet feature on *TikTok*. Findings are informed by qualitative interviews conducted with eighteen (n = 18) musical artists on *TikTok* in early 2021 (see Appendix). The majority of participants were based in the US (n = 15). Interviewees were initially identified purposively as members of a *TikTok* community known as 'JazzTok' (detailed further below). After the initial interviews, several other members of the JazzTok community were contacted via snowball sampling. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were all conducted via Zoom. Interviews were recorded, transcribed using an automated transcription service, and analysed for qualitative themes using a grounded approach to thematic coding (Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008).

Throughout this article, I refer to informants as 'TikTokers', meaning those who use *TikTok* as both viewers and creators, just as those who view and create on YouTube are colloquially known as YouTubers (Postigo 2016). I argue that TikTokers participate in collaborative music making, or distributed creativity (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009), facilitated by the *duet* feature. Additionally, I argue that TikTokers are continually contesting and appropriating the function of Duet on *TikTok* to build connections and create content during an unprecedented moment of limited mobility. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, I describe the features of *TikTok* that distinguish it from other types of digital platforms and historicize the Duet feature guided by the platform biography method (Burgess & Baym 2020). Next, I discuss the ways individuals make collaborative music on *TikTok*, focusing on 'Duet Jams', a concept I frame using Sawyer and DeZutter's (2009) theoretical conception of distributed creativity, collaborative situations in which groups collectively generate a shared creative product. I then present a case study of @JazzTokOfficial, a collectively managed *TikTok* account formed by TikTokers who met through repeated Duet Jam interactions. I conclude arguing that the artists of JazzTok engaged in distributed creativity facilitated by a short video platform to overcome the strains of making music during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the benefits of which will extend into the future.

Platform Features

TikTok is a short video platform, meaning it hosts audio-visual content that is no longer than 60 seconds, and its primary mode of content consumption and dissemination is via mobile device (Kaye et al. 2020a). On the one hand, TikTok encourages the same type of participatory cultures (Jenkins et al. 2015) evident on other digital media platforms such as YouTube through vernacular creativity, mundane participation as a means of collective cultural participation (Burgess 2006) and produsage, collaborative and continuous building and extending existing content (Bruns 2008). On the other hand, TikTok includes an arsenal of additional platform features that promote interactions and modes of production unique to the short video format. I follow Galloway (2004), who conceptualises platform features as protocological objects that structure and exercise control over the specific social situations on which they are brought to

bear. Users may creatively work around the apparent intended use of features, which can reveal the politics, relationships, and cultures of use (Bucher 2013).

Several features of *TikTok* intentionally facilitate engagement and interaction with others. Some of these features are latent, such as the primary mode of viewing videos on *TikTok*, the For You Page (FYP) that recommends new content for uses to scroll through endlessly, matched to viewers' unique preferences via a sophisticated algorithmic recommender system. By scrolling through the FYP, TikTokers are constantly engaging with new content that refreshes frequently and is recalibrated based on a wide variety of user data (TikTok 2020b). Some of the factors that influence which videos get recommended by one's FYP are, in part, based on one's engagement with other videos and users. In June 2020, *TikTok* released a statement explaining how the FYP recommendations are made, in the interest of improved transparency (TikTok 2020b). The statement explained that in addition to recording data from one's own inputs such as liking, commenting, or following, the algorithm also adjusts recommendations based on the inputs of friends, followers and other TikTokers one is following.

Other features are more active facilitators of interaction, such as Use This Sound, Video Reply to Comments, Stitch and Duet, each of which are used to create new videos. Use This Sound allows TikTokers to create a new video that directly imports the audio from the video they were just watching with one tap (Kaye et al. 2020b). Video Reply to Comments allows TikTokers to spotlight a comment left on a previous video by creating a new video to respond to the comment or commenter (Abidin et al. 2020). Stitch was added in October 2020, and allows TikTokers to clip a short segment from a previous video and place it at the start of a new video (TikTok 2020c). Duet, the focal feature of this article, works by scrolling through *TikTok* videos, finding a video to Duet, and tapping a dedicated Duet button on the TikTok sharing interface. The *TikTok* platform automatically downloads the video and opens the video recording interface to shoot or import a video that appears side-by-side the original being used for Duet (Weir 2020).

The appeal of Duet makes perfect sense in the context of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The Duet feature creates an opportunity for parasocial interaction (PSI), one-sided relationships between individuals and figures in media (Jarzyna 2020). Duets can be used to facilitate PSI by everyday TikTokers engaging in Duet dances or lip-synching with celebrities (Musical.ly, 2017). Duets can also provide social interaction responding to questions posed by other TikTokers with personal stories, reacting to content in a new video, or playing music together with another person, which was instrumental for millions of people feeling shut-in and isolated following the first wave of lockdowns. *TikTok* has changed the function of Duet, including some transformations that took place in late-2020 when the pandemic was in full swing, which is significant considering Duet was not originally included as a feature when *TikTok* first launched internationally.

A Brief History of the Duet Feature

To historicise the development of the Duet feature on *TikTok* I draw on the platform biography method (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Platform biography chronicles how digital media platforms

change over time by considering social, political, and cultural forces. In developing the platform biography method, Burgess and Baym focus specifically on platform features to understand the politics of relationships between users, technologies, and cultures of use (2020, 35). In their book, *Twitter: A Biography,* Burgess and Baym trace pathways of feature evolution at four stages: appropriation, integration, contestation, and iteration. This evolutionary perspective illuminates how certain features change and develop through social and technical interactions, tension, and exploration. Providing sufficient evidence to support of each of these four stages of evolution is beyond the scope of this article, but the platform biography can still provide a useful framework to review the history of *TikTok*'s Duet.

To begin, Duet was not hardcoded into the original international version of *TikTok* but likely would have been familiar to many early TikTokers. *TikTok* launched in 2018 after parent company ByteDance acquired and rebranded popular lip-synching short video platform, *Musical.ly*. Duet was a popular, not to mention trademarked, feature on *Musical.ly* (The Nation 2018). *Musical.ly*'s Duet feature was, itself, reminiscent of another Duet feature on the social singing platform *Smule*, which allowed users to create harmonies with themselves or other users (Smule, 2015). The key difference was that *Musical.ly*'s Duet did not allow additional audio to be recorded using Duets as it was introduced as a way to dance or lip-sync alongside others (Musical.ly 2017).

The first mention of Duet being integrated into the *TikTok* platform came via corporate press release in March 2019 (TikTok 2019). Duet debuted alongside another feature, 'Reactions', both of which enabled TikTokers to create new content with one another as a "launchpad of creative activities as people re-interpret other peoples' content and create unique experiences," (TikTok 2019, 1). According to the release, Duet was meant to carry forward practices of lip-synching and dancing from *Musical.ly* whereas React allowed TikTokers to share feedback or commentary on videos. Using React, TikTokers could participate with others to create comedy skits, response videos, trolling videos, or collaborative musical content. Duets were initially silent, but Reactions allowed TikTokers to add their own audio to respond to other videos. In 2020, *ByteDance* merged Reactions and Duet followed by the introduction of a new feature, Stitch, in September 2020. Stitch allowed TikTokers to clip a short segment of another video and then record their reaction, stitched together with the clip from the original (TikTok 2020c). In essence, Stitch replaced Reactions. In October 2020 Duet was given the option to record audio as well as the addition of new layouts (TikTok 2020d). Duet layouts enabled TikTokers to shift the position of a Duet on their screen and, more importantly, made it easier for TikTokers to string together Duets, forming expansive chains, each containing the original video and audio of the previous Duets (Chen 2020).

This brief historical overview illustrates how the Duet feature came to be what it was in early 2021. At the time, numerous means of making music remotely existed, including on *TikTok*. As the next section explains, making collaborative music on *TikTok* was possible before the October 2020 Duet update, such as by using Reactions third party recording and editing platforms. The Duet update came months into COVID-19 lockdowns, giving musical TikTokers an improved digital tool to create collaborative music.

Making Music on *TikTok*

TikTok, a short video platform designed to encourage and facilitate user-generated content, was a natural online space for singers, songwriters, producers, and instrumentalists to record and share their musical creations. Global COVID-19 lockdowns created many obstacles for musical artists: rehearsals needed to be conducted remotely, access to recording studios was limited, and live performances were shifted to virtual gigs or cancelled. The pandemic also created opportunities for artists who had the capability to record and release music independently (Cooper 2020). Several innovations of the past decade such as high-quality home recording equipment, the proliferation of advanced digital audio workstations (DAWs) and increased avenues to self-publish music online have dramatically lowered entry barriers for music production and dissemination (Prior 2010; Wikström 2020).

Some TikTokers interviewed for this study stated they do not do music professionally, such as Jake (@jakedoesmusicsometimes) who remarked: "I don't like do music in college or anything, I just needed a creative outlet." For Jake and a handful of other informants who enjoyed making music for fun and not as their primary creative career, TikTok offered a means to share musical projects easily and in an engaging manner. Informants described how they could record and upload videos directly from their device's camera and edit using the TikTok platform. Alternatively, they could use external recording hardware and third-party production software to create better quality video and audio that they would then upload and share via TikTok. The opportunity to record and share music on TikTok was an unexpected boon to informants who were newer to the platform:

> I think my preconception of thinking that TikTok was just these teenagers dancing to random songs was completely wrong. I didn't realize there were so many subtopics genres on the app and I was actually shocked that there were so many musicians on there just doing their thing, putting out like their own instrumentals, or just jamming to another song. I was beyond shocked and I loved it.
>
> Bri (@souparstarbri)

Bri, who joined *TikTok* in mid-2020, was among millions of new users who understood *TikTok* to be an extension of *Musical.ly*, a singing and dancing platform aimed at teenagers. When *TikTok* saw its largest initial growth spurt in 2019 its primary userbase and target market was preteens (Albury & Savic 2019). After spending more time on the platform, Bri and others began to find communities and subcultures recommended to them through their own activity while scrolling through the FYP. Several informants stated that they had never used *TikTok* prior to COVID lockdowns but decided to give it a try either out of boredom, because of recommendation, or after seeing a *TikTok* video that piqued their curiosity. The platform managed to hold their attention by introducing them to other musical TikTokers with shared similar interests.

> I started posting a lot of synthesizer content, so then I would start seeing more synthesizer content. And then I realized that [people were using] these hashtags, like #SynthTok, #MusicTok and #JazzTok, which have now kind of become their own little communities.
>
> Kyle (@felonious_skunk)

As on other platforms, using hashtags is an optional way to organise content according to user-generated categories. The three hashtags Kyle mentioned were also noted by other informants who included them to connect to musical communities or attract musical TikTokers to their page.

Other informants, whose careers were tied to music, highlighted *TikTok*'s unique content creation features as a way to encourage playing and practising while they were temporarily unable to play their regular gigs. Kris, a church musician and music teacher, initially joined the platform before the lockdowns to connect with his younger students:

> I wanted to experience it and figure out how it worked… and it would surprise the kids when I'd throw out little jokes about something that happened on *TikTok* and they'd be like, "Oh!" and then I'd joke and say, "I don't know what you're talking about." So that was the point of getting on in the first place. And then of course in March of last year, we hit this global shutdown and my school decided we were going to be out. The church I was playing at decided they would no longer be meeting for a while… so here I am at home and everything that I'm used to had shut down. I just wanted to take that opportunity to be more creative and try to find a creative outlet… it wasn't really planned out so much as it was just something I enjoyed doing.

<div align="right">Kris (@musixicn_kris_)</div>

Jay, a professional trumpeter with over thirty years of experience as a touring musician, found a lifeline on *TikTok* in late 2020, when suddenly:

> My entire career that I spent my entire life building was gone, I was subbing on Broadway. Broadway is gone. Touring is gone. I was scheduled to play with the national symphony for Memorial Day, Fourth of July, all gone. Everything was gone.

<div align="right">Jay (@jaywebbtrumpet)</div>

Jay revealed that posting videos on *TikTok* initially helped to ease some of the anxiety of having to put his musical career on hold. Within a few months, he saw a new potential for professionalisation on *TikTok* leading to further investment in the platform and his own music setup. Jay was one of several informants who either built or improved on existing home recording studios to create musical content specifically for *TikTok.*

The actual process of recording and uploading music on *TikTok* varied among informants. For example, some used their smartphone to record to record audio and video quickly and easily, while others already had the musical hardware and software needed to make high-quality recordings at home before they joined *TikTok*. Among those that did not have their own home recording setup, many felt justified to purchase the gear after finding musical success on *TikTok*. After converting his closet into a bespoke studio, Jay said that he was writing and recording more music than ever before in his professional career. His first song that credited him as the songwriter as opposed to an instrumentalist or performer, was released on digital music streaming platforms in late 2021. The song, 'Bust Your Windows'[1], was written,

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[1] Bust Your Windows – Stacey Ryan and Jay Webb. Available at:
https://open.spotify.com/album/243ttCsxpFZ4OoYgHTRzHw

recorded, and released in collaboration with another informant, Stacey (@staceyryanmusic), who explained that the song began as a "Duet Jam."

Duet Jams

According to informants, the main ingress for musical collaborations on *TikTok* was via Duet Jams*,* which are exactly that: musical jams facilitated by *TikTok*'s Duet function. Duet Jams can take many forms. For example, a guitarist may post a lead and a bassist and drummer Duet to add the rhythm section; a beatmaker may share a produced track for a vocalist to add their own lyrical invention; a songwriter may release a new song and members of the Duet *TikTok* community begin to remix it in real time. Whereas affordable recording gear and digital audio workstations (DAWs) helped convert bedrooms into studios, *TikTok*'s Duet feature further transformed bedrooms into collaborative jam spaces. Creating social spaces to allow for jamming to take place is an important part of the musical enterprise (Cornfield 2015). Jamming is spontaneous; jamming is collaborative; jamming is fun. Just as live music scenes were heavily curtailed during COVID-19, so too were jam spaces and rehearsal rooms, unless they were sufficiently large to allow for social distancing. According to informants, Duet did a good job emulating the experience of jamming:

> [The Duet] feature really does tailor the best to musicians and maybe actors as well. The fact that you can layer onto anything… As somebody who loves playing in bands and loves collaborating, it's one of my favourite features.
>
> Gabbi (@fettuccinefettuqueen)

When Duet was introduced on *TikTok*, the audio clip was typically imported from the original video being 'Duetted.' At the time, adding additional audio was reserved for Reactions, so Duet encouraged users to participate in popular dance challenges, lip-sync to popular songs, or otherwise jump on popular trends. Some informants explained that Duets were still frequently used to follow *TikTok* trends, but others explicitly distanced themselves from that type of TikToking:

> I don't follow the trends. I'm on the side where I like to add new content rather, which is much harder. It's just like content creation. You're making something new, putting yourself in there, and it feels more complete with you in it. I think Music *TikTok* does that really well. Those kinds of [Duets] take effort. You're always creating new content through these features.
>
> Shout (@vocaloutburst)

Damoyee (@damoyee) highlighted two ways to start Duet Jam. Firstly, while browsing their FYP TikTokers may stumble upon an interesting short video that they decide to Duet. Several informants commented that the simultaneous randomness and specificity of the *TikTok* algorithmic recommender system fuelled their spontaneity. Some days they might encounter a video that seemed tailor-made for them to Duet while others they might find something surprising that lent itself well for a Duet Jam. Secondly, TikTokers could find a Duet Jam in-progress and explore other versions by tapping on the audio icon at the bottom right to engage with *TikTok*'s Use This Sound feature. Use This Sound allows TikTokers to create a new video based on the one they were just watching (Kaye et al. 2021) and lists all the videos that have

'used' a specific sound. Rather than proceeding to use the sound, prospective Duet Jammers could find new inspiration for their own Duets by exploring others' jams.

Duet Jams create novel content through 'distributed creativity', defined as groups of individuals who join together to produce a new creative output that ranges from the "relatively predictable and constraints to relatively unpredictable and constrained" (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009, 82). The Duet feature necessarily constrains some options for creative expression, but allows for unpredictable contestation of the feature's intended use. As an example of a relatively predictable and constrained Duet Jam, Emerson (@emersonbrophy) explained that he would sometimes set up videos to become Duet Jams by creating templates – "I sing one line and have the lyrics on screen for the next line that someone else sings" – but even still he could never be sure how other TikTokers might add to his song on via Duet. As an example of a relatively unpredictable and unconstrained jam, Adam, a music student, described putting his knowledge of music theory to work when creating Duets:

> When I see a video of someone singing an acapella tune without a track, I'll do an edit and add the piano part, which is sort of backwards, I think, from how people think of it, you know, you lay down the piano part and *then* you sing along to it. But doing it this way allows me to get away with cool re-harmonization. I'll take the chords and I'll change them to be more interesting.

> Adam, @adamdorfmannmusic).

In this way, Duet Jams allow TikTokers to participate in online remixing and sampling culture by contributing their own complex musical additions.

Informants explained that Duet Jams were a useful way to grow their followings on *TikTok*. For example, Anthony explained that it was a Duet Jam that propelled his *TikTok* profile to new heights after he posted a Duet drumming behind a creatively remixed version of the jazz standard *Fly Me to the Moon* shared by another TikToker, "and overnight it got like 10,000 views when I had just about 50 followers. I was pretty shocked to see that kind of growth happen," (Anthony, @ewokbeats). As a rhythm section player, Anthony reflected, "my page was basically built off of Duets people because I've noticed that people don't just want to watch the drums or drum covers." Before long he had built connections with a handful of other musical TikTokers through repeated Duets adding drums.

Another appeal of Duet Jams for many informants was the ease with which they could engage in jamming; however, some informants highlighted technical issues they needed to overcome in order to participate in a seamless jam.

> There's this unpredictable delay on Duets. Especially if you're doing something rhythmic, you record it and you listen back to it and it's like off by maybe a quarter of a beat, which every now and again, it's negligible, especially if it's not strictly rhythmic. If it is [strictly rhythmic] the Duet doesn't quite work.

> Kris, @musicixnkris

In addition to technical limits, some informants also noted economic constraints associated with Duet Jams. As mentioned above, the majority of informants stated they had no interest in professionalising their content to make money from *TikTok*. The simple reason was that

profiting on *TikTok* was daunting and frustrating in early 2021, as *TikTok* only had limited avenues for direct monetization (Kaye et al. 2021), compared to platforms like *YouTube* with more mature revenue schemes (Google 2021). In July 2020, *TikTok* introduced the 'TikTok Creator Fund', a $200M (USD) fund to pay eligible creators for their content based on views that was subject to numerous terms and conditions (TikTok 2020b). Only the US-based informants were eligible to join the Creator Fund at the time of interviews. Many had experimented with joining the fund but ultimately left, mentioning that it paid a pittance for views and that they felt their overall video view count had decreased after joining. Most relevant to this discussion, several informants stated that the Creator Fund did not allow their Duets to be monetized. This was repeated by all informants who were still members of the Creator Fund at the time of our interview. This was not much of a factor however, as none of the informants reported making much money from the Fund anyway. In the future, if the Fund became a more profitable source of income, the policy could potentially economically disincentivise TikTokers from Duetting others.

TikTokers can also still Duet with themselves, as was one of the original intended uses of *Musical.ly*'s Duet. Ebony (@ebonylorenmusic) said she often would Duet her own videos when recording acapella songs and chain together multiple versions of herself to create rich harmonies. Other informants mentioned creating Duet Chains to jam along with multiple other TikTokers to simulate a virtual jazz orchestra. Duet Chains build on the standard, two-video Duet to allow multiple new entrants to add to Duet content by chaining them together ad infinitum. The October 2020 Duet update afforded TikTokers the ability to rearrange the placement of videos in Duet Chains and create vast Duet Mosaics. Duet Chains allow for more complex jams that informants suggested would be difficult to replicate remotely. Ralph, a trombonist who worked professionally as a music teacher and composer, recalled participating in a Duet Chain that:

> …was a New Orleans jazz version of 'When the Saints Go Marching In'. And usually, with that sort of style of New Orleans jazz, it's extremely chaotic. Everyone has their own role to play, but at the same time is doing something completely different and out of their world, you know, showing off their own thing, everyone's sort of battling for, like, dominance. And that's the thing that can't really be done unless it's in person except for *TikTok* where you're able to Duet like that.

<div align="center">Ralph (@theboneguy)</div>

Jamming on Duet Chains was cited as a key avenue for distributed creativity to manifest on *TikTok.* The concept of distributed creativity builds on what Sawyer terms collaborative emergence (2003). According to this view, creative group processes are likely to arise under circumstances where actions have unpredictable outcomes and subsequent actions are determined by previous actions. In the above example, Ralph stumbled upon a jam in progress and added his trombone part to harmonise with the previous instrumentalists. Any TikToker that found the video after Ralph's contribution could then harmonise with him or branch off in a new direction. Through collaborative emergence, distributed creative actions are often recontextualized by others and each participant is considered to be contributing equally; as is the case in live improvisational performances (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009). Alex (@alexengelberg), who previously did part-time work as a musical accompanist for an improv

comedy theatre prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns, explained that Duet Jams were a digital embodiment of the "Yes and…" philosophy of live theatrical improvisation, where each new addition contributes to the ongoing performance in unexpected ways. Informants also noted further technical limitations when adding more personnel to Duet Jams. For example, the slight delays noted above became more of a problem in longer Chains. Each subsequent TikToker who joined a jam in progress would need to carefully manage their own delay or risk throwing off the tempo of the whole chain. In addition, one informant described an issue with mixing audio when adding to Duet Chain:

> Being able to adjust the volume on the different Duets would be my ultimate change…
> Even on a big Duet Chain, the original sound is still there. I had one request of TikTok,
> it would be to change the volumes [of other in the Duet Chain] such that you don't end
> up with feedback and like crunchy vocals because the volume [of other Duetters] was
> too loud.

<div align="center">Rachel (@rvmillz)</div>

Communities formed through Duet Jams added a musical component to online social interaction for informants who were confined to their homes. RJ (@rjthecomposer) described TikTok as "the ultimate fusion of social media and content platform," that allowed him to make new friends and join communities while also sharing his creative musical ideas. Anthony mentioned that he would often jump into a Duet Jam in progress when he saw one or more of his friends who were already participating. Duet Jams helped communities grow each time new faces appeared in the chain. Like Anthony, many informants listed other TikTokers with whom they would frequently Duet, thereby creating remote a musical ensemble with rotating members that would go on to transcend the *TikTok* platform.

JazzTok

The @JazzTokOfficial account is exemplary of musical distributed creativity produced through Duet. It is a collectively managed musical *TikTok* account that was created at the end of 2020. Many informants explained that they had used hashtags like #jazztok, #musictok or #synthtok to connect with like-minded TikTokers or shape the contours of content they encountered while scrolling through the FYP, long before the formation of @JazzTokOfficial. As Kyle explained in response to tagging his own videos:

> I probably use more hashtags than I need to but they have been helpful… I don't know
> how many people found me that way, but I definitely noticed that the hashtags I used
> influenced the stuff I would see on my own feed.

<div align="center">Kyle (@feloniousskunk)</div>

#JazzTok was a regularly featured hashtag among a group of musical TikTokers who had formed a community through Duet Jams and Chains in the latter half of 2020. Before long, several members had begun to mutually follow each other allowing for more interaction and collaboration on the platform. Like other social media platforms, *TikTok* features an internal messaging feature, Inbox, to send and receive messages between users on the platform. In July 2021, the only way to send messages to other TikTokers was by being 'mutual', the platform vernacular for 'friends' or two accounts that follow one another. Many members of the

@JazzTokOfficial community had already been mutuals for months and had jammed together in many Duet Chains. According to co-founding member Ben, the official account represented a "sentient jazz hivemind" on *TikTok* that was born in December 2020:

> It all started with a live stream. [Lisa] was streaming, and I had never seen her do a live steam before. I don't think I had ever even heard her voice before. And it was her, I think [Gabbi] and [Kyle] and I were in the chat. I remember saying JazzTok is the best Tok. And [Lisa] was like "JazzTok *is* the best Tok... hey I've had this idea. Do you want to start a discord server?" and I was like "YES. That sounds awesome, that's a brilliant idea!" The next morning, I wake up to a notification inviting me to the server. I was the third person; Lisa, Gabbi, and I were the first people. And we just started inviting friends, and they started inviting people and now we've got over one hundred members.

<div align="center">Ben (@bensrightbrain)</div>

The group set up a server on Discord[2], a separate social messaging platform, and created a new *TikTok* account, @JazzTokOfficial, managed by Ben and soon comprised of dozens of musical TikTokers. The JazzTok founders were not the first to create a collectively managed *TikTok* account. Other prominent examples are '*TikTok* house' accounts co-managed by groups of influencers living together and creating content (Lorenz, 2020). Whereas *TikTok* houses might be formed by marketing or talent management firms, JazzTok emerged independent of outside influence; a group of musicians who got to know each other through repeated Duets. After a few weeks of coordinating and communicating, @JazzTokOfficial posted its first video, a fully orchestrated arrangement of Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas is You[3]. The video was released on 24 December 2020 and featured several familiar faces among those who used #jazztok in previous Duets (Figure 1).

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[2] https://discord.com
[3] https://www.tiktok.com/@jazztokofficial/video/6909535106017316102

Figure 1. JazzTok's debut performance of All I Want for Christmas is You' [4]

The process of forming JazzTok exposed several technical limitations of *TikTok*. For example, JazzTok ensemble videos are edited together on a third-party platform, not using the Duet function. Ben (@bensrightbrain) outlined the process of making JazzTok videos, which involved skilled use of multiple online platforms to record, merge, and edit video and audio files submitted by a geographically dispersed community of musicians. Everything was sourced within the community but required extra effort outside of the *TikTok* platform, as a co-founding member explained:

> *TikTok* is not good for communities unfortunately, which is what we found out with JazzTok. That's actually, the reason I made JazzTok. *TikTok* is really good for finding people we needed a place where we could talk together in a group and also share stuff. The *TikTok* messaging app is lousy… So, to have a community on *TikTok*, you kind of have to come off of it and go somewhere else.

Lisa (@utzig)

Despite these limitations, the ability to create communities and feel connected via relationships forged on *TikTok* was repeatedly referenced as a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic for informants in the JazzTok community. As the third co-founding member, Gabbi, explained,

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[4] Personnel: top: @theboneguy (left), @damoyee (center), @theonlytylerl (right); middle: @bensrightbrain (left), @utzig (center), @joethewolfe (right); bottom: @abedin_saxstuff (left), @ewokbeats (center), @mneufeldmusic (right); not pictured: @caden.ake (saxophone) & @nathaniel_0211 (trumpet). Arranged by @mneufeldmusic. Video by @bensrightbrain.

she was truly surprised by the depth of the relationships she formed with other musicians via JazzTok:

> *TikTok* has brought me a network of people that I would never have met. I've never even been overseas. Knowing that I have a worldwide network of people… It's just nuts and it's even more crazy that it's happened in a time where we literally can't travel. Like it's so unprecedented. I don't mean to make light of COVID, because it's obviously this horrible thing that's been negatively affecting everybody worldwide, but you know, in my head I was like, well, if I'm not gigging, I may as well just do this. It's just brought me so many friendships that I never would've seen coming at all.

<div align="right">Gabbi (@fettuccinefettuqueen)</div>

The JazzTok community grew noticeably during the four-week span of interviews, as evidenced by the Discord server. In early January 2021, the server had around one hundred members, which doubled to over two-hundred-fifty when I concluded interviews in early February. In addition to posting new ensemble pieces arranged and orchestrated by members, @JazzTokOfficial began posting other types of content in the later months of 2021, such as jazz challenge videos[5] and interviews with core artists[6]. Nodding to its Duet roots, many video call on viewers to "please duet this video" and add their own musical contribution to the JazzTok cloud-based Big Band.

Please Duet This?

In this article, I have described ways in which *TikTok*'s Duet feature has been used by musical TikTokers to create, collaborate, and communicate during COVID-19 lockdowns. Through a case study @JazzTokOfficial, I argue that Duet is an integral feature for distributed creativity on *TikTok*. Informants in this study highlighted several critiques of Duet, which may point to future evolution of Duet, which remains ongoing in July 2021. Regardless of limitations, all eighteen informants fondly recounted spending their time in lockdown learning, sharing, and duetting each other on *TikTok*.

TikTok and Duet had a real, tangible impact on the personal lives and professional careers of informants. All eighteen members of JazzTok spoke about how grateful they were to have made so many new friends to cut through the isolating moments of the pandemic and lockdowns. Informants shared stories of unexpected career developments that emerged through *TikTok*, Duets, and JazzTok. Stacey, a Gen-Z college student in Canada, experienced the process of recording and releasing for the first time guided by Jay, a Gen-X professional musician in the US. Damoyee (@damoyee) and Ebony (@ebonylorenmusic), two independent musicians in early stages of their professional careers, had amassed sizeable followings on *TikTok* and shared strategies to translate their *TikTok* fame into fandoms as they released more music. Adam, a music student, spent the lockdown Duet Jamming with friends for fun but also pointed to many new skills he had picked up in the process that were sure to prove useful in his future career:

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[5] https://www.tiktok.com/@jazztokofficial/video/6981112930813086982
[6] https://www.tiktok.com/@jazztokofficial/video/6984059245578800390

> I'm excited to really do stuff with the skills that I've been using *TikTok* to practice. I really think that's what it is… practising production, video editing… all of these skills that are going to become really useful… I have *TikTok* to thank for that.

<div align="center">Adam (@adamdorfmannmusic)</div>

The case study of JazzTok has limited generalisability but points to several productive directions for future research. Future work should investigate how the Duet continues to evolve on *TikTok* and on competing short video platforms, such as Instagram Reels, that have integrated their own versions of the feature (e.g. Carman, 2021). Additionally, future work should explore how other *TikTok* features, such as Use This Sound, create unique opportunities for distributed creativity that are distinct from digital platforms like YouTube. Finally, future studies should seek out other musical communities on *TikTok* and elsewhere that formed out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate what happens to those communities in the wake of the pandemic.

The spectre of COVID-19 will likely continue hover over the international music industries for years to come. As the major players scramble to adapt business models, independent artists are proactively finding ways to do what they love and discovering new professional opportunities to make music with others from afar. Given that the interviews were primarily conducted in January, I ended each by asking informants what they were looking forward to in the New Year. They told me they were eager to return to rehearsal spaces, to perform in front of crowds and, above all, to meet up with their JazzTok family in real life:

> I'm really excited to deepen some of these friendships I've made. I have been so blessed to be put in a room with so many fantastic people who I know are going to succeed and do great things.

<div align="center">RJ (@rjthecomposer)</div>

Appendix – Interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in January and February 2021 remotely via Zoom. All informants cited in this study provided informed consent to be named and to include their TikTok account names in publications.

Name	Date	Account	Country
Ebony	12Jan21	@ebonylorenmusic	US
Emerson	14Jan21	@emersonbrophy	Australia
Ben	15Jan21	@bensrightbrain	US
Shout	16Jan21	@vocaloutburst	US
Anthony	18Jan21	@ewokbeats	US
Damoyee	19Jan21	@damoyee	US
Kris	20Jan21	@musixicn_kris_	US
Bri	20Jan21	@souparstarbri	US
Lisa	20Jan21	@utzig	US
Rachel	21Jan21	@rvmillz	US
Adam	21Jan21	@adamdorfmannmusic	US
Jake	21Jan21	@jakedoesmusicsometimes	US
Jay	22Jan21	@jaywebbtrumpt	US
Alex	26Jan21	@alexengelberg	US
Ralph	27Jan21	@theboneguy	US
Stacey	28Jan21	@staceyryanmusic	Canada
RJ	30Jan21	@rjthecomposer	US
Gabbi	4Feb21	@fettuccinefettuqueen	Australia

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