

Analysis of the TikTok Sound Branding Influence on the User

Karine Markarova¹, Seung In Kim^{2*}

Abstract

This study explores the impact of sound branding on TikTok, particularly how it affects user engagement, brand perception, business growth, product promotion, user satisfaction, mood, and retention rates. It highlights that TikTok's sound branding significantly enhances user interaction and strengthens the bond between brands and customers through auditory cues. Additionally, it boosts business growth, aids in product promotion, and elevates user satisfaction and retention. However, the study indicates that for sound branding to effectively increase purchase intent, it must be paired with compelling visuals and content. It also notes that sound branding alone may not be sufficient to encourage users to subscribe to a brand or seek out a product featured in an advertisement. This study underscores the importance of integrating sound branding in social media branding strategies and suggests its findings could be applicable in various fields, including advertising, public relations, marketing, psychology, and digital media design. The research calls for a more comprehensive approach to multisensory branding to enrich the user experience.

Keyword : sound branding, audio branding, TikTok sound branding, TikTok, sound influence

1. Introduction

In this age of digitalization, software developers started to use a comprehensive approach of both visual and audio components to entice the user [1]. One successful case is TikTok, a simple app with dancing videos that has turned into a colossal entertainment and educational platform many entrepreneurs use to promote their businesses. Existing studies have looked into the advertisements on this app, monetization, visual content, content analysis, psychological tricks that the creators use to attract users, the psychology of TikTok use, and the impact of this app. However, we have not looked much into its sound branding approach, considering how heavily the app depends not only on the visual elements but also on the sound elements. The creative freedom that the TikTok platform provides allows users to experiment with sounds. Sound can be overlooked when it comes to design or other creative processes (excluding music production), and the emphasis is mostly on the visual part. In this article, we will cover what sound branding is and how it is utilized in TikTok, what influence it has on the user, and

1 Department of Digital Media Design, IDAS, Hongik University, Seoul, Korea [Graduate Student]
e-mail: markarovakarine@naver.com

2 Department of Digital Media Design, IDAS, Hongik University, Seoul, Korea [Professor]
e-mail: r2d2kim@naver.com (Corresponding author)

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the certain changes in the TikTok policy. Our objective is to analyze the following aspects: 1) TikTok sounds and songs influence on user engagement; 2) brand-customer bond building through sonic associations; 3) impact on business growth; 4) TikTok sound influence on the product promotion effectiveness; 5) user mood and satisfaction levels; 6) user retention rates. Based on the users' opinions, we will also try to discern whether TikTok's sound branding has disadvantages. The method of this research is continuous sampling and qualitative and quantitative analysis. With this article, we hope to demonstrate the power of sound and bring attention to such crucial details when it comes to creating a brand from scratch. We are hopeful that the insights from this research will greatly contribute to social media sound branding and demonstrate that sound branding should not be neglected but rather emphasized, especially for social media projects.

2. TikTok and Sound Branding

2.1 TikTok

TikTok is a huge social media platform that enables users to create content and share it in the form of short videos. It was created in September 2016 by ByteDance company. The focus on viral entertaining content with an emphasis on songs and other creative tools made it especially attractive for the younger audience. The main content at some point consisted of people dancing or lip-synching to trending songs or sounds. Nowadays, the content has dramatically changed and varies from entertaining to educational content. It is worth noting that depending on geolocation, the app has different content or even app versions. The Chinese version of TikTok is known as Douyin (抖音), and it is a separate app. As for American TikTok, Korean TikTok, or Russian TikTok (considering a ban on TikTok in Russia), they have different filtered content. However, there is one interesting moment when we look at the specifics of the TikTok branding strategy. TikTok is like a snack culture where videos are very short, and it promotes consumer culture by creating a short-lived relationship with consumers [2]. This is dangerous considering the short-lived nature of these videos, which require more effort to keep rolling out and maintain the brand identity [2]. What seems to be the strong point of TikTok is - that short, fun, and engaging videos that do not bore people - can easily disrupt the brand-customer relationship. It is crucial to adapt the branding content to fit the media platform [3]. Considering how short-lived the success of the video can be, the branding should be adaptable to this environment. When it comes to TikTok's UX system, it has three levels of interactions, including a video page, a comments section, sponsorship page [4]. Tiktok's comments section does not allow external links and uses an in-app search

system, 'mention' that strengthens the interaction between users and creators by staying on the same app [4]. The comment section also allows only short messages that, in case of lengthy discussions, might turn into a hard-to-follow conversation for the user to read. To summarize, the whole TikTok interaction design centers around the unification of the users without relying on external apps and sticking to the vertical video format. In terms of content creation, at first, it offered 15-second-long content, but now it has expanded to 1 to 10-minute recording options, as well as photo posting and text posts. TikTok's advertising options involve the technique when companies buy original hashtags and create a TikTok challenge that urges the users to use the said hashtag; the other techniques are native advertising, targeted advertising, full-screen ad banners, top TikTok videos [5]. There are also other advertising options for TikTok. Such as Branded Effects (animated branded stickers), InFeed Ads (appear while you scroll the feed), native advertising, branded takeover (a full-screen ad banner that appears on top of all the content as soon as you open TikTok and the user cannot skip it), Top TikTok videos (TopView which opens as soon as the user opens the app but it can be 1-minute long and the user can skip it), and 'Branded Hashtag Challenge' (brands buy original hashtags and users can use them in their videos and participate in the challenge).

2.2 Sonic Branding: Sound and Its Influence on People

Sound branding is a relatively new branch of branding. It is an interdisciplinary area that intersects with sonic design, branding, advertising, psychology, PR, and music. Sound branding usually accompanies visual content but can also be used independently to represent a brand, a product, and a blogger. Sonic branding is the branding process that involves branding with sounds, such as music [6]. It is also called sonic branding, audio branding, and other synonymic names. At the same time, it is advised to avoid believing that sound branding is only about music when it is rather about branding [7]. Sound branding is also described as not just a jingle or music for advertising but an intricate system that consists of inspired and thoughtful design focused on the sounds instead of sight [7]. Sound branding is also called 'music branding' since it can be defined as a communication process between a brand and customers through emotions [8]. The '4Ps of Marketing' have transformed into 'the 4Es', which stand for Experience, Emotion, Engagement, and Exclusivity, and can be delivered to people through music [8]. All of these aspects inherently run through music, and music easily conveys a spectrum of emotions to the receiver of the message. Music plays a key role in sound branding and can alter a person's mood [8]. It was observed that mid-frequencies (500 to 2000 Hz) are perceived as annoying; other low-frequency sounds around 3 to 8 dB are also included in the equation [9]. Other

sounds are unanimously considered annoying-for example, fingernails against the blackboard or friction between metal objects [9]. Sound can elicit three different emotions: happiness, fear, and sadness [9]. It has been noted that music and certain sounds can positively affect people. Natural sounds are among those that are pleasant to human ears, and they are usually found between the 50s and 60s on the noise scale (dBA scale) [9]. Music is also successfully used for therapies to help patients with cancer, stress, and anxiety. Certain tempos of music can elicit different emotional reactions from the users. In most cases, higher tempos are perceived as 'happy' by people, and lower tempos songs as 'scary' [10]. A certain genre of music evokes certain emotions or responses; the same goes for the source of the sound, genre, voice, style, tempo, lyrics, loudness, and other criteria that can be considered. Aside from affecting the user's emotions, music promotes engagement. More than half of the visitors to famous social media websites like Facebook, Last.FM, Twitter, and MySpace come back for music, and 40% of the visitors make music part of their profiles [8]. Research on mood induction models shows that given there is a match between the mood of the music and the communication mood, it amplifies the intent to purchase among consumers [10]. Depending on the language of the music, the customers were inclined to buy the wine that matched the language of the songs played in the store [11]. Thus, good sound branding can influence the mood and, consequently, the user's satisfaction levels. On top of that, people's believability can be improved if music has high congruity with the message and the brand [12]. The right kind of music designs a brand's authenticity [7]. Music that manifests the core traits of the brand amplifies the authenticity of the brand. Non-verbal communication through music can easily reach consumers without provoking a cognitive response called a 'counter-argument' that would nullify branding efforts [7]. To conclude, we will include the main takeaways made on music experience effects on the consumer that might be transferred and adapted for social media use: 1) responsiveness to music is a very individual thing and can vary depending on the person; 2) brand-specific music evokes a better sense of 'fit' among consumers than generic music; 3) consumers who can feel 'the brand-music fit' were more satisfied with the experience and had positive brand associations; 4) a better 'brand-music fit' leads to higher ratings from customers on shopping experience and the atmosphere of the store [13].

2.3 Sound Branding in TikTok

TikTok's sonic branding has transformed jingles into the process of original music creation [14]. One of the most recognizable TikTok sounds is a sound logo at the end of each TikTok video. This sound differs from the app's Chinese version, where a cute voice gently says, 'Douyin', and the TikTok sound logo has a quick ascending melody. MassiveMusic created the TikTok sound logo and wanted to convey

the essence of the brand, and inside the 2-beat sonic logo lies an 808 sub-bas hit followed by an E major7 chord that is unresolved on purpose to make the listener guess what should be next [15]. Their efforts led to phenomenal results, with 73% of users attributing this logo to a positive experience and considering it 'unique' [15]. Other sounds associated with TikTok and its sonic branding include the sonic logo, the sound of a video button, and songs used in 90% of the content and ads on the platform. The UX system sound feature automatically picks the song if the user takes a picture with a TikTok camera. To some extent, TikTok sound branding is similar to Instagram, which created a similar format, 'Reelz', and allows music to be added to videos and photo posts. While both social networks focus on the visual part and all kinds of content, the striking difference is that TikTok emphasizes the songs and sound effects more. The songs and audio can instantaneously go viral on the TikTok platform. If the song is removed or taken down, TikTok allows the user to replace it with an alternative or them altered version of that sound. As for the recent findings, 63% of the users have discovered new music that they have encountered for the first time on the app; 58% of the users noticed that they had a strong brand connection; 68% percent of the users remembered the brand better; 62% percent want to get to know the brand better; 58% of the users want to share the ad or spread the word about the brand [16]. As for the songs, 67% of users prefer branded videos with viral songs, and 65% of content creators voted for original sounds from a brand's video [16]. To summarize, the majority of users and content creators have experienced the positive effects of TikTok sound branding on the music industry, such as song popularity and artist discovery. We also categorize TikTok content with sound into the following categories: 1) Videos with original songs (unedited and recognizable songs from famous musicians); 2) Videos with altered songs (sound effects and edited songs (remixes), dialogues); 3) Video with new songs (songs from aspiring artists); 4) Narration videos (videos with quiet background music); 5) Narration videos type 2 (videos with no sound). The first three types of content are similar since there are no voice-overs, and the sonic branding component is prevalent. Other types of content emphasize the narrator rather than the sound. Nevertheless, the recent dispute with Universal Music Group raises many concerns about the future of TikTok's sound branding. Many worldwide popular artists' songs were removed from videos, leaving a thread of soundless viral videos. Many users took this news light-heartedly and now they remix or alter the songs to avoid copyrighting, but what would be the long-term effect of this change still remains unknown [17]. As of now, the pirating of songs has become more apparent, and TikTok's policies on song moderation might change to avoid pirating [17]. TikTok sound branding is used by big companies and other creators with small and big followings. The whole ideology of the app fosters openness and versatility for sonic branding to thrive.

3. Methodology and Survey Results

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A survey featuring dichotomous questions was conducted to elicit clear, unambiguous responses from participants, minimizing hesitation or uncertainty in their answers. Additionally, respondents were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback. Data were collected from 82 participants, categorized into four age groups: 16-20 years old (6 responses), 21-25 years old (48 responses), 26-30 years old (23 responses), and 31 years old and above (5 responses). Participants hailed from a diverse range of countries, including Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Brazil, South Korea, China, France, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, ensuring a broad international perspective. The survey questions were designed to address the research objectives outlined in the introduction. All respondents were either active TikTok users or had experience with the platform. Considering TikTok's sound branding appears in both standalone ads and within content created by users (TikTokers), the survey encompassed both contexts. The findings are summarized in the subsequent [Table 1].

[Table 1] TikTok Sound Branding Survey Results

No.	Questions	Percentage (%)	
		Yes	No
1.	Do you use similar apps like YouTube Shorts or Instagram reels?	95.1	4.9
2.	Do you think that the music choice for an ad is important?	97.6	2.4
3.	Do you get interested in the product if the ad music choice was good on TikTok?	78	22
4.	Do you feel positive emotions (excited or satisfied) when you hear a good music choice in TikTok content or TikTok ad?	97.6	2.4
5.	Do you feel negative emotions (annoyance, frustration) when you hear a bad music choice in TikTok content or an ad?	65.9	34.1
6.	Do you want to click 'learn more' or search for the product when the music is to your taste or is engaging?	47.6	52.4
7.	If the sound accompanying content is good, do you also want to research more about the brand?	57.3	42.7
8.	Do you want to buy a product if the music choice in the ad is good and catchy?	28	72
9.	Do you want to find the song and the musician if the music choice in the ad is good and catchy?	97.6	2.4
10.	Do you want to click away when the music choice for the ad or content on TikTok is terrible?	82.9	17.1
11.	If the music is catchy, do you want to stay longer on a creator's ad or video content?	85.4	14.6
12.	If the music choice is good, do you want to watch the ad or the video content until the	91.5	8.5

	end?		
13.	Do you feel positive that you won't be able to listen to songs of some popular artists on TikTok? The list of artists includes Billie Eilish, Blackpink, Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande, Harry Styles, Drake, Olivia Rodrigo, etc.	28	72
14.	Would you still use TikTok even though some famous artists' songs were removed?	89	11
15.	Would you prefer a unique sound from a new artist to a famous artist on TikTok?	64.6	35.4
16.	If the ad's visuals and content were good but the music was bad, would you be interested?	56.1	43.9
17.	If the ad's visuals and content were bad, but the music was good, would you be interested?	20.7	79.3
18.	Is the ad's content more important than sound to you?	81.7	18.3
19.	Do you remember the brand from TikTok better if it has its distinct sound?	85.4	14.6
20.	If the song is catchy, would you share the TikTok video with your friend?	64.6	35.4
21.	Do you feel connected with the brand when they use the song that suits you?	78	22
22.	Do you recognize the brand when you hear the songs from the ad?	87.8	12.2
23.	If the song is good, are you most likely to comment, like, or engage with the ad or video content?	56.1	43.9
24.	Are you most likely to subscribe if the sound in the TikTok video or ad was good?	32.9	67.1
25.	Would you love the TikTok content or ad more if the song matched your mood?	86.6	13.4
26.	Would you like it if the song in the TikTok content or ad matched your music taste?	92.7	7.3
27.	When you hear TikTok viral songs outside of TikTok (in your everyday life), do you think of TikTok or some TikTok-recommended products?	74.4	25.6
28.	Do you think that TikTok sound branding is worth studying?	93.9	6.1

The most represented age group was 21-25 years old. Upon comparative analysis of the answers from each age group, we found four discrepancies: 1) Question No. 6: Only 21-25 (27/47 users) and 26-30-year-olds (12/23 users) do not want to click 'learn more' or search for the product when the music is to their taste or is engaging. All the other age groups are eager to learn more about the product. 2) Question no.10: Only 31 years old and above do not want to click away when the music choice for the ad or content on TikTok is terrible. All the other age groups want to click away. 3) Question no. 23: Only 21 to 25-year-olds (25/47 users) will not be likely to comment, like, or engage with the ad or video content if the song is good. All the other age groups will engage with the video. 4) Question no. 25: Only 31-year-olds and above are most likely to subscribe if the sound in the TikTok video or ad was good. Other groups will not subscribe. If we analyze the survey results **as a whole** and match the question to the objectives, then TikTok greatly influences the user. The results are the following: 1) engagement (Questions 6, 20, 23): Users are most likely to engage with the content if the song is good and share the content if it is catchy. On the downside, users do not want to click 'learn more' or search for the product when the music suits their taste or is engaging. 2)

Brand-customer bond building (questions 19, 21, 22): Users remember the brand from TikTok better if it has a distinct sound; they feel connected to the brand if the songs suit the user. Users also recognize the brand when they hear the song from the ad. 3) business growth (questions 3, 7, 8, 9): If the sound accompanying the content is good, most users become interested in the product and want to research more about the brand; they also want to find the song and the musician. On the negative side, sound branding alone cannot make the users purchase the product. 4) product promotions (question 27): When users hear TikTok viral songs daily, they think of TikTok or TikTok-recommended products. 5) satisfaction levels (questions 4-5): TikTok sound branding influences the user's mood. If the music choice is good, most users feel positive emotions (annoyance, frustration), and the opposite is true if the music choice is bad. 6) retention rates (questions 10-12): if the music choice is catchy and good, most users tend to stay on the content longer or till the end. Most of the users would click away if the music choices for the ad or content were terrible. On the downside, good sound branding is insufficient to make the users subscribe (question 24). The only area that is not affected positively is purchase intent. It definitely picks the users' curiosity and makes them research the brand. However, most people would not buy the product even if the sound is good, which leads to the conclusion that sound branding should be combined with good visuals, quality content, and product information to make the users buy the products and encourage them to learn more about it (questions 16-18). Regarding recommendations, if the song fits the mood or the user's music taste, the users would like TikTok content and ads more. Most users would prefer sounds from new artists on TikTok, so this can be integrated more, especially considering the recent dispute with the UMG label dispute (questions 13, 15, 25-26). We also conducted a qualitative survey to understand the main pain points of the users in relation to TikTok sound branding and clarify some of the answers from the dichotomous survey. As for the qualitative survey results, the respondents voiced that their main inconvenience is the repetitive nature of the TikTok sound branding and the 'forceful promotion' of the songs. One of the respondents expanded on that topic and claimed that the viral sounds and songs get 'transferred' onto other platforms, appear in the content (YouTube, Instagram), and amplify the annoyance.

To clarify the question on the purchase, where we anticipated positive responses but, on the contrary, received negative responses, we asked the respondents to explain their choice. We also inquired why users were not interested in purchasing the product even if the song in the content was good. Most respondents pointed out that the purchase intent depends on the content rather than the song. Some respondents claimed that the users did not want to buy the product because they might dislike it or its content. Other respondents agreed that while sound is important the content and product are more

deciding factors. We also asked the respondents who voted 'yes' and would be interested in purchasing the product if the music choice in the ad was good and catchy. The respondent stated that the sound branding would pick their curiosity about the product that is hyped up.

4. Discussion

The research findings advocate for a judicious approach to the pervasive promotion of songs and sounds on TikTok. While such sonic branding strategies can effectively ingrain song or brand associations in users' minds, an excessive reliance on them runs the risk of engendering adverse reactions and alienating potential customers. The study proposes striking a balanced approach to mitigate this concern.

Further exploration revealed intriguing possibilities in analyzing how different content types interact with the same song, suggesting a potential avenue for expanding this research into investigating the psychological impacts of sound branding. Specifically, examining how individual personality traits, such as the four temperaments system, influence music preferences on TikTok could yield valuable insights for crafting more tailored and effective sound branding strategies.

An interesting development highlighted in the study is the evolution of sound branding on TikTok, particularly in the wake of the removal of songs by popular artists from the Universal Music Group (UMG) catalog. This development suggests a potential opportunity for the rise of new artists without significantly deterring TikTok's user base. The study confirms the positive impact of sound branding across various dimensions, except for its ability to directly drive purchase intent, subscription eagerness, and product research.

Notably, a significant 93.6% of survey respondents affirmed the relevance and value of this research topic, underscoring its contribution to understanding the effectiveness of TikTok's sound branding strategies and their broader implications for various stakeholders.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this research establishes TikTok sound branding as a significant field of study with a positive impact on various aspects such as user engagement, brand loyalty, business growth, product promotion, and both user satisfaction and retention. It functions effectively as a standalone tool, benefiting both users and businesses. However, for enhancing purchase intent, combining sound branding with appealing visuals and content is crucial. Sound branding alone may not suffice to drive brand

subscriptions or product searches from advertisements. Optimizing TikTok sound branding could involve tailoring music choices to match users' preferences or current mood, potentially maximizing its effectiveness. This study underscores the substantial influence of TikTok sound branding on both users and businesses, enhancing performance, satisfying the need for entertainment and connection, and fostering positive outcomes for content creators, businesses, and users alike.

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