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A different girl, but she's nothing new: Olivia Rodrigo and posting imitation pop on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

Olivia Rodrigo is a Filipina American pop star who used the micro-vlogging network TikTok to launch her music career in early 2021. Though Rodrigo received criticism for copying other musicians' work, I argue that Rodrigo's authenticity is predicated on her use of transparent content creation on her TikTok account to connect with her young, global audience. Using Rodrigo's TikTok as a case study, this commentary essay introduces the concept of imitation pop to interrogate the relationship between influencing, pastiche, and the curation of celebrity image on social media platforms.

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Olivia Rodrigo broke the Internet in 2021. After starring as a lead actress as a lead actress on *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* (Disney +, 2019—), the 18 year-old Filipina American took to TikTok to promote her burgeoning musical career. Released in October 2018 by the Chinese app development company ByteDance, TikTok is a social networking site prioritizing short-form videos with multimodal components. Earlier video-based mobile apps, such as Vine, or TikTok's predecessors, Douyin and Musical.ly, also experimented with short-form videos, often combining music and sound with images. This multimodal approach emphasizes mimesis: the app encourages users to repeat, remix, and restyle circulating content to generate a digital imitation public (Diana Zulli and David J. Zulli 2020, 2). Popular viral trends may emerge from dances or performances, the reuse of sound or visual content, or sharing educational "hacks," such as makeup tutorials, recipes, or do-it-yourself (DIY) projects.

After releasing her first single, "drivers license,"¹ on January 9 2021, Rodrigo posted a now-viral TikTok asking followers to stream her track. The video features the beginning music of "drivers license" and a series of small video vignettes explaining the song's significance. For example, using TikTok's green screen feature, the video shows Rodrigo in front a picture of her driver's license as the track plays. A block of text appears above the picture: "I posted this photo on instagram saying how i was super excited to drive alone thru the suburbs crying lol ... i ... thought the experience might make a good song" (Olivia Rodrigo 2021). "driver's license" instantaneously went viral, receiving 76 million streams in the first week after its release and breaking several global records. The TikTok video received 10.4 million views, and the sound for "driver's license" accumulated over

1.7 million uses. The self-proclaimed “spicy pisces” quickly became a household name and released her first solo album, *SOUR*, on May 21 2021. Declared a delightfully “post-genre” album (Craig Jenkins 2021), *sour*’s success solidified Rodrigo’s status as pop royalty.

In the wake of her rapid rise to fame, other artists accused Rodrigo’s work of being derivative. For example, in June 2021, white musician Courtney Love published an Instagram post accusing Rodrigo of copying her band Hole’s crying prom queen cover art for their 1994 album, *Live Through This*, in Rodrigo’s promotional *sour* prom video album (Quinn Moreland 2021). Critics also addressed stylistic similarities between another *sour* single, “good 4 u,” and the pop-punk band Paramore’s 2007 hit, “Misery Business” (Jenkins 2021). Internet users across platforms collectively wished that Rodrigo was just a little bit more unique. So if Rodrigo is not original, what makes her stand out?

I suggest that Rodrigo’s use of TikTok as a self-branding tool renders her artistic promotion as distinctly authentic. In an era of hyper-individualism, what makes artists like Rodrigo stand out is their use of social media influencing and self-branding to remix and re-mediate already-existing ideas, text, and sounds that appear authentic (Gunn Enli 2015, 135; Richard Dyer 2007, 1). My use of authenticity is derived from Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2012) articulation of authenticity and brand cultures. Extending Naomi Klein’s (2000) cautioning that brands and consumer capitalism increasingly structure daily life, Banet-Weiser shares that brand cultures reveal how consumers have intersecting relationships with marketing and products, revealing how “[brands] . . . become cultural contexts for every day living, individual identity, and affective relationships” (Banet-Weiser, 4). In this way, (self-)branding can help to convey a perception that a person or an object holds a genuine, individual identity or affective relationship with an audience (4).

Moreover, mediated authenticity presents a circumstance where an individual is performing not-performing (Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls 2014). Here, authenticity is situated by a constant conveying of genuine interaction with an audience, even while under surveillance of a social media livestream with millions of viewers. Unlike her Instagram account, which promotes more polished, curated posts, Rodrigo’s TikTok shows a goofy, uncensored (read: authentic) self that appears no different from the millions young followers who are tuned into her every move (Melanie Kennedy 2020). Followers around the globe can access Rodrigo’s content in similar ways, regardless of their location.

TikTok is foundational to Rodrigo’s success. As an imitation public, successful TikTok posts often consist of restyled ideas of already popular video trends (Zulli and Zulli 2020). Rodrigo’s music equally embodies imitation publics. I coin the term *imitation pop* to describe how celebrities, like Rodrigo, rely on social influencing as an innovative strategy for promoting cultural content that establishes a differentiated form of authenticity. In the remainder of this essay, I briefly explain TikTok as a platform for self-branding pastiche and Rodrigo’s successful use of the latter to communicate an emerging celebrity image.

Conceptualizing TikTok’s imitation public and Rodrigo’s pastiche

TikTok’s uniqueness lies in its focus on content and genre, crafted via the platform’s user-interface and affordances. Users can alter the speed of their videos and add in different sounds. These features are used with distinctive video augmentation that allow new ways of sampling genre and content. For example, upon opening the app, users are brought to the #ForYou page, which is curated by an algorithm that assumes what an individual user

is most likely to watch (Crystal Abidin 2020). These guidelines for communicative practice allow everyday people to gain immense levels of notoriety on the platform (Abidin 2020; Kennedy 2020). Here, viral content is not necessarily “original;” it is instead an imitation or remix that adds to the conversation through new content.

Rodrigo uses TikTok, a platform built on the recycling and augmentation of already-existing content and genre, to promote her star image to millions of followers. For example, while doing press for *sour*, Rodrigo was transparent about how she engaged with other artists’ music, like Taylor Swift, to inspire tracks for her album (Lauren McCarthy 2021). What Rodrigo does brilliantly with her promotional TikToks for *sour* is demonstrating to her fans and followers *how* her music takes on existing styles and ideas that she likes via her “authentic” platform presence by appealing to the experiences of her young followers: the digital documentation of navigating heartbreak and young love. I position Rodrigo’s use of imitation pop as pastiche (see Dyer 2007; Madan Sarup 1993). Referencing the work of Jean-François Lyotard (1979) and Frederic Jamieson (1991), Sarup explains that pastiche is a postmodern artistic form that teases the fragile boundaries between art and every day life through play and parody. He notes in “... a world in which no stylistic innovation is possible, all that’s left is pastiche” (Sarup, 145). A post-modern reading of Rodrigo’s music challenges the universality of grand narratives by revealing how language and politics shape individual experiences of power (Dennis K. Mumby 1998, 19). Rebranded through TikTok videos and challenges, Rodrigo’s recycling of sounds resonates with her global audience.

TikTok users rely on the platform’s playful affordances to challenge the universality of dominant cultural conversations and situate dialogue in different, distinct ways (see Mumby 1998, 18). TikTok’s algorithmic infrastructure and user interface promote a platform where forms of imitation, such as remixing, restyling, and repetition, are crucial to reaching virality (Kennedy, 1072–3). For example, Mel Sommers, a 22 year-old Asian American woman, created the eponymous “drivers license challenge,” which used the song’s bridge as part of its memeable format. In this challenge, users stitched together two videos of themselves as the sound plays: in the first video, a makeup-less Sommers cries along to Rodrigo’s lyrics and falls backward. This is immediately followed up with a second “glow up” video where Sommers lies on her bed in a fancy white sundress and lip-syncs along to Rodrigo’s lyrics (Mel Sommers 2021). Sommers’s original “drivers license” challenge video accumulated 176.4 million views, facilitating new stylizations and interpretations of the song while preserving aspects of the original script, ultimately promoting Rodrigo’s work further. In this way, TikTok’s interface encourages a user-interaction style that emphasizes personal branding. Imitation and reproduction do not simply build celebrity, but social capital also determines how TikTok’s algorithm determines which accounts, sounds, and videos go viral.

Conclusion: imitation publics, imitation pop stars

TikTok is key to Rodrigo’s success as a pop star. Rodrigo approaches her music as an amalgamation of pop stars past, similar to TikTok’s penchant for restyling previously popular content. For instance, in a February 2021 interview with *Nylon*, Rodrigo spoke at length about her use of pastiche in *sour*: “I want [*sour*] to be super versatile ... I’m going to try and take all of my ... influences and inspirations and make something that I like”

(McCarthy 2021). Through the lens of pastiche and imitation publics, artists like Rodrigo (and other content creators) curate star image across platforms, building a following not necessarily through likes but through her millions of TikTok followers who share the remixing, restyling, and revisiting of her work.

A postmodern analysis and framing of pastiche reveal how Rodrigo is emerging as a GenZ pop star whose cultural brand and social media influence blend as one entity. Social media blurs the boundaries between online and offline, necessitating that TikTok and other platforms are crucial to maintaining star image. Rodrigo's use of social media influencing to share and promote *sour* reveals how personal branding and other forms of content creation are mandatory public relations practices. Rather than a mere copy/paste, Rodrigo's lifting of particular aesthetics from past generations' pop princesses eschews the guise of originality. Rodrigo's authenticity is predicated on transparency about what inspires her and how she re-presents genre and content together to self-promote her art (see Sarup, 132). Through stitches, duets, and green screens, Olivia Rodrigo's curation of her star image showcases the postmodern appeal of today's popular music: a fresh face returning to the familiar beats and lyrics of the previous generation.

Note

1. Rodrigo's musical work uses lowercase script and no apostrophes.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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