

Excerptability, Participatory Affordances, and Platformed Visibility: An Exploratory Case Study of Viral Music Circulation on Douyin

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Abstract: Short-video platforms have changed the unit through which popular music is encountered: users often meet a brief excerpt embedded in a repeatable video format before hearing the complete song. This article develops **excerptability** as a sensitising concept for examining how musical form becomes available for platform reuse. Rather than seeking population-level effects, it presents an exploratory, interpretive case study of viral music circulation on Douyin. The core analysis compares ten purposively selected songs and reconstructs appendix-reported uses associated with 100 highly liked videos; a convenience survey of 201 Douyin users is retained only as supplementary audience context. Eight songs circulated through excerpts containing chorus material, but only six used a chorus alone, and excerpts ranged from under 17 to 45 seconds. Three catalogue tracks released before Douyin existed—one in 1990—also achieved renewed circulation. These cases show that excerptability can be retrospectively realised through selection and reuse rather than only designed into new music. The reconstructed records further suggest two configurations: performance-led circulation through covers and challenges, and narrative-led circulation through mini-dramas, plots, and atmospheric use. The article conceptualises excerptability through boundedness, recognisability, repeatability, and actionability, and relates these dimensions to participatory affordances, platformed visibility, and catalogue recirculation. Its contribution is conceptual and analytical rather than statistically generalisable: it offers a vocabulary and case-based framework for future comparative research on platformised music culture.

Keywords: Douyin; viral music; excerptability; participatory affordances; platformisation; short-video platforms; music circulation

1. Introduction

Short-video platforms have become important intermediaries in popular-music circulation. On Douyin, songs frequently reach users not as complete recordings but as short excerpts attached to dances, covers, comedy, tourism promotion, mini-dramas, and other visual formats. Repetition across many videos can make an excerpt highly recognisable even when users have not deliberately searched for the song or listened to the complete track. This mode of circulation raises questions about which musical features lend themselves to short-video reuse, how participatory practices contribute to visibility, and how audiences describe their encounters with the resulting music.

Existing studies describe viral music in several related ways. Viral circulation can involve digitally shared imitation and re-performance [1], content-making practices distinct from conventional promotion [2], and the rapid reproduction of recognisable musical or visual units. Research on TikTok and related



platforms also emphasises dance challenges, user participation, influencer activity, and value co-creation [3-4]. Meanwhile, work on digital music industries shows that platforms increasingly influence discovery, curation, and the relationship between rights holders, musicians, and listeners [5-7].

The term *viral meme song* is used here as a practical rather than evaluative category. It refers to a song that (a) achieves substantial visibility through repeated short-video circulation and (b) is reproduced through recognisable excerpts or participatory formats. The term does not imply that every such song is aesthetically inferior or compositionally identical. Labels such as “brainwashing music” or “low-quality music” are culturally loaded and should not substitute for analysis.

The original project from which this article is developed addressed the effects of viral meme songs on Chinese audiences and the Chinese music industry. That formulation was too broad for the available evidence. A questionnaire based on non-probability sampling cannot represent the Chinese population, and observations of platform recommendations cannot by themselves demonstrate algorithmic manipulation or industry-wide effects. The present article therefore adopts an explicitly exploratory and interpretive purpose. It treats the ten songs as information-rich cases through which to build a sensitising concept, not as a representative sample from which to estimate population parameters. It asks two core questions and one supplementary contextual question:

- (1) How is excerptability manifested and differentiated across the ten selected songs?
- (2) How are excerpts enacted through performance-led, narrative-led, and catalogue-recirculation practices on Douyin?
- (3) As supplementary context, how did the surveyed users describe their exposure to and evaluation of viral meme songs?

By separating musical evidence, reconstructed video-use records, and self-reported audience context, the study identifies configurations and negative cases without treating them as universal laws or making unsupported causal claims.

The article makes three contributions. First, it introduces **excerptability** as a meso-level sensitising concept linking musical form to short-video reuse. Excerptability is not a formula for popularity; it refers to the degree to which a bounded musical segment can be recognised, detached, repeated, and coordinated with visual action. Second, it distinguishes performance-led from narrative-led enactments of musical excerpts, extending participatory-affordance research beyond dance and imitation. Third, it identifies **catalogue recirculation** as a temporal process through which older recordings become newly actionable. Together, these contributions offer a case-based alternative to accounts that locate virality solely in musical simplicity, user creativity, or algorithmic power.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Platformisation and the changing musical object

Platformisation describes the penetration of platform infrastructures, economic processes, and governance into cultural production and circulation. Cultural commodities become contingent: their form, visibility, and monetisation are adjusted to platform-specific data structures and markets [8]. In music, digital services do more than distribute recordings. They organise discovery, classify content, produce popularity indicators, and mediate relationships among musicians, rights holders, advertisers, and listeners [5-6].

Short-video platforms intensify this transformation because the circulating object is frequently not the complete recording. It is a detachable excerpt combined with a visual template, creator performance, caption, hashtag, and interface-based invitation to reuse. Douyin and TikTok share a corporate history but operate in different markets and governance environments; they should not be treated as interchangeable platforms. Research on their parallel development nevertheless shows how short-video formats, creator cultures, and commercial infrastructures evolve across distinct platform ecologies [9]. This article focuses specifically on Douyin while drawing cautiously on TikTok scholarship to illuminate comparable media practices.

The platform perspective also changes how musical standardisation can be understood. Repetition can occur within composition, across videos, and through interface conventions. A recurring chord progression is not the same phenomenon as a repeated dance template or a ranking system that repeatedly surfaces the same recording. Treating these levels separately makes it possible to ask where similarity occurs and how similarities become connected.

2.2. Viral circulation and participatory reuse

Viral cultural circulation is not simply a property contained within a song. It is produced through relationships among media objects, users, platform functions, and promotional actors. Burgess (2014)

[10] associates viral video with imitative and ordinary forms of creativity, while Trezise (2018) [1] examines how dance-song covers circulate through contagious scripts. Harper’s (2019) [2] study of Beyoncé’s visual album similarly demonstrates that viral visibility depends on the interaction of content, social behaviour, and technological interfaces.

For short-video music, reuse is especially important. Users can reproduce a dance, sing over an existing track, parody a performance, or place an excerpt beneath unrelated visual material. Such activities can be understood as participation, but participation is not necessarily independent of commercial structures. User activity may simultaneously provide self-expression, social connection, free promotional labour, and data value. Hu et al. (2016) [11] show that participation in video-sharing communities is related to self-construal and community interactivity, while Toscher (2021) [4] frames activity on TikTok as resource integration and value co-creation. These perspectives help explain why participatory circulation may benefit users and commercial actors at the same time.

Affordances are relational possibilities for action rather than fixed technical effects. A “use this sound” function, split-screen format, editing template, or hashtag can facilitate imitation, but an affordance becomes meaningful only through situated practice. Zulli and Zulli (2022) [12] describe TikTok imitation as technological mimesis that supports “imitation publics.” Applied to music, this suggests that circulation depends not simply on exposure to a recording but on culturally intelligible actions that can be repeated with it. The present study calls these possibilities **participatory affordances**.

2.3. Musical form and excerptability

Music that circulates in short videos is often encountered through an excerpt rather than a complete song. An excerpt that begins quickly, contains a recognisable melodic or lyrical hook, and can accompany repeated gestures may be particularly reusable. This does not mean that a simple progression automatically causes virality. Familiar harmony, repetition, vocal range, tempo, lyrical content, artist recognition, visual performance, and promotional investment can operate together.

Audio-content analysis commonly distinguishes high-level features such as genre, mood, and instrumentation from mid-level features such as rhythm, pitch, and harmony [13]. Music similarity is also partly perceptual and context-dependent rather than reducible to a single technical measure [14]. The present study therefore uses descriptive musicological categories—song form, location of the circulated excerpt, tempo, metre, harmony, melody, instrumentation, and vocal demands—rather than claiming to calculate an objective index of musical quality.

This article uses **excerptability** to identify the interface between musical form and platform practice. Four analytical dimensions are proposed: boundedness, or whether a segment can be separated without losing basic intelligibility; recognisability, or whether melodic, lyrical, rhythmic, or timbral cues make it identifiable; repeatability, or whether its internal organisation supports repeated listening and performance; and actionability, or whether it can coordinate movement, lip-sync, editing, parody, or narrative emphasis. In Blumer’s (1954) [15] sense, these dimensions sensitise inquiry by suggesting where and how to look without pretending to supply a definitive measurement scale. They guide interpretation of the ten-song corpus and invite operationalisation in larger comparative studies.

The concept of standardisation provides a critical lens for interpreting recurring musical forms. Adorno’s critique of popular music associates standardisation with industrial production and pseudo-individualisation [16-17]. However, applying this framework mechanically would reproduce the conclusion in advance. Recurrent chord progressions or chorus structures can facilitate familiarity without proving that listeners are passive or deceived. Moreover, digitalisation can expand access and participation while also concentrating infrastructural power [6]. Standardisation is therefore treated here as an observable tendency in selected musical features, not as evidence that all works or listeners are identical.

2.4. Platformed visibility and audience agency

Platforms organise music discovery through interfaces, popularity indicators, recommendation systems, licensing arrangements, and connections with other services. Research on YouTube and streaming services demonstrates that algorithmic and editorial systems shape visibility [5] [18]. In China, streaming platforms, rights holders, self-releasing musicians, and short-video services operate within a distinctive industrial and regulatory environment [7].

Exposure should nevertheless be distinguished from persuasion. A user may encounter a popular song because of general trending content, social sharing, search behaviour, creator activity, commercial placement, or personalised recommendation. Receiving a recommendation for a disliked song does not reveal why it was recommended, whether the user engaged with it, or whether the exposure changed the

user's taste. Audience agency and platform power should thus be analysed together rather than presented as mutually exclusive explanations.

Uses-and-gratifications research is useful for interpreting self-reported reasons for media use because it draws attention to entertainment, emotional, informational, and social needs. In the present study it serves as a modest interpretive framework for questionnaire responses. It is not used to infer psychological motivations that were not directly measured.

The resulting framework can be represented as a sequence of analytically distinct but interacting processes:

musical excerptability → participatory enactment → platformed visibility → differentiated audience response.

The arrows denote proposed relationships, not causal effects established by the present design. Platformed visibility may also feed back into production when artists or labels compose, edit, or promote songs with anticipated reuse in mind. Testing that feedback would require production interviews and longitudinal data beyond the scope of this study.

3. Method

3.1. Exploratory interpretive case-study design

The study uses an exploratory, interpretive, multi-source case-study design. Its purpose is concept construction and analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisation. Case-study inquiry can generate theoretical insight through strategically selected cases and close attention to context, variation, and counterexample [19]. Musicological comparison provides the primary evidence; reconstructed video-use records show how excerpts were enacted; and an online questionnaire supplies supplementary audience context. The survey is not treated as a hypothesis-testing component and does not elevate the project into a population-representative mixed-methods design.

The design follows a triangulation logic of complementarity rather than validation. Sources can illuminate different levels of the same process while retaining distinct units of analysis. For example, chorus use and respondents' perceptions of similarity can be discussed together, but subjective similarity does not validate harmonic classification. Likewise, reconstructed video frequencies illustrate forms of enactment; they do not establish that participation caused high engagement.

The unit of analysis is the song in the musicological comparison, the reported video use in the reconstructed circulation records, and the respondent in the supplementary questionnaire. Making these units explicit prevents ecological inferences from individual attitudes to platform-wide behaviour.

3.2. Song sample and musicological analysis

Ten songs were purposively selected from songs appearing within the top three positions of Douyin-related monthly music charts on QQ Music during the 2021–2023 period covered by the original project. The sample comprised *Four Seasons for You*, *White Moonlight* and *Cinnabar Mole*, *Milky Way*, *Front Coalition Lost Love*, *Lan Ting Xu (Orchid Pavilion Preface)*, *The Shepherd of the Sea of Cocoa*, *Love You*, *Lonely Hero*, *Preface to the West Building*, and *Spade A*.

The original chart archive, exact capture dates, and complete inclusion log were not retained in the manuscript. Consequently, the sample should be understood as a set of prominent illustrative cases rather than a reproducible census of the most viral songs. This is an important limitation and should be corrected in future data collection.

Each song was examined in relation to form, location and duration of the excerpt circulating on Douyin, melody, metre, tempo, tonal organisation, chord progression, instrumentation, vocal range or singing difficulty, lyrics, and performance. The analysis was descriptive. References to “common chord templates” indicate correspondence with recurrent pop progressions used as an analytical benchmark in the original study; they do not establish compositional copying or low artistic quality.

3.3. Video sample and coding

For each song, the original researcher examined ten associated Douyin videos with the highest numbers of likes available at the time of data collection, producing 100 reported video uses. Because URLs and archived captures were not retained, the revised article treats these observations as a **reconstructed descriptive record**, not as a fully reproducible content-analysis dataset. The reported uses were originally assigned to two broad categories:

- **Performance-led reuse:** covers, dance challenges, imitation, or other performances organised around the song.

- **Narrative, atmospheric, or promotional use:** use of the song to organise a mini-drama or plot, accompany a landscape, or promote a programme, destination, or other activity.

The coding was conducted by one researcher. The original project did not report a second coder, intercoder reliability, archived URLs, or a full coding sheet. Consequently, the 85:15 distribution is used only to map provisional circulation configurations. It is not presented as a reliable estimate of all Douyin videos or as a formal test of content prevalence.

For the present revision, song-level category counts were reconstructed from the thesis appendix and checked against the reported total of 100 videos. Because the original video identifiers and independent coding records were unavailable, intercoder reliability could not be estimated retrospectively without fabricating observations. A complete coding manual and double-coding template were therefore prepared as supplementary materials for replication or re-coding.

3.4. *Supplementary descriptive questionnaire*

The online questionnaire was created through Wenjuanxing and circulated through Chinese social-media channels, including WeChat, Weibo, and short-video networks. Eligibility was based on use of Douyin. A total of 201 completed responses were included. Questions addressed respondents' evaluations of viral meme songs, perceived similarity among songs, perceived singing difficulty, preferred performers, usual locations of exposure, attractive features, preferences for alternative versions, and views of the songs' future. In the revised design, these responses provide contextual resonance and possible directions for future scale development; they do not test the excerptability framework.

Several questions permitted multiple responses; percentages from those questions therefore do not sum to 100%. The survey used purposive and convenience recruitment rather than probability sampling. It did not establish a sampling frame for Chinese Douyin users, and the original manuscript did not report response rate, recruitment counts by channel, psychometric validation, or complete demographic cell sizes. The analysis is accordingly limited to descriptive frequencies. Age and education cross-tabulations are not used to make population-level claims, because some categories contain very small numbers and no inferential tests were conducted.

Participants were informed of the study purpose, voluntary participation, privacy protections, and anonymisation at the beginning of the questionnaire. The original manuscript did not identify a formal institutional review reference; this information should be added if approval or exemption was obtained.

3.5. *Document analysis*

Academic publications, policy materials, industry reports, and platform-related documents were used to contextualise the empirical findings. Documentary claims were not treated as direct evidence of platform intentions. Where the original project relied on trade reports, news items, or websites, those materials were used only for context rather than for central causal conclusions.

3.6. *Trustworthiness, reflexivity, and evidential thresholds*

The revised analysis applies five safeguards consistent with qualitative criteria of credibility, sincerity, resonance, and meaningful coherence [20]. First, numerical findings are reported only when recoverable from the thesis tables or appendices. Second, claims are matched to the sampling level: observations refer to “the selected songs,” “the reconstructed video records,” or “respondents.” Third, causal language is avoided because the study has no experimental manipulation, longitudinal comparison, or recommendation logs. Fourth, negative cases—particularly the verse-led circulation of *Spade A*, the difficult vocal material of *Milky Way*, and the mini-drama uses of *Preface to the West Building*—are analysed rather than suppressed. Fifth, a structured audit trail is supplied through the reconstructed questionnaire table, song-analysis matrix, video-use table, coding manual, and reproducible aggregate-statistics script.

Researcher interpretation shaped the original musical descriptions and video categories. The revised article does not disguise this subjectivity as measurement reliability. Instead, it treats excerptability as a sensitising concept, makes its four dimensions explicit, preserves contradictory cases, and distinguishes direct appendix evidence from later interpretation. These practices improve transparency but cannot retrospectively replace missing URLs, an independent coder, or a complete chart archive.

4. Results

4.1. *Musical characteristics of the selected songs*

Table 1 presents a cross-case comparison reconstructed from the original music-analysis appendix. It corrects the earlier, overly broad claim that nine songs circulated primarily through choruses. Eight excerpts included chorus material, but only six were chorus-only excerpts. *Front Coalition Lost Love* circulated through a prelude and verse, while *Spade A* circulated through a verse. *Four Seasons for You* and *Love You* combined a chorus with another formal section.

Table 1. Cross-case profile of the ten selected songs

ID	Song	Release	Tempo	Circulated section	Clip duration	Reported vocal demand	Performance-led videos (of 10)
S1	<i>Four Seasons for You</i>	2020	71 bpm	Intro and chorus	<25 s	Easy	9
S2	<i>White Moonlight and Cinnabar Mole</i>	2021	80 bpm	Chorus	<20 s	Very easy	10
S3	<i>Milky Way</i>	2021	85 bpm	Chorus	<17 s	Very difficult	6
S4	<i>Front Coalition Lost Love</i>	1990	128 bpm	Prelude and verse	16–30 s	Easy	10
S5	<i>Lan Ting Xu</i>	2008	75 bpm	Chorus	16–27 s	Difficult	8
S6	<i>The Shepherd of the Sea of Cocoa</i>	2020	63 bpm	Two choruses	30–45 s	Difficult	10
S7	<i>Love You</i>	2004	100 bpm	Verse and chorus	23–25 s	Easy	10
S8	<i>Lonely Hero</i>	2021	65 bpm	Chorus	23–35 s	Easy	10
S9	<i>Preface to the West Building</i>	2021	75 bpm	Chorus	16–27 s	Easy	2
S10	<i>Spade A</i>	2021	130 bpm	Verse	15–27 s	Easy	10

Eight excerpts had a stated upper duration of 30 seconds or less; two extended to 35 or 45 seconds. Tempo ranged from 63 to 130 bpm, and vocal demand ranged from very easy to very difficult. The corpus therefore does not support a single sonic profile of viral music. What recurs more consistently is the availability of a bounded segment that can be detached and reused.

The release years add a temporal dimension absent from the original interpretation. *Front Coalition Lost Love* (1990), *Love You* (2004), and *Lan Ting Xu* (2008) pre-date Douyin. Their later visibility cannot have resulted from composition specifically optimised for the platform. These cases point to **catalogue recirculation**: creators and platform systems can reactivate older recordings by locating or producing excerpts that work within contemporary video practices. Excerptability is therefore not solely an authorial property. It can be retrospectively realised through selection, editing, performance, and repetition.

Six songs used progressions classified in the original analysis as common pop chord templates, while four did not. Melodic repetition was also observed, particularly in *White Moonlight and Cinnabar Mole* and *Spade A*. The instrumentation was commonly organised around drums, guitar, piano, or digitally produced equivalents. Songs drawing on a Chinese-style aesthetic incorporated timbres associated with traditional instruments, including the guzheng.

Most songs were described as having manageable vocal demands, although this was not universal. *White Moonlight and Cinnabar Mole*, for example, was assessed as spanning approximately two octaves. These exceptions matter: the corpus does not support the claim that all viral songs are easy to sing or compositionally crude.

Taken together, the corpus displays partial rather than complete standardisation. Short, recognisable excerpts, familiar harmonic movement, repeated melodic material, and conventional instrumentation recur across several cases. At the same time, the range of formal locations, tempos, release periods, vocal demands, tonal organisation, and timbral presentation undermines any claim that the songs are

interchangeable. “Standardised” is therefore best understood as the selective recurrence of reusable conventions.

4.2. *Forms of video circulation*

Eighty-five of the 100 reconstructed uses were performance-led, including covers and dance challenges. Fifteen were reported as plots, mini-dramas, landscapes, or related background uses. Within these selected records, performance-led formats were more frequent than narrative, atmospheric, or promotional formats.

The aggregate 85:15 split conceals meaningful cross-song variation. Eight songs had performance-led formats in at least eight of their ten reconstructed records. *Milky Way* had six covers, with the remainder comprising landscapes and plots related to its lyrics. *Preface to the West Building* was the clearest negative case: only two records were covers, whereas eight were mini-dramas. Its circulation was therefore strongly narrative rather than performance-based. This case prevents “participation” from being reduced to dance or musical imitation. A reusable excerpt may also function as an affective narrative device that organises serialised visual content.

Two provisional circulation configurations emerge from the cases. In **performance-led circulation**, the excerpt supplies a script for bodily or musical enactment, as in covers and dance challenges. In **narrative-led circulation**, the excerpt supplies atmosphere, emotional framing, or continuity for plots and landscapes. These configurations are not mutually exclusive and require examination in a larger corpus, but they are analytically more informative than treating every reuse as the same type of participation.

A classification sensitivity check clarifies what the original 85:15 split can and cannot mean. Under a strict performance definition, covers, dances, challenges, and musical performances count as participatory, producing 85 performance-led uses and 15 other uses. Under a broader cultural-participation definition, the two plot-related videos and eight mini-dramas also count as transformative narrative reuse; the distribution then becomes 95 participatory or transformative uses and five atmospheric landscape uses. The conclusion is therefore not that precisely 85% of Douyin videos are participatory. Rather, the reconstructed cases show that excerpts became actionable through more than one route, and the boundary between participation and background use depends on the theoretical definition adopted.

Aggregate chi-square and Fisher calculations are provided in the supplementary analysis file as an audit aid, not as population inference. They are excluded from the main evidential argument because the ten songs and highest-liked videos were purposively selected, several cells are sparse, and the original item-level records are unavailable.

The relationship between musical form and participation is plausible but should be stated cautiously. A short chorus, repetitive beat, or recognisable hook may reduce the effort required to coordinate a dance, cover, or imitation. Yet the high-participation cases include both slow and fast songs, easy and difficult vocal material, new releases and catalogue tracks, and chorus- and verse-based excerpts. The video analysis did not compare successful and unsuccessful songs and therefore cannot isolate the causal effect of any particular musical feature. Creator status, visual content, paid promotion, timing, and platform distribution may also influence engagement.

Participatory videos can produce several forms of value simultaneously. For users, a cover or dance can provide self-presentation, enjoyment, recognition, and connection with others. For musicians and platforms, the same activity can extend the song’s circulation and generate additional content. The finding is therefore consistent with accounts of participatory culture and value co-creation, while also leaving room for critical questions about who captures the resulting economic value.

4.3. *Supplementary audience context*

The questionnaire findings are reported sparingly because the instrument was not designed to validate excerptability and the convenience sample cannot represent Douyin users. Their role is to indicate whether the case-based interpretation resonates with any self-reported patterns worth testing in future research.

Of the 201 respondents, 20 (9.95%) reported liking viral meme songs very much, 44 (21.89%) reported generally liking them, 95 (47.26%) selected the neutral midpoint, 25 (12.44%) reported disliking them, and 17 (8.46%) expressed strong dislike. The distribution indicates mixed rather than uniformly positive attitudes. Combining categories would conceal this ambivalence and is therefore avoided.

A total of 162 respondents (80.60%) perceived similarity among viral meme songs, while 39 (19.40%) did not. Perceived similarity is consistent with the recurrent musical conventions identified in the ten-song analysis, but it is not an objective measure of compositional sameness.

Short-video platforms were the most frequently selected usual point of exposure: 136 respondents (67.66%) selected Douyin or another short-video platform. Music-streaming platforms were selected by 79 respondents (39.30%), followed by bars, clubs, or karaoke venues (44; 21.89%), television (40; 19.90%), performances by friends or family (33; 16.42%), festivals or concerts (19; 9.45%), other channels (17; 8.46%), and music classes (7; 3.48%). Because this was a multiple-response item, these figures describe reported channels rather than mutually exclusive audience groups.

When asked what attracted them to viral meme songs, respondents most frequently selected music style (98; 48.76%) and melody (82; 40.80%). Emotional response (66; 32.84%) and singers (65; 32.34%) followed. Short-video clips were selected by 46 respondents (22.89%), singing skills by 39 (19.40%), and song popularity by 35 (17.41%). These descriptive results complicate a purely technological account of virality: respondents reported musical and affective features more often than popularity itself.

The survey also showed that exposure does not imply approval. Some respondents who disliked or strongly disliked viral meme songs nevertheless reported encountering them online. This finding is compatible with broad platform visibility, but the survey did not record recommendation logs or exposure histories. It therefore cannot determine whether the encounters resulted from personalised algorithms, general trends, social sharing, or other mechanisms.

The original cross-tabulations suggested possible variation by age and education. Those patterns are not interpreted substantively here because the sample was not representative, category sizes were uneven, and no inferential statistics were reported. Statements that younger and older people constitute the principal audience, or that less-educated people prefer viral meme songs, would exceed the evidence and risk reproducing demographic stereotypes.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Virality as an interaction of music, participation, and exposure*

The case materials point towards an interaction among excerptability, participatory reuse, and platform exposure. Eight excerpts included chorus material, but verse-based and mixed-section excerpts also circulated. Reconstructed video uses varied between performance-led and narrative-led configurations. Supplementary questionnaire responses add contextual resonance: short-video platforms were the most commonly reported point of encounter, while style and melody were prominent reported attractions. They are not treated as validation of the case framework.

No single component should be treated as sufficient. Familiar harmony cannot guarantee visibility; a dance challenge cannot circulate without creators and viewers; and exposure does not ensure liking. A more defensible model is relational: musical features make some forms of reuse easier, creators translate music into repeatable visual formats, and platform infrastructures distribute and rank those formats. Audience responses then feed back into visibility through viewing, imitation, commenting, sharing, or rejection.

This interpretation develops research that understands virality as a socio-technical process rather than an intrinsic property of content. It also explains why a song can be both commercially promoted and creatively appropriated. The same excerpt may function as a licensed asset, an informal cover, a joke, a dance prompt, or a marker of community membership.

Excerptability sharpens this relational account by identifying what passes between musical form and platform practice. The excerpts in this corpus are neither merely fragments of autonomous works nor neutral inputs to an algorithm. They are bounded musical resources that creators place into new visual and social contexts. Their actionability is visible in covers, dance challenges, and narrative uses, while their recognisability is consistent with respondents' widespread perception of similarity. These associations do not establish a universal mechanism, but they show why analysis of short-video music should not begin and end with complete songs.

The catalogue cases further separate excerptability from compositional intent. A recording made decades before Douyin can acquire platform relevance when creators identify a segment suited to contemporary imitation or storytelling. This finding adds **temporal recirculation** to the framework: platformised music culture does not only accelerate new releases; it reorganises access to cultural memory and makes back-catalogue music newly actionable. Future research could compare original release contexts with later short-video uses to examine how meanings change across time.

The negative cases are equally informative. The difficult vocal demands of *Milky Way* did not prevent circulation, and the predominantly mini-drama uses of *Preface to the West Building* did not depend on performance imitation. These cases suggest that no single feature—simplicity, singability, chorus form, or danceability—is necessary across the corpus. Virality is better approached configurationally: different

combinations of recognisability, affect, creator practice, and platform visibility may produce comparable circulation outcomes.

5.2. Standardisation without assuming passive audiences

The selected songs show recurring conventions, but the evidence does not justify a binary distinction between industrial “deception” and autonomous listening. Adorno’s critique remains useful for asking why familiar structures are repeatedly reproduced and how commercial systems reward predictability. Yet recurrence is not equivalent to total sameness, and popularity is not proof of manipulation.

The questionnaire distribution is instructive in this respect. Respondents expressed a wide range of attitudes, including dislike, despite widespread exposure. They also selected musical style, melody, and emotional response as attractions. These results are more consistent with constrained agency than with a model of passive cultural dupes: users make judgements within an environment whose available and visible content is structured by platforms, creators, and commercial relationships.

The study cannot determine the relative power of these actors. Doing so would require platform-level recommendation data, longitudinal exposure measures, interviews with creators and users, and evidence concerning licensing and promotion. The appropriate conclusion is therefore that platform power warrants investigation, not that algorithmic manipulation has been demonstrated.

5.3. Implications for music promotion and research

For musicians and promoters, the findings suggest that a reusable excerpt and a participatory visual format may support short-video circulation. This should not be converted into a formula for guaranteed virality. The corpus contains exceptions, and the study did not examine failed campaigns. Artists also face trade-offs among reach, attribution, licensing control, and the meanings created through user reuse.

For researchers, the results show the value of connecting musicological analysis with platform-content analysis. Studies of short-video music can become overly focused either on musical form or on platform economics. Examining both makes it possible to ask how a chorus, rhythm, performance convention, interface, and creator practice work together.

The study also offers a methodological implication for platform research. Platform power is often inferred from visible outcomes, yet the same outcome can have several causes. Widespread exposure may result from personalised recommendation, general popularity, paid placement, creator networks, or cross-platform promotion. Future work should combine screen-recorded recommendation diaries, platform data donations, creator interviews, and time-series measures of song use. Such designs would allow researchers to distinguish visibility from persuasion and correlation from platform effect.

5.4. Transferability beyond Douyin

The framework is potentially transferable, but the findings themselves are context-specific. Douyin’s Chinese regulatory environment, commercial partnerships, user culture, and music-rights arrangements differ from TikTok and from streaming-first services. Excerptability may travel across platforms, whereas the affordances through which excerpts are enacted and ranked may not. Comparative research should therefore hold musical materials constant while examining how identical excerpts acquire different patterns of reuse across Douyin, TikTok, Kuaishou, and streaming platforms.

This distinction between conceptual transferability and empirical generalisability is important for international scholarship. A study of Douyin should contribute more than a local example of a supposedly universal TikTok process. It can instead show how globally recognisable short-video practices are reconfigured within a specific platform ecology.

6. Scope Conditions and Research Agenda

This is a concept-building case study, and its claims should be evaluated through analytical usefulness and transferability rather than population representativeness. The ten songs are prominent illustrative cases, not a sampling frame for Chinese viral music. The reconstructed video records represent highly liked uses associated with those cases, not the full distribution of Douyin content. The convenience questionnaire provides audience context, not psychometrically validated or population-level evidence.

The study’s archival conditions impose a further boundary. Exact chart-capture dates, the complete inclusion log, video URLs, and independent coding records were not retained. These absences prevent retrospective intercoder-reliability estimation and exact replication of the original selection. The supplementary audit files reconstruct all recoverable song, video-category, and questionnaire counts from the thesis appendix, clearly labelling reconstruction rather than presenting it as original raw data.

Excerptability itself remains a sensitising concept. Its dimensions—boundedness, recognisability, repeatability, and actionability—organise comparison but are not a validated index. Future work can develop the concept in three stages. Qualitative studies should first examine how creators and audiences recognise and select excerpts. Comparative content studies should then operationalise the four dimensions with archived videos and multiple coders. Finally, larger designs can compare circulating and non-circulating songs across Douyin, TikTok, Kuaishou, and streaming services. Such work could test when excerptability travels across platforms and when it depends on a particular platform ecology.

The article does not estimate algorithmic effects. Doing so would require longitudinal recommendation traces, data donations, creator interviews, or platform cooperation. Its more limited claim is that platformed visibility should be analysed alongside, rather than substituted for, musical form and participatory practice.

7. Conclusion

This exploratory interpretive case study examined ten viral meme songs and reconstructed appendix-reported uses associated with 100 highly liked Douyin videos, with a 201-participant convenience questionnaire retained as supplementary context. Eight excerpts included chorus material, but the cases also contained verse-based and mixed-section circulation, clip lengths extending to 45 seconds, wide tempo and vocal-demand differences, and three catalogue tracks released before Douyin existed. Cross-case analysis distinguished performance-led from narrative-led circulation and showed that the meaning of “participation” changes with the coding boundary adopted.

The evidence supports a limited case-based conclusion: viral music circulation on Douyin can be interpreted through interactions among excerptable musical material, participatory or narrative enactment, catalogue recirculation, and platformed visibility. The study does not establish algorithmic effects, demographic population patterns, or industry-wide consequences. Recognising these evidential boundaries produces a more credible account of platformed music culture—one in which commercial power, creative participation, musical convention, cultural memory, and audience agency coexist.

Conceptually, the article proposes that viral music circulation can be analysed through the articulation of excerptability, participatory affordances, platformed visibility, and temporal recirculation. The value of this framework lies not in predicting a hit from a chord progression, but in explaining how new and older musical materials become actionable through different configurations of performance, narrative framing, and structured exposure. Keeping musical, social, temporal, and infrastructural processes in the same analytical field is the study’s principal contribution to research on platformed cultural production.

Data Availability and Research Transparency

The original respondent-level survey file, chart-capture archive, video URLs, and independent coding records are not available. To avoid creating synthetic raw data, the supplementary materials provide only records that can be reconstructed from the thesis appendix: a song-analysis matrix, aggregate video-use counts, aggregate questionnaire counts, a video-coding manual, a double-coding template, and reproducible aggregate calculations. These materials support audit of the reported descriptive results but do not enable exact replication of the original sampling process.

Ethics Statement

The original questionnaire introduced the study purpose, voluntary participation, privacy protection, and anonymisation to participants. The thesis does not provide an institutional ethics-approval or exemption reference. The author must confirm the applicable institutional review status and add the appropriate documentation before journal submission.

Supplementary Materials

- Table S1: Detailed musicological profile of the ten selected songs.
- Table S2: Reconstructed song-by-video-category counts.
- Table S3: Reconstructed aggregate questionnaire responses.
- Supplement S4: Video coding manual and double-coding template.
- Supplement S5: Reproducible aggregate statistical calculations and analysis notes.

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