



THE REAL TIKTOK CHALLENGE?

TURNING INFLUENCER STATUS INTO HITMAKER CLOUT



Like plenty of teens, **Charli D'Amelio** and **Addison Rae** first saw TikTok as a fun distraction. Now two of its top influencers, they're powering Hot 100 hits and eyeing an entirely new kind of celebrity — while proving just how much artists and labels need them

STORY BY TATIANA CIRISANO



EASTERLING: COURTESY OF SUBJECT. HAIR BY JAMIE MALONEY. D'AMELIO: COURTESY OF SUBJECT.

IT'S 8:45 A.M. ON A THURSDAY, AND 16-YEAR-OLD CHARLI D'AMELIO HAS ALREADY POSTED THREE NEW VIDEOS TO TIKTOK FROM HER BEDROOM IN NORWALK, CONN.

Like most mornings, she woke up around 7 a.m., drank coffee, did her makeup — today, hot pink eyeshadow and black liquid eyeliner — and started filming, with her phone propped up on the windowsill to make use of the natural light.

She lip-syncs to a clip of Sean Kingston's "Beautiful Girls" first; next, New Boyz' "You're a Jerk," batting her eyelashes in time with the beat. In a third video, she pops her hips to Megan Thee Stallion's raunchy track "Hot Girl," a popular dance challenge on the platform, contorting her tiny face into expressions as animated as a cartoon character's. Each video already has around 400,000 likes; within 24 hours, they will draw a cumulative 10 million.

With 62.5 million followers — over six times the population of New York, or the entire population of a country like Italy — D'Amelio is the most-followed person on TikTok, the short-form video app where users post their takes on viral challenges and memes set to music from the platform's song library. And no one is more stunned by those numbers than she is. "I had a whole plan set up for basically my entire life," D'Amelio explains, breathlessly, when she joins me over video chat the same morning, from the bedroom where she films her TikToks. She started studying dance at age 3 and hoped to join the dance team at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, where the renowned choreographers have worked with Jennifer Lopez, one of her favorite artists. "I would get close with them, dance for J.Lo, then tour with her," she says — simple as that.

In fact, D'Amelio was waiting for her mother to drive her to dance camp last summer when she posted a TikTok video of herself in black leggings and a hoodie doing a routine created by Move With Joy, a popular choreographer on the platform. "I got in the car and was like, 'Mom, it got 100 likes. I don't know what this means,'" she recalls. "And then it kept going up." Sitting in the passenger seat, she watched the numbers multiply, and by the time she arrived at the camp an hour and a half away, the video was bordering on 100,000 likes.



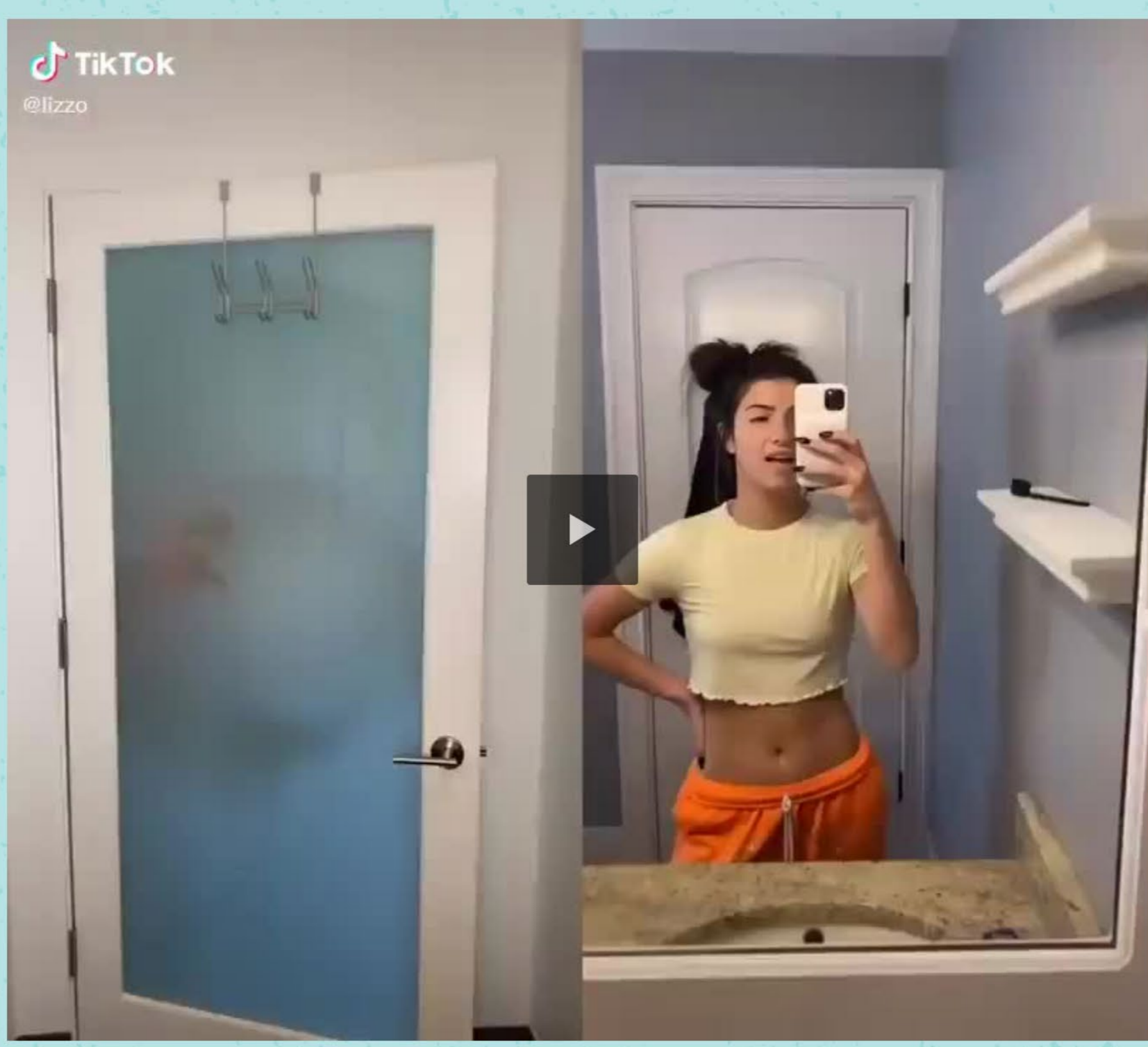
COURTESY OF @CHARLIDAMELIO/TIKTOK

As confusing as this was to D'Amelio, the situation was perfectly plausible in the TikTok universe: The social media platform's user experience makes it primed for both igniting trends and launching users to instant fame. TikTok — which grew out of the lip-syncing app Musical.ly, after Chinese technology firm ByteDance acquired and then merged it with its own sibling app in 2018 — functions like a game, where the ultimate user is getting famous, fast. In addition to choosing background music, users add stickers, filters and other effects to their videos, which can be up to 60 seconds long, though most are under 15. But while Musical.ly was populated mostly by middle schoolers lip-syncing and acting out Nickelodeon-esque variety skits, TikTok was adopted by high schoolers and college students making more off-the-cuff, unpolished content. Instagram influencers, with their meticulously retouched, perfectly posed snapshots, would feel out of place in TikTok's bite-size content free-for-all — D'Amelio posts many of her videos in sweatpants and pajamas, and that's exactly how her followers like it.

What makes TikTok particularly well-suited to launching unknown users to instant fame is that unlike most social media platforms, it opens directly to a discovery section dubbed the For You Page (or, as users refer to it, "FYP"), which automatically generates videos it thinks the user will like, based on activity. Every user's FYP is different, and the algorithm — which TikTok explained for the first time in a [company blog post](#) on June 18 — doesn't factor in users' follower counts, which further democratizes and diversifies the feed. Scrolling through the FYP, you might find a [bodega cashier asking customers trivia in exchange for free snacks](#), a [coronavirus-themed reality TV parody](#) or a [person bringing a snowball on a plane to Hawaii](#) just for kicks. There are entire communities of gardeners, makeup artists, amateur chefs, history nerds and science geeks. Much of the content is silly-funny: Think embarrassing moments and slapstick vocal effects.

"You never know what you're going to get or who's going to be on your screen," says **Mary Rahmani**, TikTok's director of music content and artist partnerships, North America. "You are served a variety of content, and you get to decide who you want to like and follow." It's likely D'Amelio's video showed up on the FYPs of users who enjoy dance challenges and spread from there.

The clips that go viral are increasingly helping songs become hits. Lizzo is one of the artists who has benefited the most from TikTok's formula: Her self-love anthem "Truth Hurts" became a smash over a year after its release, thanks in large part to its lyric "I just took a DNA test," becoming a [meme](#) on the app. Even bigger was Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," which went viral on the platform in early 2019 thanks to a challenge where users "[transformed](#)" into cowboys to the tune of the chorus. For the chart week ending June 20, the top four tracks on the Billboard Hot 100 can all be tied to TikTok trends: They are, in order, DaBaby's chart-topping "Rockstar" featuring Roddy Ricch; Megan Thee Stallion's "Savage" featuring Beyoncé; The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights"; and Doja Cat's "Say So" featuring Nicki Minaj.



COURTESY OF @LIZZO/TIKTOK

With the app's user base continuing to grow amid worldwide shelter-at-home orders — it crossed 2 billion downloads globally as of April, according to app analytics company [Sensor Tower](#) — labels are now spending low- to mid-five figures per campaign involving TikTok influencers to start trends featuring their songs on the platform, with some influencers charging upwards of \$10,000 per post, enough for the Federal Trade Commission to begin paying attention. And as more labels set aside budgets for TikTok and even start releasing alternate versions of songs tailored for TikTok success, the app's influencers are becoming powerful music industry players and celebrities themselves.

Thus, for both users and labels, posting on TikTok is a lot like buying a lottery ticket — and on that fateful drive to camp last summer, Charli D'Amelio scored a winner.

D'AMELIO WASN'T QUITE SURE HOW TO REACT TO HER NEWFOUND FOLLOWING.

But **Barbara Jones** — a former Sony Music Entertainment executive who launched influencer marketing agency Blissful Media Group in 2008 — thought she could help. Jones initially tracked down D'Amelio in September 2019 to ask if she would participate in a meet-and-greet for charity held in Greenwich, Conn., at a teen center where Jones is a board member. "My 17-year-old daughter said, 'This girl Charli's got 400,000 followers,' and I was like, 'That's a good start,'" recalls Jones, who worked with the Jonas Brothers, Fiona Apple and Muse during her time as a record executive. "I was emailing soccer coaches and parent-teacher associations to find her."



Former Sony Music executive Barbara Jones (left) signed Charli D'Amelio to her management company Outshine Talent; she now manages the entire D'Amelio family with songwriter-producer Billy Mann.

JONES: COURTESY OF SUBJECT. MANN: KRISTIN CHALMERS.

Once she did, she began to show D'Amelio how she could build her TikTok following into a career and soon signed the teenager to her new management company, Outshine Talent. Not long after, the rest of the D'Amelio family joined TikTok — including Charli's parents, Heidi and Marc D'Amelio (4.3 million and 5 million followers, respectively), and her 18-year-old sister, Dixie D'Amelio (26 million). Jones now co-manages the entire family with Grammy Award-nominated songwriter-producer **Billy Mann**, the founder of management agency Manncom Creative Partners.

By November, labels had noticed that Charli's choice of song for a video seemed to increase its chances of becoming a commercial hit outside the platform, as she had done for tracks like Arizona Zervas' "Roxanne" and Ant Saunders' "Yellow Hearts." While TikTok streams don't count toward the Hot 100, users tend to seek out songs that are popular on TikTok on streaming platforms, too. "At this point," says Dixie, "I know every song that I know from TikTok."

Charli's rise on TikTok also coincided with the app reaching high schoolers, a coveted demographic for the record industry. "Before, it was a middle-schooler thing," says Mann. "The fall was a real amalgamation point, and the labels who understand youth culture understand what this effect can be." Fast-forward six months, he adds, and "Charli's [follower] growth is as explosive as the requests and the outreach that we're getting." He and Jones now receive dozens of emails per day from record labels and artists who want to pay Charli to create or participate in trends tied to their songs.



D'Amelio (right) performed "The History of TikTok Dancing" on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in March.

ANDREW LIPOVSKY/NBC/GETTY IMAGES

Charli keeps a running list of those pitches in her iPhone's Reminders app and listens in her spare time, keeping an ear out for danceable beats and catchy lyrics that would be fun to lip-sync to. But she takes her role as a tastemaker seriously and only promotes songs she genuinely enjoys. "If I can tell that someone has amazing music, it means the world to me to be able to try to get it out there," she says. "When something really speaks to me, I'll use it no matter who it is." She has recently helped promote songs like SAYGRACE's "Boys Ain't Shit," Jack Harlow's "WHAT'S POPPIN'" and SAINT JHN's "Roses (Imanbek Remix)" to wider audiences, and sometimes even posts tracks ahead of their release to help build hype, like she did in May with Marshmello and Halsey's single "Be Kind."

Along the way, Charli has become a pop culture person of interest in her own right, just as well-known as (and in some cases, even more so) the artists she's helping promote. In the past six months, she has guested on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, appeared in a Super Bowl LIV commercial for Sabra Hummus, landed a campaign with Prada during Milan Fashion Week and launched a merchandise line of hoodies, phone cases, tumblers and duvet covers emblazoned with her face. She has also received co-signs from artists like Bebe Rexha, who invited her to dance onstage during her opening performance for the Jonas Brothers at Brooklyn's Barclays Center in November, and Lizzo, who posted a TikTok thanking Charli for using her song "Cuz I Love You" in March. Perhaps taking a note from another modern family business empire, the D'Amelios are now teasing a reality show about themselves.



From left: Charli D'Amelio, Bebe Rexha and Dixie D'Amelio recorded a TikTok video together backstage when Rexha opened for the Jonas Brothers in New York in 2019. Charli made a cameo onstage as well.

COURTESY OF @CHARLIDAMELIO/TIKTOK

TikTok's rise in the music industry may have begun with "Old Town Road," but many say that the platform's watershed moment came just over a year later, when in April Drake debuted "Toosie Slide," a single with a hook made up almost entirely of instructions for a TikTok dance. Drake turned to Atlanta-based social media influencer Toosie, along with hip-hop duo Ayo & Teo, to develop the song's signature moves, and the resulting video that Toosie posted to TikTok — in which the three demonstrate the dance in a dimly lit room containing little more than a ceiling fan — has 1.5 million views, while #toosieslide has over 4.2 billion tags.

Given Drake's undeniable star power, it's hard to tell how much TikTok contributed to the No. 1 debut of "Toosie Slide" on the Hot 100. But that Drake felt the need to get in on The Whole TikTok Thing is yet another sign the industry is hustling to capitalize on the app's influence. Now, TikTok's Rahmani is increasingly coaching artists and their teams, with their best practices on the platform, and says that the Weezer, Fall Out Boy and McCartney camps have all recently reached out. "I've found that I'm having more and more calls with artists directly," she says. "Even 'tier one' artists — they're insisting on being on the phone calls."

So intertwined is TikTok with today's music, it's hard for even Charli to tell where the app's influence ends. "Everyone that I know, all of their songs come from TikTok," she says. "I'll be listening to a [new] song, and then I'll be like, 'Oh! That part was on TikTok!'"

ONE EVENING IN DECEMBER, WME TALENT AGENTS JOE IZZI AND JUSTIN GREENBERG WERE AT THE COMPANY'S BEVERLY HILLS OFFICE, HUNCHED OVER THEIR PHONES AMID ANOTHER LATE-NIGHT TIKTOK BINGE.

Scouring for talent on the platform together had become their daily habit: "We could feel the energy picking up around TikTok and were spending day in, day out looking for creators" to sign, recalls Greenberg.

Their instincts turned out to be right. That night, they came across **Addison Rae Easterling**, a 19-year-old aspiring dancer from Louisiana known on the platform as Addison Rae. Easterling first gained momentum last fall, when her video lip-syncing to Kelsea Ballerini's "Love Me Like You Mean It" in a cowboy hat went viral, and she is now the second most-followed person on TikTok, with 44.9 million followers and counting. "Before even playing the video, we knew there was something there. Her aura just screams off the platform," says Greenberg. "We had a great sit-down with her, signed her, and ever since we came back at the top of January, it has just been full-force explosive."

Six months ago, says Izzi, brands and labels were "getting away with really low-balling" TikTok influencers for paid posts. But the two are among several talent agents — including UTA co-heads of digital talent **Greg Goodfried** and **Alison Berman** and music agent **Dave Klein**, who currently represent the D'Amelio family — who are inventing a professional framework to help TikTok influencers capitalize on their fame. Izzi and Greenberg have negotiated deals for Easterling with labels such as Island Records and Sony Music Entertainment, including a recent dance challenge campaign for Kane Brown's April single "Cool Again," as well as partnerships with brands like Reebok and Olay.



COURTESY OF @ADDISONRE/TIKTOK

"[Labels will] ask me, 'Hey, can you make up a trendy dance for this song that anyone can do?'" says Easterling, who left Louisiana State University in December to focus full time on her career as an influencer. She now posts up to five mostly dance-based TikToks per day (12 if she's "really having fun") from her new home in Los Angeles. For the "Cool Again" dance challenge, she filmed herself in front of a towering, spiky plant in her backyard — her current favorite setting for videos — demonstrating each move while lip-syncing to the lyrics in jean shorts and a crop top. "I'm always down to listen," she says. "A lot of these artists aren't very known, and it's really cool to know that you can blow an artist or a song up."

As with most social media platforms, influencers on TikTok set their rates based on both follower count and engagement, meaning the percentage of followers actively interacting with their content through likes and comments. The higher influencers' engagement, the more people will interact with their content, allowing them to demand more money for paid posts. On Instagram, anything over 3% engagement is considered above average, and even the most-engaged influencers tend to max out at 10%. For perspective, Kim Kardashian West engages around 2% of her 174 million followers per average post, which is still decent considering that engagement tapers off the more followers one has.

But because the TikTok interface encourages users to participate in trending content, that percentage can soar. TalentX Entertainment, a talent management company specializing in TikTok that launched in January with longtime Britney Spears manager Larry Rudolph on its advisory board, says that some users on its roster of 60 influencers see up to 40% engagement on TikTok, while the others maintain an average of 5%. "It's the highest engagement of audience-to-following ratio I've ever seen in my life," says TalentX president **Tal Fishman**, the creator of successful YouTube comedy channel Reaction Time. "I think it's because the demographics on TikTok are directly in the range of the demographics making the content, and the content is so easy [to make] and home-grown."



COURTESY OF @ADDISONRE/TIKTOK

Those engagement rates are enticing for digital marketers and allow users on TikTok to demand more dollars per post. "A campaign that involves five TikTok creators, the goal isn't for five videos to get a lot of views," explains TalentX CEO **Warren Lentz**. "The goal is for hundreds of thousands of other TikTok creators to do their iteration using that same song. So a TikTok campaign is medium risk but very high reward."

Still, engagement alone isn't enough to make a song blow up on TikTok. Charli D'Amelio laments that her current favorite song, "Love Scars 3" by Trippie Redd, "wouldn't do well on TikTok because you can't really dance to it." Sister Dixie D'Amelio chimes in: "At this point, I have an ear for it, where I'm like, 'Oh, this could have a TikTok dance or trend to it.'"

A quick list of sounds that do lend well to TikTok: clapping, gunshots, the *cha-ching!* of a cash register and pop culture references in the lyrics. The goal is sparking a visual image that could turn into a dance move or meme. Japanese singer-songwriter Joji's "Slow Dancing in the Dark" was among the first songs to gain momentum on the platform last spring, entirely thanks to a microwave-timer sound effect just before the chorus. The #MicrowaveChallenge — in which users spin on the floor, like food on a microwave plate, in time with the song's trademark *ding!* — has now garnered 262.5 million views on TikTok.



EASTERLING: COURTESY OF SUBJECT. HAIR BY JAMIE MALONEY. D'AMELIO: COURTESY OF SUBJECT.

"Most of the songs that get big on TikTok are weird-sounding, not really normal songs," says 21-year-old artist **Powfu**, who signed to Columbia Records after his song "death bed" with beabadoobee blew up on TikTok in early 2019, driving it to a No. 24 peak on the Hot 100. "If I were to write a song for TikTok, I would make the lyrics kind of goofy." **Zoi Lerma**, the 18-year-old Los Angeles creator of the dance challenge for New Zealand indie-pop artist BENEÉ's "Supalonely," says she always listens for ad-libs: "If you can add it into the dance, it makes the dance so much more animated."

In short, what label A&R executives might classify as a hit record and what works on TikTok are often entirely different. “You might have this fantastic hook on the album’s focus track, but it might be 10 seconds of the outro of the last song that is the biggest moment on TikTok,” says **Jacob Pace**, the 21-year-old CEO of multiplatform media brand Flighthouse. He should know: Flighthouse, which is owned by Create Music Group, has 24.8 million followers on its official TikTok, where it posts miniseries like *Finish the TikTok Lyric* starring some of the platform’s biggest stars. But Pace says the L.A.-based company is now getting an “overwhelming” amount of requests from labels, which pay Flighthouse to help them prepare music releases for TikTok and connect with influencers.

In late 2019, **Elliot Grainge**’s 10K Projects label tapped Flighthouse to help promote indie-pop duo Surfaces’ feel-good jam “Sunday Best” on TikTok. “It was definitely one of their better-performing songs, and they wanted to put some gasoline on it,” says Pace. Flighthouse created a new audioclip of the song, adding a “2019 rewind” and voice-over and the sound of a tape rewinding to the beginning, and paid a group of influencers including Charli D’Amelio and Easterling to use it in videos showcasing memories from the past year. “It set off this whole wave of people doing it,” says Pace, and the song has since been used in 763,000 TikTok videos and counting, with the majority posted around New Year’s Day. Those videos lead to real streams, as users tend to search for the songs they hear on TikTok off-platform. Total on-demand audio streams of “Sunday Best” jumped from 2.1 million in the week ending Nov. 21, 2019, to 11.5 million in the week ending Jan. 30, 2020, according to Nielsen Music/MRC Data, and the song entered the Hot 100 in March, where it has since peaked at No. 20.



Elliot Grainge (left), whose 10K Projects label worked with media brand Flighthouse to promote “Sunday Best” by indie-pop duo Surfaces on TikTok.

GRAINGE: YURI HASEGAWA. SURFACES: GRACE QUINN.

Warner Records senior vp fan engagement and digital marketing **Elissa Ayadi** says that the most successful campaigns happen when she gives influencers creative control over how they use a song. “We try and give them the least amount of direction possible, honestly,” she says. “When we go to influencers, we’re really going after their expertise. We want them to come up with content that is going to speak to their base.”

And while Ayadi has had plenty of mainstream success on TikTok — like Ashnikko’s “Stupid” and Saweetie’s “My Type” — her favorite example is a less-obvious campaign for The Head and The Heart’s folk-tinged “Honeybee” that began in November. Instead of going for a dance challenge, her team tapped TikTok’s thriving arts-and-crafts community to promote the track, and it has now been used in over 19,000 videos of users sharing painting and drawing “how-tos,” and even creating blown-glass honeybees. “Most people, when they think TikTok, are thinking urban or pop,” says Ayadi. But since “there are so many different types of people watching content, you can put music on there that you wouldn’t necessarily stereotype with TikTok.”

Meanwhile, TikTok’s artist partnerships team is facilitating meetups between creators and artists like Marshmello, Yungblud and Blackbear, where “they all get to create content together,” says Rahmani, “and it’s really good exposure for all their accounts.” For example, in April, Sam Smith invited popular TikTok users Nathan Piland and Kyle Shaffer to the music video shoot for his song “I’m Ready” with Demi Lovato, where the two creators posted backstage footage and memes with Smith.



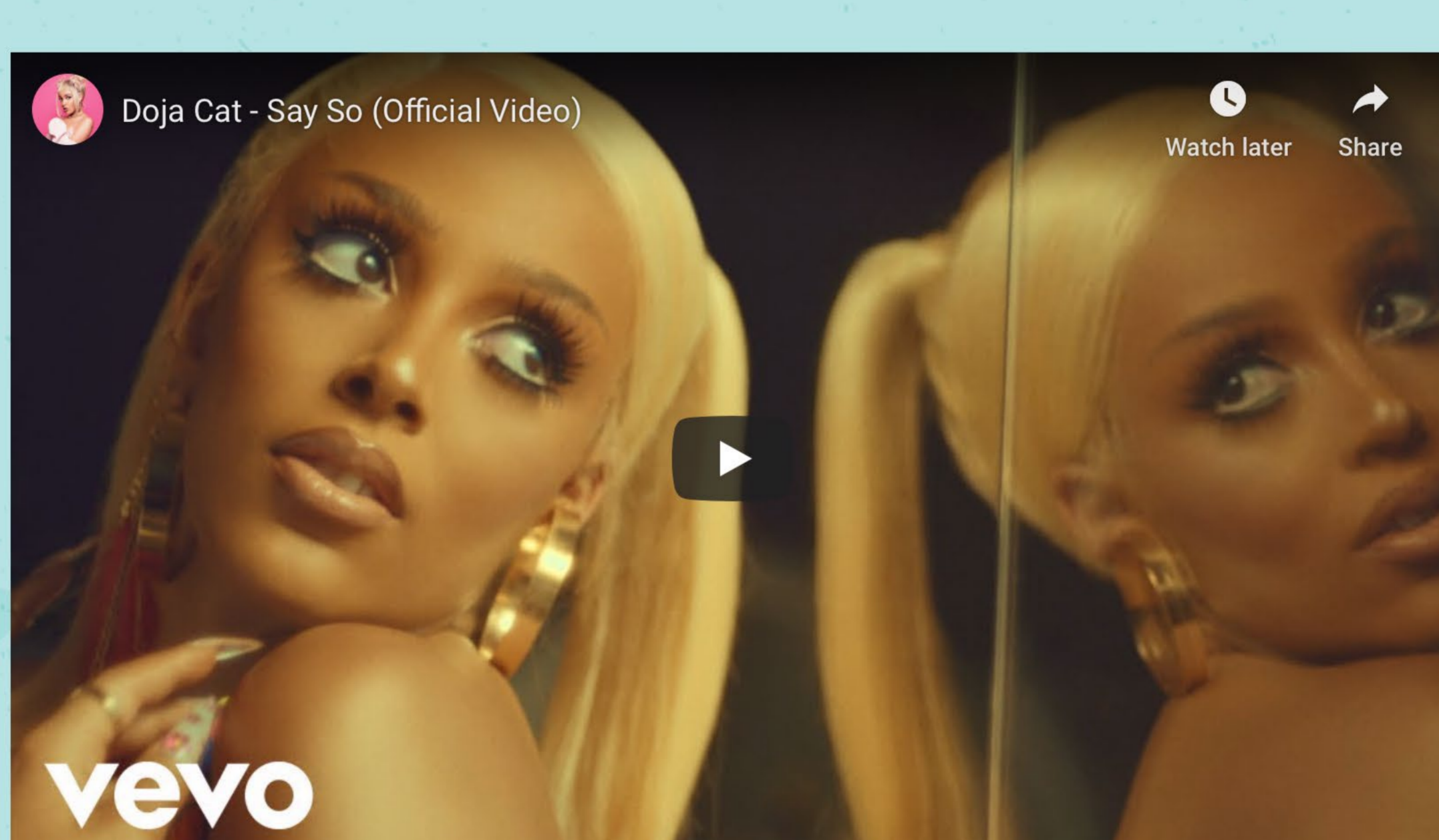
COURTESY OF @KYLE.SHAFFERTIKTOK

Of course, the ultimate payoff for labels is when a song blows up organically, without marketing dollars behind it. After users turned Lerma’s moves for “Supalonely” into a viral challenge, Lerna DM’d the news on Instagram to BENE: “I reached out to her because I didn’t think she knew,” she says. The song has since reached No. 39 on the Hot 100. Megan Thee Stallion’s “Savage” is another smash that first gained traction from an organic TikTok dance challenge, and a remix of the song featuring Beyoncé later topped the Hot 100.

But even then, there are ways for artists and labels to use influencers to further amplify those trends. RCA Records senior vp digital marketing **Tarek Al-Hamdouni** didn’t plan a huge marketing push behind Doja Cat’s sassy pop jam “Say So,” but after TikTok user **Haley Sharpe**’s choreography to the chorus turned into a dance challenge, he reconsidered.

“It was about making sure that the moment was as big as possible and doing everything we could to connect the dots between the song and the artist,” he says. “Once we saw the activity, we jumped on it pretty quickly and worked with some other influencers to get them posting as well.” After that, Al-Hamdouni and his team strategized to help TikTok users connect the 15-second “Say So” clip to Doja Cat as an artist outside the platform. That culminated in inviting Sharpe to cameo in the song’s 1960s-inspired music video in which the teenager performs the dance with Doja Cat herself. It has since earned 148 million views on YouTube and become Doja Cat’s first No. 1 on the Hot 100.

Now, says Al-Hamdouni, nearly all RCA marketing campaigns involve TikTok. “We were seeing plays go up on Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube, not because the song was tied to a playlist, but because people were literally searching for it,” he says. “You could be on every single playlist on the planet, and that number is only going to be as high as those playlists can garner. But there is no ceiling when it comes to TikTok fandom.”



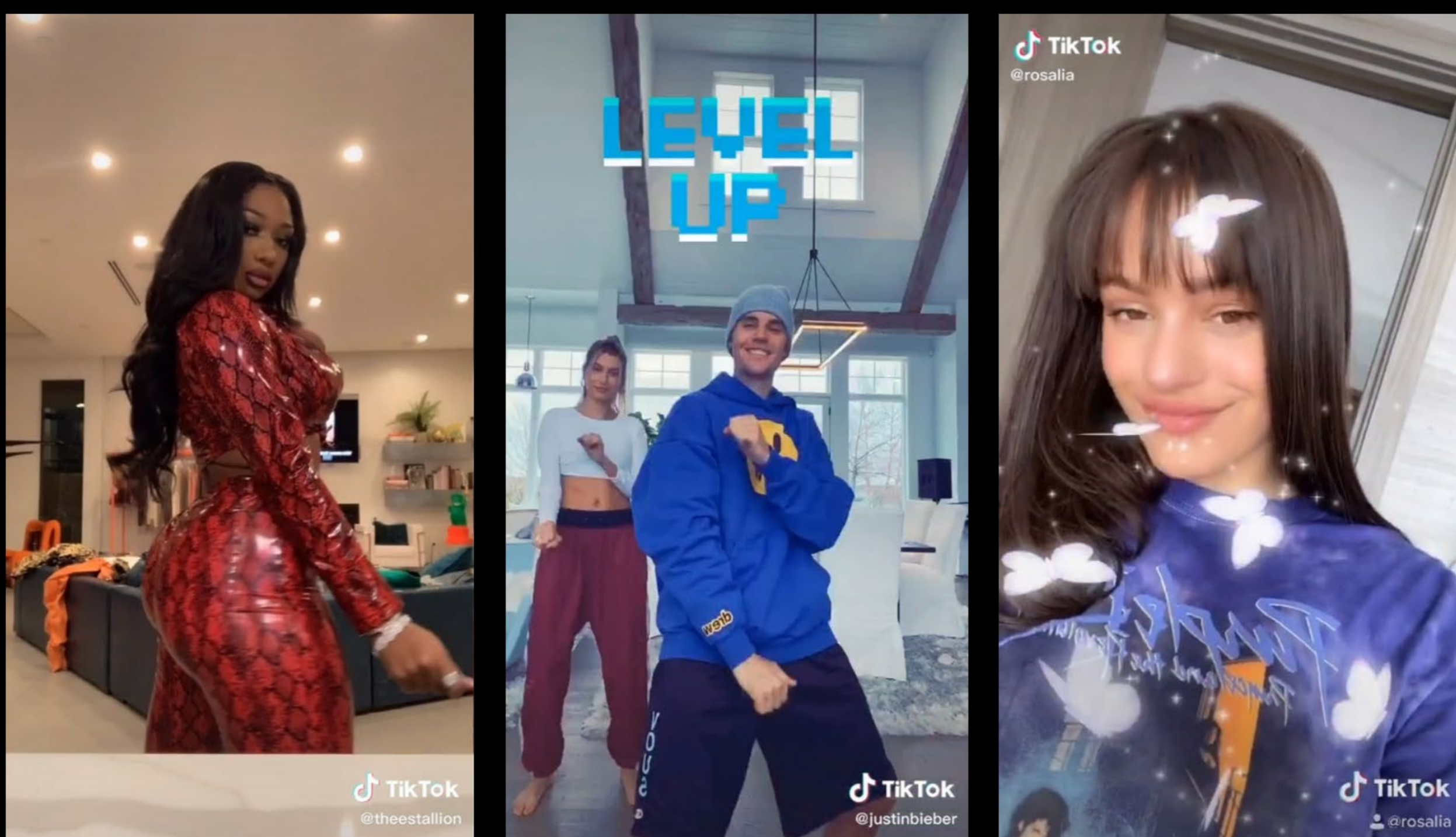
WHILE IT MAY SEEM LIKE TIKTOK HAS ENJOYED A SWIFT, SMOOTH RISE TO WORLD DOMINANCE, THE PLATFORM HAS HAD ITS SHARE OF OBSTACLES.

When it started to emerge as a promotional vehicle for music last spring, its music licensing agreements — passed down from when TikTok was Musical.ly — were about to expire, and labels and publishers demanded better deals that would reflect the value of music to the platform. TikTok has been operating on short-term licensing agreements ever since, and in March struck new short-term deals with Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group, multiple sources told *Billboard*, giving the app the rights to use 30-second clips of any of the label groups’ songs.

Still, TikTok doesn’t have deals with Universal and Music Publishing Group or large independent labels like Big Machine, and some publishers have accused it of copyright infringement. For any unlicensed music that users upload, TikTok, like YouTube, benefits from the Digital Millennium Copyright Act’s “safe harbor” protection, so long as it plays a passive role in the use of music on the platform and promptly responds to takedown requests from rights holders. But the National Music Publishers’ Association argues that TikTok plays an active role by monitoring and curating its music library, and therefore should be liable for copyright infringement when unlicensed songs are uploaded.

Beyond those copyright disputes, TikTok has faced a range of other controversies, including accusations that it censored pro-LGBTQ content in some conservative countries; violated child-privacy laws with respect to data and took down a video of Lizzo in a swimsuit. Those issues are TikTok’s to resolve and have little impact on the careers of influencers. But influencers’ current lack of oversight by the Federal Trade Commission, which works to stop deceptive advertising, is a looming issue that may affect their promotion businesses soon enough.

FTC guidelines state that endorsers must make it clear when they have been paid to endorse an advertiser, receive a product for free or have a business- or family-related connection to the advertiser — rules that are not widely followed by paid-to-post influencers. But in February — three months after the FTC issued its [first-ever disclosures guide](#) for social media influencers — Commissioner Rohit Chopra published a statement [urging](#) it to develop new requirements for platforms “that facilitate and either directly or indirectly profit from influencer marketing,” including Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, and ensure that violators will be liable for civil penalties.



From left: Megan Thee Stallion; Justin Bieber and his wife, Hailey Bieber; and Rosalia have all posted videos on TikTok.

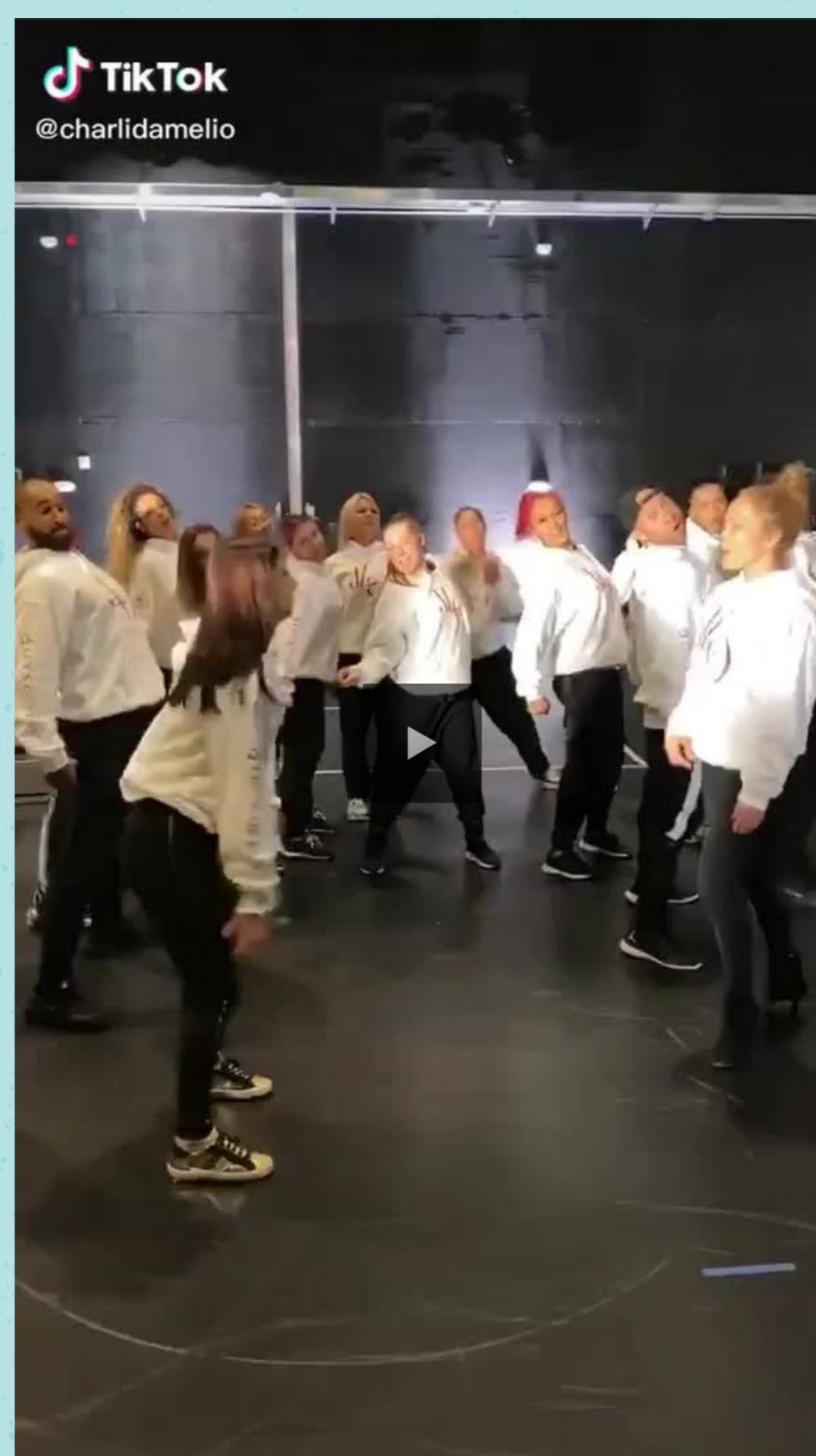
STALLION: COURTESY OF @THEESTALLION/TIKTOK. Bieber: COURTESY OF @JUSTINBIEBER/TIKTOK. ROSALIA: COURTESY OF @ROSALIA/TIKTOK.

Even so, the FTC is more likely to levy penalties on advertisers that violate those guidelines (including, potentially, record labels) than on influencers themselves. “When individual influencers are able to post about their interests to earn extra money on the side, this is not a cause for major concern,” said Chopra. “But when companies launder advertising by paying someone for a seemingly authentic endorsement or review, this is illegal payola.”

The savviest influencers on TikTok realize that the platform — just like any other app — won’t be dominant forever. To help ensure their career longevity, Jones and Mann are helping the D’Amelio family build a following on other platforms (like Instagram and YouTube) and negotiate long-term brand sponsorship deals as opposed to one-offs. “We’ve seen platforms come and go, and those are things we can’t control,” says Mann. “We’re trying to be smart about building an audience that will come with them wherever they are.”

Charli D’Amelio says she wants to “do it all” — from touring as a dancer with top-tier artists to expanding into beauty and fashion. She’s already using her platform philanthropically, too, partnering with UNICEF for Internet Safety Day in March to create a video about cyberbullying, and she recently teamed with Procter & Gamble to promote donations to coronavirus relief funds through the “distance dance.”

Along the way, she achieved her ultimate goal a decade earlier than planned. In February, she flew to Miami to shoot a dance with Jennifer Lopez the day before the singer’s history-making Super Bowl LIV performance. D’Amelio promised herself she wouldn’t cry, but when Lopez gave her a hug, “it all started coming out,” she says. “She was the sweetest person ever.”



COURTESY OF @CHARLIDAMELIO/TIKTOK

In the #SuperBowlChallenge TikTok video that they filmed backstage, D’Amelio jumps and fist-pumps the air alongside Lopez and her crew of backup dancers, her smile beaming. She has a minor slip-up and skips over one of the moves, but it doesn’t matter. By now the clip has joined the dozens of others that make up her TikTok profile feed — a shifting, neon-splashed wall of thumbnails that seems to repopulate itself endlessly, D’Amelio’s tiny face smiling up from each one. **b**

What Makes **TikTok** Tick

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