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Musical.ly Tutorials as Aesthetic Codes and Performance Guidelines in Digital Youth Communities

Musical.ly has been. In April 2018, the social media app for creating and live sharing videos was merged with Chinese video platform TikTok owned by the ByteDance Company. The goal is to establish a worldwide social media platform monopoly designed for young people to create and share short music-based performance videos. Before musical.ly disbanded, the app had more than 200 million users who were automatically transferred into TikTok accounts. On a side note, TikTok was the world’s most downloaded iPhone app in the first quarter of 2018. Therefore, the merger already illustrates the potentially commercial and pop cultural influence of musical.ly videos and of their creators.

But we can be relieved, musical.ly videos still exist within TikTok and I will continue to refer to them as such. During its short existence, musical.ly spawned numerous teenage stars who are now equally popular on TikTok. The top three are German twins Lisa and Lena with 31.5 million fans, Loren Gray and Baby Ariel each with about 29 million followers. There are three basic types musical.ly videos: First, rather simple lip sync videos based on a song sequence; Second, choreo and dance videos based on a song mostly without lip syncing; Third, videos in which users re-enact a spoken word sequence in a dramatic way, mostly comedy or sketch videos. Lip sync and choreo often come together in a video. Videos are at max 15 seconds long but can be up to 60 seconds if they’re combined into a story.

Musical.ly videos seem to be the current peak of social media videos. They are typically selfie videos that users create directly in the app using its features and filters. However, more advanced users fixate their smartphone to do full body performances. Musical.ly purposefully inspires users’ modes of creative self-presentation within cultural and social norms of online communities and performance standards. This paper looks at musical.ly tutorials by famous

users as a form of amateur expertise regarding formation, reproduction and establishing of aesthetic codes within this context and beyond.

Users' performances in musical.ly refer to cultural norms and values (Goffman, 1959) connected to and triggered by the musical genre and the lyrical theme of the song. Users draw on socially acquired mimetic practices and on their cultural knowledge of how to physically perform certain songs. Their knowledge derives from their cognitive role in society and their active perception of popular media content. Musical.ly users as well adopt and advance, for example, "formalized gestures for theatrical performance" (Rettberg, 2017) of the original artist or other well-known YouTube or musical.ly stars. In this way, they transform and reconstruct publicly available media performances according to the technical and aesthetic features of the app and to their individual creativity of using these features. This, at first, leads to the creation of a "hybrid amateur-professional artifact" (Forbes/Tessler 2018). The practice of lip syncing in musical.ly refers to standardized forms of mediated musical presentations.

Loren Gray's profile exemplify basic aesthetic concepts of musical.ly videos. She presents herself in various styles and outfits, mostly in her private bedroom or other rooms and settings that are linked to her biographical life. This creates identity contexts and forms of intimacy within the rather ordinary interaction. It makes her relatable for her peer audience as they share tastes in pop music and in engaging with popular culture through performing and perceiving it. At first, there seems no special skill needed for doing musical.ly videos, yet famous users, like Baby Ariel or Loren Gray, emerge from the masses. Any musical.ly video involves strategic planning, maybe rehearsing, it requires knowledge about how to use the features of the app, and foremost, it requires users to transfer their cultural knowledge of music-based performance into their own creative performance of a short video.

In a tutorial, we might expect the expert user to explain her performance strategies and to give advice on using the app's features to guide users to a more professional musical.ly production, yet without indicating too much professionalism. As a genre, tutorial videos illustrate unique forms of explaining, addressing, and self-presentation (Müller, 2009). Musical.ly tutorials can be understood as "socially encoded sources of information" (Lange, 2016) but mainly they are self-reflexive. Users who gained expertise through improving their musical.ly skills are returning their knowledge to the community (Bhatia, 2017). They are reframing their existing media performances within the technical context of the app and the

reproduction of modes and aesthetic codes of presentation. Expert musical.ly tutorials then are artifacts of professional guidance and support within a semi-professional environment. The community agrees upon criteria, such as technical skills, creative adoption, or pop culture style, and asks its stars for advice to secure standards through expert legitimization. In tutorials, musical.ly stars therefore switch from explaining *how they did* their video to *how one should* do videos (Mogos/Trofin 2015).

This paper's brief example is a 4-minute tutorial by Baby Ariel in which she is sitting on her bedroom floor in front of the camera, explaining how she first picks a song and decides which musical.ly features to use for her performance. The crucial aspect in this one is the hand motions to the song's lyrics.

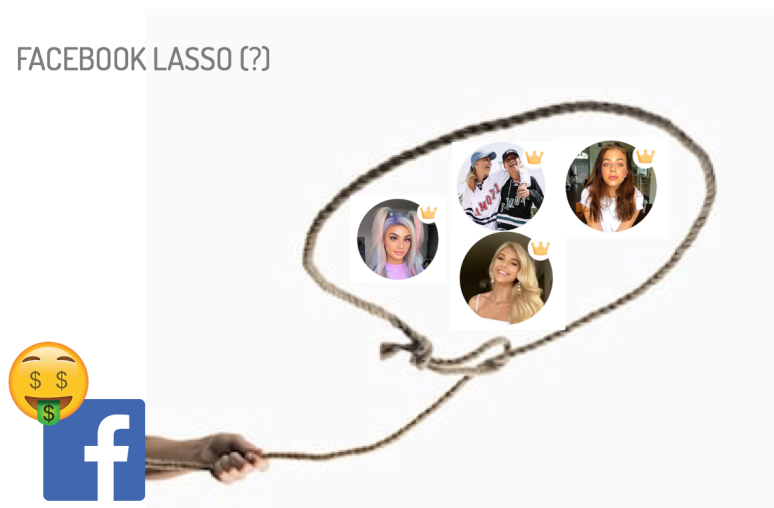
Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQq0FLIMuQE>

As we can see, Baby Ariel is not explaining the app's features or giving advice of how to correctly use them. This sketchy transcript of the tutorial shows, that she first explains some basic preparations and then generally advises users to do what they feel like and to find their own hand motions. She switches between basic descriptions of her actions and demonstrating a reproduction of her own performance to the song using the common hand motions for key lyrics as she did in the actual musical.ly video. However, we can't see the referred musical.ly and we can't see how her performance looks within the app. In its self-referential way, the tutorial is less an expert advice for users, but rather a show-and-tell performance by Baby Ariel that ends with her demonstrating how she did her musical.ly to this song.

There are of course many other musical.ly tutorials that give more details on technical and performance aspects. This one briefly shows how musical.ly tutorials oscillate between person-centered explanations and a performance variation of the actual video. Yet, only by looking at it, we can figure out what she was doing, namely using the slo-mo function.

Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpK9E519MC4>

Whenever Facebook jumps on the bandwagon, we know that it's real. So, lip syncing video apps might be the next big social media thing, as Facebook announced it is developing Lasso, a stand-alone app similar to musical.ly that is "built for teens, fun and funny, and focused on creation". And Lasso, a nice app name for metaphorically catching all the young amateur users to exploit their apparent creativity in commercial contexts? It's debatable, I think.



Anyway, by looking at musical.ly tutorials, the claimed aspect of creation seems two-fold within amateur culture. While musical.ly users produce creative outputs, they are based on pre-defined functions of how to perform the Self. It connects online amateur creativity to commercialization and to the reproductions of aesthetic codes based on commercial popular culture artifacts. Musical.ly tutorials seem to do this in a self-reflexive manner. For Baby Ariel and Loren Gray it pays off: they both landed real record deals and released their debut singles – which they did not write themselves. Yet, they transformed their presentation of the Self from amateur to professional based on musical performance, making them “too big for pop to ignore”.