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Rock On: The State of Rock Music Among Generation Z

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Abstract

Rock music is a significant part of American culture and has always had ties to the socialization of the youth since its rise in the 1950s. Many musicians and music journalists have pushed forth the opinion that the genre is “dead” as its relevance in young adult culture has faded away in favor of different genres of mainstream music. However, rock artists have seen more success and virality in the past few years. This is primarily true through the social media platform TikTok, the largest platform of its kind with most young people as part of its userbase. The following study intends to analyze and explain the relationship between rock music and members of Generation Z, particularly 18- to 24- year-olds, through an online Qualtrics survey. It highlights the musical preferences of this target group, including how they discover rock music and respond to the rock music they are presented on social media. Many of the participants embrace the genre with a feeling that it is rising in popularity in their age group. Secondary research was conducted to find data on some of the rock artists that have gained traction on TikTok, to highlight the impact that massive exposure to Generation Z has had on them. The effects of virality are evident in the short term for these artists, but the long term effects are minimal. Findings of the study suggest that artists and labels need to develop strategies to convert those who come across their viral music into devoted fans of the band.

Keywords: rock music, Generation Z, TikTok, social media, music, youth culture

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Introduction

Many research studies have been conducted around rock music and its impacts on society. All signs point to rock's do-it-yourself ethos and tenacious spirit as the cause of the genre's longevity, despite the amount of sonic and cultural evolutions it has undergone. The genre's ties to the youth have also adapted to the societal changes in each era of rock music. Due to the impact of social media, Generation Z seems to have their ears open to rock music more so than in the past. According to Andrew Meola, Generation Z is defined as "the generation that was born between 1997-2012, following millennials" (2022). The question that this study seeks to answer is: what is Generation Z's relationship to rock music? How does this generation consume it, and has the social media platform Tiktok influenced this at all?

Literature Review

The History of Rock

Rock music got its start in the 1950s. "Rock n roll" has origins in African American culture through artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard (Farber). Many of the artists who pioneered rock music were working-class African Americans based in the South who played blues music on their guitars (Mahon). However, with time, the work of these artists has been ignored in the shadow of the multimillionaire white rock stars who have come after them. It is important to acknowledge the roots of the genre and give African Americans the credit they deserve for revolutionizing music through the creation of rock.

What is now considered "classic rock" is the product of decades spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s. Though released ages ago, these eras of rock music are embraced in a large way and still have devoted radio stations to this day. The 1960s brought way for traditional rock and

roll from Britain, such as The Beatles and their edgier cousin The Rolling Stones (Frith). The next phase of rock that came post-Vietnam had a more free-spirited feel, featuring bands that could easily be reduced to “hippies,” such as the flowy, witchy Fleetwood Mac and the psychedelic Pink Floyd (Frith).

Around the 1980s, raucous bands with striking haircuts like Aerosmith and Def Leppard took over the mainstream. Simultaneously, the synthesizer became an essential part of rock music in the “new wave” genre that showed success for many British bands (Frith). Finally, rock in the 1990s is heavily associated with the grunge scene. At this time, the Pacific Northwest was home to superstar bands that included more fuzzy and distorted guitars in their typically cynical songs. The biggest band of the grunge era is undoubtedly Nirvana. The introspection that came from Kurt Cobain’s pen reached the general public in a massive way, with his shouts of distress in songs like “Smells Like Teen Spirit” still being extremely recognizable years later (Frith).

Heavier offshoots of the rock genre have come in the form of punk and metal, which found their starts in similar eras. The latter came into its own in the early 70s when Black Sabbath brought together dark, horrific lyricism and heavy instrumentation to become the first real “heavy metal band” (Pearlin). The genre then evolved into something more technically advanced, with bands playing at breakneck speeds and competing to be the most extreme, thrashiest band. Punk, however, developed a little later in the mid-1970s with home bases in New York and London (Cooper). According to RateYourMusic, “Fast tempos, loud and distorted riffs, simple songs, frequent use of power chords, and shouted vocals” are common characteristics of the genre. Bands such as The Ramones and The Sex Pistols ignited a sense of rebellion and anarchy among both musicians and fans of their work, adding a political level to

the genre (Cooper). Once this commercial height of punk wore off, niche localized punk scenes began to thrive on their own and formed many subgenres in the process (Cooper).

From the underground world of punk stemmed a more saccharine version of the genre, which came to be called “pop punk.” A first wave of pop punk began in the early 1990s, but the popularity of the genre did not take off until later in the decade and into the early to mid-2000s (Gebre and Winkler). The genre is typically characterized by its polished and melodic sound, which led it to be accepted by the general public through major players such as Blink 182 and Fall Out Boy (Gebre and Winkler). Though fading since its peak, the genre still lives on with its aggressive vocals and catchy hooks, having a dedicated following that revolves around the live show setting.

The 2000s were also characterized by the rise of indie rock, rock being primarily released through independent labels and living in the underground. One of the biggest scenes of indie rock has been New York City, where guitar-heavy bands like The Strokes brought a rougher edge to rock music that was still accessible (Goodman). The genre was initially referred to as “college rock”, reflecting the audience that typically gravitates towards this kind of music, but “indie” became an easy, catchall term to reference it (Velvet). Some of the defining characteristics of the genre include a DIY aesthetic, sometimes lo-fi production, self-written songs, and authenticity that shines throughout (Masterclass (b)).

A lot of the rock music that is currently on the airwaves today is considered “alternative rock”, as it has a clear distinction from the mainstream. A tough genre to put into words, MasterClass describes the genre as being guitar-driven with a punk ethos and pop sensibility (MasterClass (a)). A perfect example of modern alternative rock is Glass Animals, a quartet with rock roots that use their traditional rock instruments paired with electronic and even hip-hop

beats to create one-of-a-kind songs that have taken over radios and charts around the world (Baltin). This band, along with others in a similar vein, make up the current state of rock music.

The State of Rock Today

The phrase “rock is dead” has been used to describe the genre’s decrease in relevancy for several years now. According to a study done about Spotify’s music catalog, only about 5% of all music released in the 2020s thus far has been rock music, much lower than its peak at around 35% in the 1970s (Larpchareren). Both journalists and artists, including veteran rock musician Gene Simmons of the band KISS, have had a lack of faith in the longevity of the genre past this point (Nepomuceno). Journalist Steven Hyden said, “When people talk about rock music, they have a vision in their head of a four- or five-piece band smoking cigarettes with leather jackets and tattoos... a band that comes from nowhere and takes over the culture. That’s unquestionably over” (Ross). This notion shared by many came in part from the rise of hip hop and R&B as the most listened to genres since 2017, taking rock’s spot for the very first time (Gibson).

At the same time, the genre has recently gathered more ears and attention through a revival of signature pop punk sounds in the mainstream. For example, breakout teen pop star Olivia Rodrigo’s chart-topping single “good 4 u” from 2021 brought many comparisons to the pop punk classic “Misery Business” by the band Paramore. These observations came from the similar drum and guitar patterns and through the cynical lyrics that are written all over the pop punk scene (Marcin). This recycled trend in music also inspired artist Machine Gun Kelly to transition from a rapper to a rock sensation through his pop punk album assisted by Blink 182’s Travis Barker, who has supported many rising artists making similar music (Powell).

Outside of pop punk, other artists have gained success with their own takes on rock music. For example, “hyperpop” duo 100 geecs has combined bubblegum pop with the rock they grew up on, including ska and nu-metal sounds from the 1990s, to make left-of-center music that has gathered attention for both its catchiness and “weirdness” (Horowitz). Indie rock has also persisted past its golden age in the 2000s with bands both small and large. A larger example is British artist Beabadoobee, who has combined her love for 90s indie rock such as Pavement and pop hooks into a grungier take on pop-rock that has received some mainstream attention, including support from 2010s legends The 1975 (Shafer). There are plenty of artists who are making music inside their bedrooms with just their guitars and GarageBand who are doing similar things on a less publicized scale. Self-releasing artists’ growth within the streaming market is something worth mentioning, as “the sector grew a further 34.1% to break the billion dollar market for the first time, ending the year on \$1.2 billion. It increased market share by more than a percentage point, up to 5.1% in 2020” (Paine).

The Social Aspects of Rock Music

Rock music has always been the music of the youth, especially as a result of the social aspects that came with the development of an alternative culture surrounding this kind of music. The first major example of this dates back to the 1960s, when The Beatles took the world by storm. The story of The Beatles’ conquest of America is described heavily in “Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Sixties Screamscape of Beatlemania” by Nicolette Rohr. She describes in the article how this British foursome’s arrival in the United States caused a fandom revolution like none other in its day. The fanbase, which consisted of mainly young women, wept, screamed, and even fainted at airports and on streets whenever the Fab Four were spotted (Rohr). These fans’ lives began to

revolve around the band: listening to their records in their bedrooms, camping out for concert tickets, starting fan clubs to connect with others who shared that same love for the Beatles (Rohr). The Beatles' fans subverted many expectations for "ladylike behavior" in the 1960s, and it is clear how Beatlemania started the evolution into the modern "fangirl" that has been unjustly frowned upon just for showing their passion for a favorite artist.

This passionate dedication to guitar music did not fade with time; it just became more underground. For example, the book *Ripped, Torn, and Cut: Pop, Politics and Punk Fanzines From 1976* by Subcultures Network describes the popularity of the "zine" amongst fans of punk music, which fueled music communities. "Zines", a shortened name for fanzines, are small circulation magazines of niche interest (LibGuides). These "zines" consisted of "adolescent obsessions and subjective musings presented in hard-to-comprehend scribble, one-finger type or slap-dash collage" and were sold and bought by music fans who wanted to manifest their fandom in a creative way (Subcultures Network). The "zine" was at its most popular in the 1980s, serving a primarily teenage audience (Subcultures Network). At the same time, shows within people's houses or backyards became more common. Smaller bands of diverse genres would make up each bill, which was then promoted by an organization of fans to play at an unconventional venue. These shows built communities in local scenes and even helped bands gain wider success (Coplan).

DIY music scenes are still thriving in cities across the country today. Small shows bring together rock music lovers, with an emphasis on those who are marginalized, to find community through their common interest. These do-it-yourself communities allow small bands and artists to create their own opportunities and enable their music to grow organically. Dalton Randall, a member of DIY bands in Houston, said, "Every band was a local band at some point. DIY scenes

give a genuine platform for anyone trying to pursue their art, and people attending shows are what truly keep the scene alive” (Hubbard). Before the dawn of social media, only those who had some sort of connection to the artists would have heard about upcoming shows. However, bands now have platforms to reach a wider audience, even including those who live out of town (Hubbard).

Social Media and Music

Social media was a pivotal development that has allowed for more connection than ever before. Matthew Hudson defines social media as “websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly, efficiently, and in real-time” (2020). For many, social media has become a way to meet people with common interests and to share those interests with “friends” or “followers”.

Music was not incorporated into social media until the founding of Malaysian platform Friendster in 2002, when users could stream songs of their choice while on the site. The most memorable beginning of the intersection between social media and music was MySpace, created in 2003 (Social Industries). The platform helped many alternative artists in the era promote their music and grow their fanbases (Richardson). An example of this is Tempe, Arizona-based rock band The Maine, who saw the potential in MySpace for community building. In the early years of the band, in the mid-2000s, the band members would spend “most of their waking hours — before school, after school, sometimes during school — reaching out to fans across the country through Myspace” (The Maine). The band knew that just promoting themselves would not create the impact they wished to have, so they wanted to break down the wall between artist and fan. Once connected to these fans, the band started to develop authentic friendships with them, and in

turn, they would show up to their first shows all over the United States. Some of these early fans have even continued showing up to concerts over a decade later (The Maine). Many bands followed in The Maine's footsteps and took advantage of MySpace during the platform's heyday before the 2010s. Listeners were also able to take part in the sharing of music, choosing songs to be displayed and automatically played on their personal profiles (Johnson). This sharing of music through social media has only gotten more common, especially once TikTok came into play.

Then Came TikTok

TikTok is a social media platform that has influenced the music industry in a major way. The platform, which has recently reached 1 billion users as of 2021, shares short videos and typically uses an algorithmic "for you" page to show users new and trending content (TikTok). The app has proven to be successful in turning unknown artists into chart-toppers, with the first notable example being Lil Nas X, whose rap-country single "Old Town Road" became a massive hit after being shared on TikTok (Unterberger). The key to a song's success on TikTok is for it to resonate well enough with fans that more and more videos will start to feature that song, whether it be in the background or as some sort of essential component to the video being made, such as a trending dance. Many times, this leads to users flocking to streaming services to seek out the song of their own volition, getting them to chart both on viral songs charts and overall songs charts like those through Billboard and Spotify (Stassen). To be exact, "75% of its US users say they discover new artists via the platform" (Stassen).

Following the rise of "Old Town Road," record labels have realized that the app is a valuable marketing tool that should become more heavily incorporated into release strategies. Harrison Golding, director of marketing at EMPIRE's label division, said that "in 2019,

[TikTok] was definitely a part of our marketing rollouts, but in 2020, it's increased tenfold" (Unterberger). One of the marketing mechanisms used by labels is partnering with major influencers on the app. Influencers are paid to use particular songs in their videos that will then be seen and heard by millions of viewers (Whateley). There is also an opportunity for songs to go viral through the adaptation of a particular section in the song into its own video format, such as a dance trend or something comedic that goes along with the song's lyrics (Whateley). The app has proven that it can be used as a successful A&R tool, as over 70 artists discovered on the app were signed to major labels in 2020, and that number has grown since (Ingham). Noticing the strong impact that the app can have on smaller artists, TikTok itself has recently developed a program called SoundOn that uplifts these artists and make it easier for them to get their music on the platform and find new listeners (Ingham). TikTok's simple sound-uploading format and appreciation for smaller artists have encouraged the growth of some more niche genres of music but have also led to some virality within rock music as a whole.

TikTok and Rock Music

Studies have shown that Generation Z's music taste is characterized by diversity: "Where young consumers of previous generations might have felt most passionate about a single genre, today's playlists are stacked with multiple genres, and Gen Z is happy to live in a post-genre world," says an article published by Ypulse Inc. ("3 Trends Shaping Gen Z's Taste in Musicians"). With so much music at listeners' fingertips, exploring other genres outside of what mainstream radio is playing has become significantly easier. This, combined with the accessibility of TikTok, has led to more rock artists and songs becoming successful and

favorable in the last few years. According to Forbes, 60% of TikTok's users fall into the Generation Z age range (Muliadi).

One of the earliest rock songs to go viral on TikTok was "Prom Queen", a song by indie rock band Beach Bunny who at that point was only a mainstay in the Minneapolis DIY community. Both the song's catchiness and accurate critiques of modern beauty standards led hundreds of thousands of users to use it as the soundtrack to their videos (Battan et al.). The band was able to return to the TikTok spotlight two years later when their love song "Cloud 9" made its way to the app and became seemingly inescapable. The popularity of the latter song propelled the band even more, resulting in a second version of the song that TikTok users heavily suggested, which features different pronouns to fit their respective partners and become even more accurate to each experience (Rossignol).

There are an overwhelming number of songs and artists across the rock spectrum that are fit to be mentioned in this discussion of TikTok virality. For example, the wittiness and relatability of pop-rock band Waterparks' deep cut "I Miss Having Sex..." resulted in the band earning a TikTok hit and reaching #1 on Billboard's Emerging Artists chart at the same time (Darus). 2000s indie staple MGMT also found new fans when their synthy, goth-influenced apocalyptic track "Little Dark Age" which was released in 2018 made waves on the app with its earwormy chorus (DaRosa). More lo-fi leaning sounds have been embraced by users as well, with garage rock songs like "Freaks" by Surf Curse and "Alien Blues" by Vundabar having a combined 900,000 TikToks behind them ("Surf Curse Overview"; "Vundabar Overview"). Neither of the two songs had any sort of push behind them in popular culture before TikTok claimed them, leaving the bands themselves in a shock. The members of Vundabar made an Instagram post in gratitude for many TikTok users enjoying their 2015 song, saying it is "kind of

nutty” that it has been charting as of late (Vundabar). The success of Surf Curse’s “Freaks” catapulted the band into a major-label deal with Atlantic Records, which then pushed the song onto rock radio and even led to the song reaching #17 on Billboard’s Hot Rock & Alternative chart (Brown). Little did anyone know that this track from 2013 from a self-released album would make such a splash.

Methodology

To analyze the relationship between Generation Z and rock music, participants will complete a survey using the Qualtrics platform that details their musical preferences, opinions on rock music specifically, and the level of impact that TikTok has on their individual tastes (see Fig. 1). The fully anonymous sample being studied includes students in Pace University’s Arts and Entertainment Management program who agree to complete the survey. The results of the Qualtrics survey will then be analyzed to find the average opinions of all the participants.

In addition to the survey component, data will be collected containing the streaming statistics of some rock artists who have garnered virality through TikTok, an app that is primarily used by Generation Z. The artists being researched will include Glass Animals, Beach Bunny, Vundabar, and Surf Curse, all rock artists of varying popularity who have had viral songs on TikTok and have been referenced already within the literature review. The online platform Soundcharts, a music statistics website, will provide Spotify monthly listeners, Spotify playlist placement, Spotify followers, TikTok videos with their biggest song(s), and fan retention rates for each artist. The method for finding Spotify fan retention is dividing the number of followers by the number of monthly listeners, showing how many people who listen to the band’s music are converted into loyal fans.

Findings

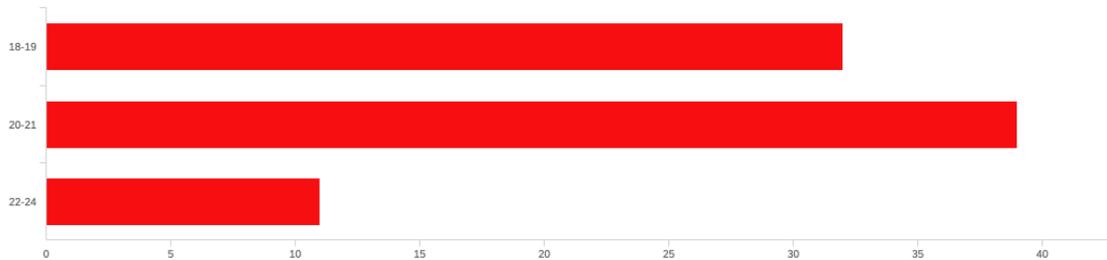
Student Survey

Once being sent to all possible participants, there were 80 students who completed all of the survey questions that were applicable to them. The students who participated in the survey ranged from the ages of 18 to 24, with most of them falling between ages 20 and 21. 38 of the students who responded to the survey were between ages 20-21, while 32 were 18-19 and 10 were 22-24.

Figure 2:

Q1a - How old are you?

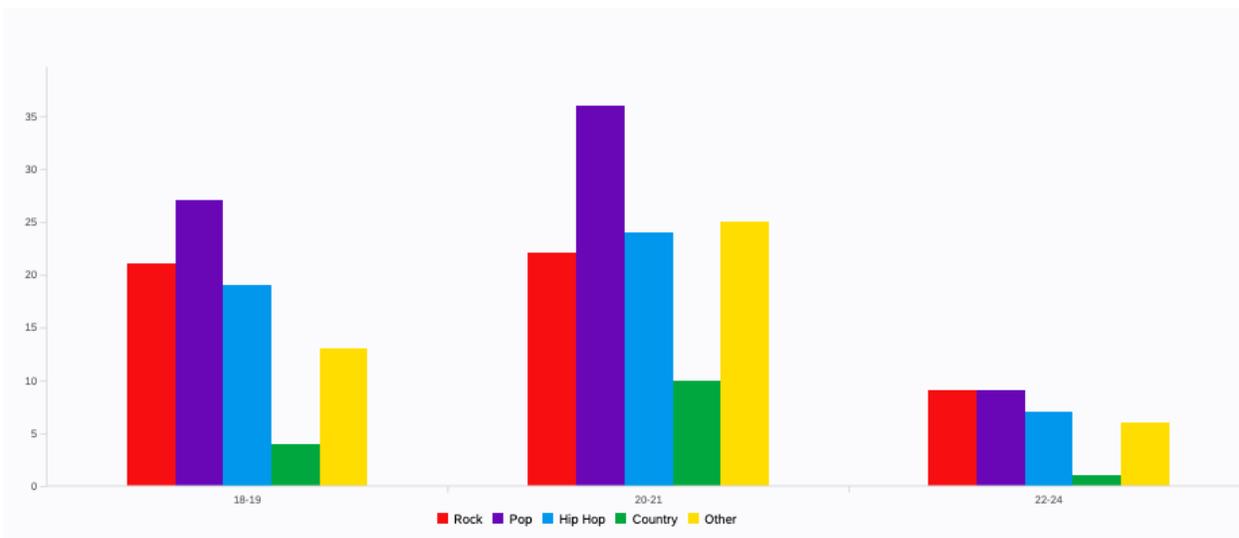
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All of the participating students are studying Arts and Entertainment Management, so there is a chance that these passionate entertainment consumers have differing results from the average Generation Z individual.

Across the responses received, the music taste of the group varied. The sample was prompted to select all the genres of music that they typically listen to, not just their one favorite. Many had diverse tastes, with 223 different selections being made from the 80 students.

Figure 3:

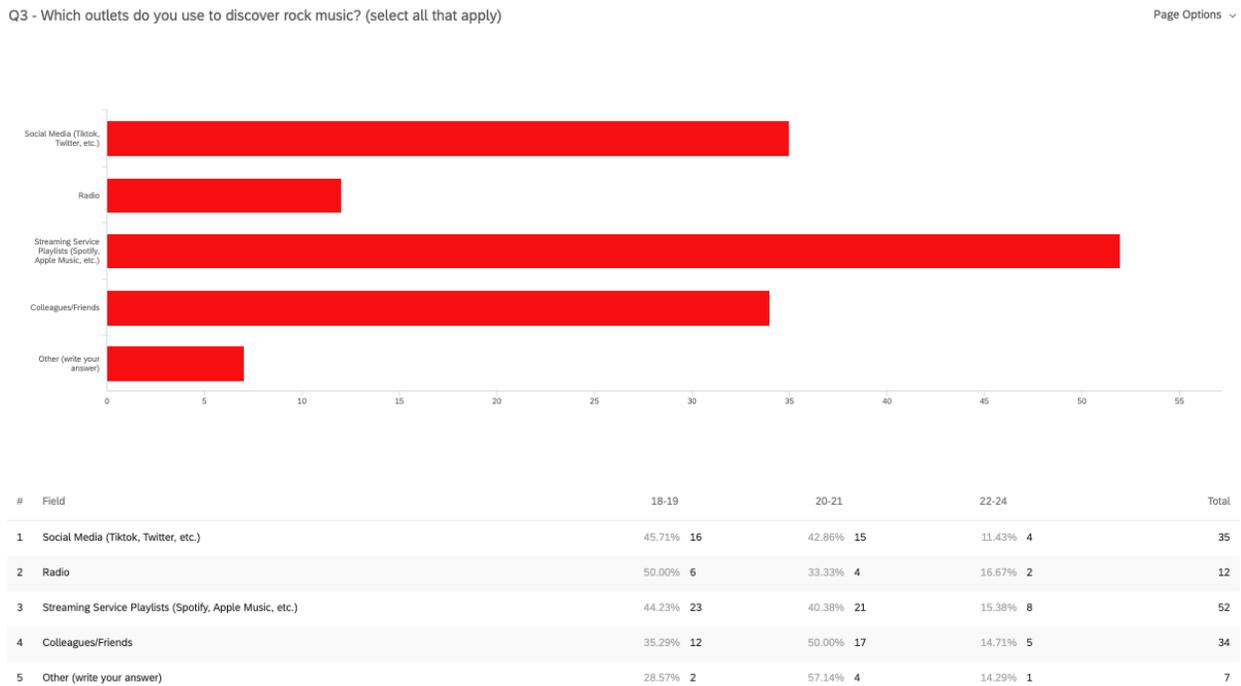


The genre that showed to be most popular was, of course, pop music, with 70 of the 80 students selecting it. The other genre dominating the mainstream at the moment is hip hop, which was chosen by 48 different students. However, rock music ended up just slightly surpassing hip hop as a preference by the sample. When straightforwardly asked if they listen to rock music, about 70% of the sample said that they do. This included students across all three age ranges, with

those who listen to rock music always in the majority. For example, out of the 10 students who are 22-24, only one student did not listen to rock music. All participants who answered yes to this question were asked to proceed to the next questions, while those who said that they do not listen to rock music were asked to omit many of the further questions that do not apply to their tastes.

The methods of rock music discovery utilized by the sample ranged just as much as their individual tastes did. Most of the sample said that they become exposed to new rock music through the editorial playlists that streaming services share, such as those on Spotify or Apple Music; 52 of the students said that this was true.

Figure 4:



Discovering music does not seem to be limited to one source, with students selecting more than one method most of the time. Radio does not have the same impact on the youth that it once had, as less than 10% of the selections included using radio to find new rock music that they enjoy.

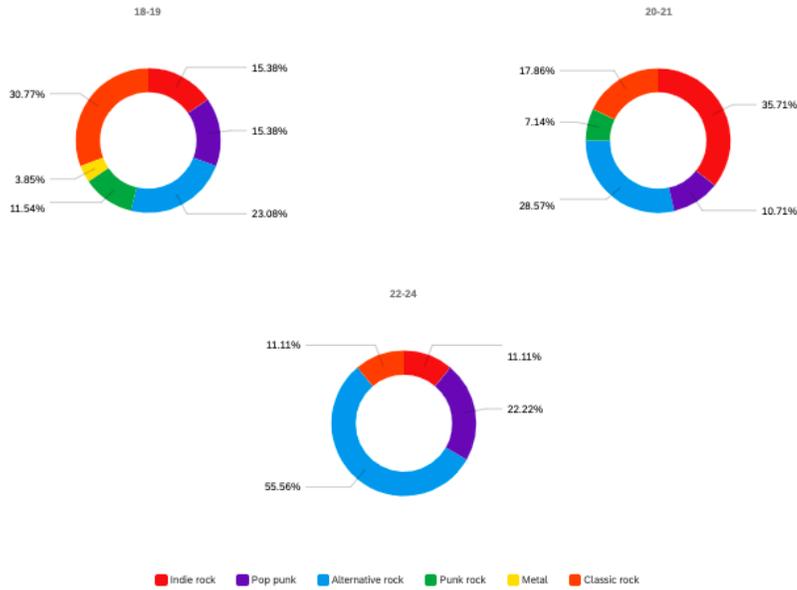
The youngest age range, 18- to 19-year-olds, had the most students who utilize the radio for music discovery, likely because they have recently spent more time with parents who typically swear by the radio or spend more time in cars than the typical New York City student. Social media, however, is another one of the most popular methods of discovering rock music, equally as common as finding new rock music through friends and colleagues, with around 35 students choosing each option. On average, the sample was quite receptive to discovering new music through the outlets of their choosing. With 1 being the least receptive and 10 being the most, the average rating of the sample for this question was a 7.8 out of 10. The standard deviation here was about 2.7, so the dispersion of the data was fairly wide.

The preferred subgenres of rock across the sample varied with each individual. 19 out of the 62 students who answered this question said that they are most likely to enjoy alternative rock; indie rock and classic rock followed with 15 and 13 votes respectively.

Figure 5:

Q9 - Which of these subgenres of rock music are you most likely to enjoy?

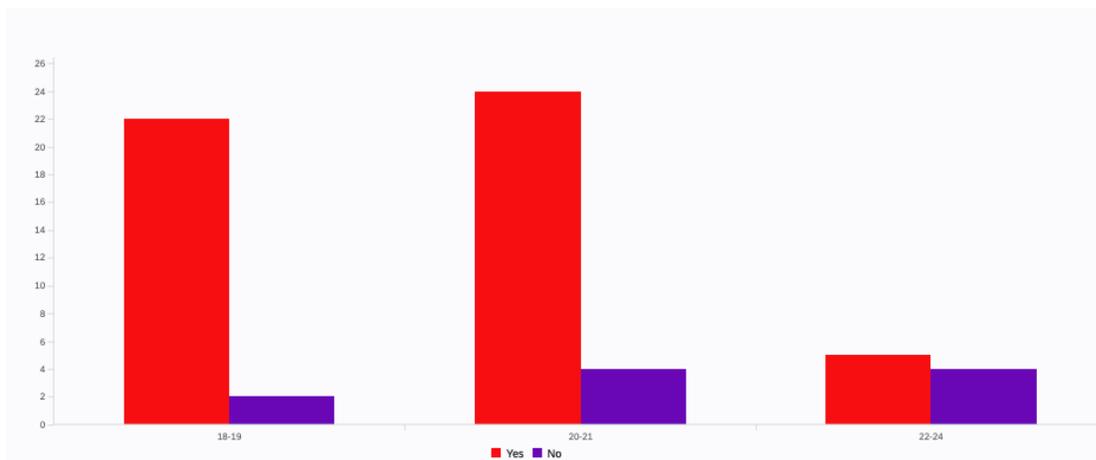




9 students said they enjoy pop punk most, and punk rock and metal only got a combined 6 votes. The most prominent subgenre amongst 18- to 19-year-old participants was surprisingly classic rock and the middle age range, 20 to 21 year olds, preferred indie rock. The 22–24-year-olds were less likely to enjoy these subgenres, with alternative rock taking up 56% of the interest in this age group.

Part of the survey was dedicated to TikTok and the sample’s relationship with music on the platform. To start, 83% of rock listeners in the survey use TikTok on a regular basis.

Figure 6:



This was mostly made up of the younger two age groups, as those who are closer to their mid-20s did not seem to use it as much – only 5 of the 9 rock listeners between 22 and 24 use TikTok regularly. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very little and 10 being a large amount, the average student said that TikTok’s influence on their music taste is a 4.8 out of 10. This includes music of all genres that has seen success on the app, not just rock music. When asked about the rock music that has gone viral on the app, most of the sample did say that they have enjoyed some of those songs on their own time. 58% of them have heard songs such as Surf Curse’s “Freaks” or MGMT’s “Little Dark Age” on TikTok and then went to listen to them past the viral section of the song.

Figure 7:

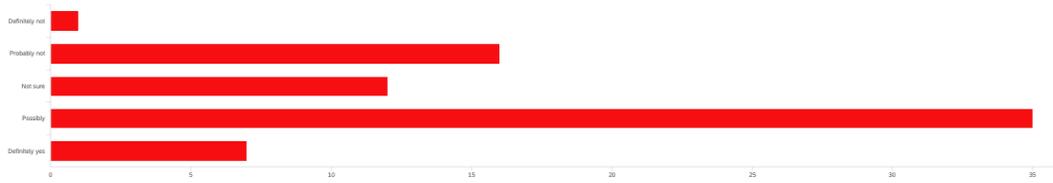
Q7 - If you answered Yes to Question 5: After hearing any rock songs that have gone viral on Tiktok within the past year (such as "Freaks" by Surf Curse, "Little Dark Age" ... Page Options



The final question of the survey asked if the sample believes that rock music is rising in popularity amongst their age group. Both those who do and do not listen to rock music were invited to answer this question. More than half the sample said that it is either possibly or definitely rising in popularity, with 42 students selecting one of these opinions.

Figure 8:

Q10 - Do you believe that rock music is rising in popularity among your age group?



17 out of the 70 respondents said that it is possibly or definitely not. 11 students, many of which were students who do not listen to the genre regularly if at all, said they were unsure of the genre’s growth among Generation Z. The results from the survey, including the use of TikTok and the listening of viral songs, manifest themselves in data about rock artists by affecting their statistics positively.

Artist Data

In order to find the impacts that particular TikTok-famous rock songs have had on the artist’s growth, the website SoundCharts has provided statistics about each artist to be analyzed and their audiences. The website has dedicated pages for each artist that gives an overview of these numbers. Since about 63% of Generation Z uses TikTok and has been exposed to these artists, a significant amount of these artists’ growth can be attributed to the listening from this age group (Aghadjanian). None of the artists featured have had their highest level of success prior to the spread of their music on Tiktok.

Glass Animals is one of the biggest bands in the world right now, especially thanks to the success of their single “Heat Waves” which has had a major presence on TikTok since Summer 2021. The band had a decently sized following prior to the explosive success of this song, but the band has become a household name for rock listeners due to this song’s rise. After 59 weeks of

climbing the Billboard Hot 100, the song reached #1 on this nationwide chart during the week of March 12, 2022 and has stayed at that spot the following week as well (Billboard). The statistics found on SoundCharts about the band and their growth aligns closely with this milestone for the band. The band recently had a peak of Spotify monthly listeners on February 26, 2022, with 39,980,662 people listening to Glass Animals within the past 30 days (“Glass Animals Overview”).

Figure 9:

Glass Animals Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	39,980,662
Spotify Followers	2,535,792
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	6.39%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	1,411,770
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“Top 50 – Global” (16.5 million likes) “Today’s Top Hits” (30 million likes) “Songs to Sing in the Car” (9.95 million likes)

In terms of Spotify followers, the band has about 2,535,792, increasing by 104,393 new followers within the past month (“Glass Animals Overview”). Of all their monthly listeners, 6.39% of them follow the band on the platform (“Glass Animals Audience Insights”). Their massive song “Heat Waves” has been used in over 1 million TikTok videos in the past 90 days, with a peak of 100,494 videos in one day on March 6, 2022 (“Glass Animals Overview”).

The song has also been featured in many editorial playlists by Spotify because of its popularity. “Heat Waves” currently holds the top spot in the “Top 50 – Global” playlist, a weekly changing playlist that highlights the songs being listened to most around the world with 16.5 million likes (“Glass Animals Audience Insights”). The song has also been featured on Spotify’s biggest playlist, “Today’s Top Hits” since December 2020 and currently holds the

fourth top spot in this playlist that is liked by over 30 million listeners (“Glass Animals Audience Insights”). It has also found success in more mood-based playlists besides just those highlighting top songs. Spotify has an editorial playlist called “Songs to Sing in the Car” with about 9.95 million likes, and “Heat Waves” is towards the top of the playlist (“Glass Animals Audience Insights”).

Another staying band on TikTok has been Beach Bunny, who has had not one, but two songs make it big on the app. With just about 825,000 videos featuring their songs in the past 90 days, this band that was completely unknown to most a few years ago has now gained many new fans (“Beach Bunny Overview”).

Figure 10:

Beach Bunny Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	6,562,630
Spotify Followers	830,146
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	12.65%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	825,000
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“Indie Pop” (1.6 million likes) “My Life is a Movie” (1 million likes) “2010’s Mix” (3 million likes)

The band’s monthly listeners on Spotify are at a new high of 6,562,630 as of March 10, 2022, and their follower count is now 830,146, with 26,428 new users following them this past month. The band has a fan retention rate of about 12.65%, which is the highest of all the bands researched (“Beach Bunny Audience Insights”). This means that 12.65% of those who have listened to the band in the past month are current followers of the band on Spotify. Beach Bunny has been featured on a bunch of Spotify’s editorial playlists, especially within the past year. For example, the platform’s “Indie Pop” playlist and the more thematic “My Life is a Movie” playlist

feature the band’s biggest hits for over 1 million users who like the playlist (“Beach Bunny Audience Insights”).

The relative newcomer to TikTok virality out of the researched artists, Vundabar, peaked in popularity on the app around December 2021 when their 2015 song “Alien Blues” was consistently used in new content. In the past 90 days, the song has been used 310,400 times in new TikTok videos. (“Vundabar Overview”).

Figure 11:

Vundabar Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	5,198,030
Spotify Followers	175,836
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	3.38%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	310,400
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“2010’s Mix” (3 million likes) “Indie Mix” (1 million likes) “Moody Mix” (1 million likes)

The band has recently hit a peak in terms of Spotify monthly listeners as a result of the song’s popularity, with 5,198,030 listeners within the past 30 days. Of all the bands researched, this band has the lowest ratio of followers to monthly listeners as their 175,836 followers is only about 3.38% of their monthly listeners who are probably only pressing play on their one viral song (“Vundabar Audience Insights”). Sometimes TikTok latches on to an older song from a basically unknown artist and it rises to the top, so the trajectory of Vundabar is probably not unlike that of many other artists.

Finally, indie rock duo Surf Curse’s following was boosted after “Freaks” went viral on TikTok. The song has been featured in about 646,800 videos in the past 90 days, even after being released nearly 10 years ago (“Surf Curse Overview”).

Figure 12:

Surf Curse Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	8,925,550
Spotify Followers	670,037
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	6.39%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	646,800
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“Viral Hits” (2 million likes)

In the past month, the band has reached 8,925,550 monthly listeners on Spotify with 670,037 followers. Therefore, the band has retained about 6.39% of their listeners as loyal fans of their further discography (“Surf Curse Audience Insights”). While the band’s following on other platforms is drastically lower, the Spotify performance of the song has resulted in a steadily increasing follower base and playlist features such as on the “Viral Hits” playlist with 2 million likes (“Surf Curse Audience Insights”).

As a result of the success that these songs have reached, Spotify has felt inclined to push them further to users through their recent development of mood-based mixes. These playlists are algorithmically tailored to each user’s tastes, but there seem to often be overlapping songs from user to user. These mixes are divided by decade, mood, and even genre. Take the “2010’s Mix” for example, with “Alien Blues” by Vundabar consistently being placed in the mix of millions of users and being in the top 50 songs being most frequently added to these playlists. There are a little over 3 million users who like their own “2010’s Mix”, so this song is in often rotation through this playlist. The song has also been added to “Moody Mix” and “Indie Mix” for many users, with over 1 million users pressing the “like” button on their custom playlists (“Vundabar Overview”). Beach Bunny’s viral hits have had a similar fate, entering users’ “2010’s Mix” playlists as well (“Beach Bunny Overview”).

Though radio is less commonly used to discover new rock music than it once was, some of the viral TikTok hits have made their way off the internet and even have seen airplay on major radio stations. According to SoundChart's airplay column, Glass Animals' "Heat Waves" has been played a striking 83,879 times across worldwide radio stations in the past 28 days ("Glass Animals Airplay Insights"). For the biggest song in the world at the moment, this makes sense. Beach Bunny's top songs have also had significant radio play, being played over 1,000 times over the past month ("Beach Bunny Airplay Insights"). Even months and years after the band's songs initially took off, they seem to have staying power in the world of radio! For some, this might be the way they discover these songs for the first time, but this is not likely the case for Generation Z.

The commonality between all the artists mentioned is that while the Spotify monthly listeners proved to be in the millions, every other following for the band has stayed relatively stagnant, besides TikTok in some cases. For example, Beach Bunny only has a little over 180,000 Instagram followers, while the band's TikTok following is around 300,000, and their Spotify streams are in the millions thanks to their viral hits ("Beach Bunny Overview"). Surf Curse, on the other hand, who has no TikTok account, has only seen increases in their Spotify numbers and nothing else. The band's Instagram followers are a little more than 3 times less the amount of their Spotify followers, and that has not changed within the past month ("Surf Curse Overview"). Even when these viral songs have topped charts and have led to major record deals, there seems to be little effect on the long-term following of the bands in question, which is an issue.

Analysis

The diversity in musical taste among this age group is definitely evident in the survey responses. This generation has been characterized by open-mindedness, and the sample's average amount of receptiveness towards new rock music is as high as expected. There will always be those who are repelled by the genre, but without a doubt, there seems to be attention coming towards modern rock music from the ears of Generation Z. The survey suggests that Generation Z is aware of rock music, and for the most part does enjoy it. The plentiful methods for music discovery have made rock music even more accessible than it was in the past, with streaming services and social media being some of the most common ways that the sample has found new artists and songs.

The habits of Generation Z are unique as the backgrounds that they come from, and even have divides by just two years of age. Older members of Generation Z, who are very close to the age of millennials, tend not to use social media, like TikTok, as much to discover rock music and prefer different subgenres of rock compared to the rest of the survey. 20- to 21-year-olds, on the contrary, said that they tend to utilize social means of finding new rock music, like scrolling through social media or hearing about it through colleagues or friends, more so than their counterparts. 18-19-year-olds in the survey can be characterized as having the most diverse taste of the whole sample, with an emphasis on classic rock and even some fans of punk and metal in their age range. What these trends suggest is that even a year's difference in age can affect the average preference of those in the sample, but this might not be true in a much larger statistical sample.

The types of songs that have gone viral on TikTok vary heavily, from musical theatre moments to already popular rap tracks. In the vein of rock music, however, it seems like the

songs that are already aligned with the foremost tastes of the generation at the helm of making them go viral. The top subgenres of modern rock music that the survey participants resonated with are indie rock and alternative rock. The artists described within this study broadly fall into either of these categories, which makes them ideal for virality amongst the 18- to 24-year-olds who dominate TikTok. It has been uncommon for a more aggressive song, like something that is considered punk or metal, to make waves on the app outside of small, niche online communities.

The percentage of students who have enjoyed viral rock songs in their own time after hearing them on TikTok was drastically different across each age group. 88% of participants in the oldest group in the sample did enjoy these songs outside of the app, while 65% and 45% did in the youngest and middle groups, respectively. The age groups featured in the survey also varied in degrees of rock music fandom. When asked if they enjoy any rock artist enough to go to one of their concerts, all of the rock listeners from the 22-24 age group said yes, 92% of the 18-19 age group said yes, and only 70% of the 20-21 age group said yes. One can infer that those who said no probably are much more casual listeners of the genre who are not intensely dedicated fans of anything they hear, while those who said yes seem more active in their fandom of the genre.

Another factor that could be a cause of rock music becoming “in” again is the cyclical nature of trends. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to express nostalgia has felt as necessary as ever. Through social media like TikTok and the spreading of trends like wildfire, the typical trend cycle has been accelerated. The shortening of trend cycles is discussed often in fashion circles, but it is also evident in the recent state of rock music. Sounds of the 90s, such as grungy indie rock, have come back, followed by the pop punk sounds that were in their heyday around the mid to late-2000s and the indie rock that was all over the popular online

platform Tumblr in the early 2010s. In the case of Generation Z, those eras were when they grew up and came of age, and they can be seen as much simpler times for many. As these individuals are nearing full adulthood, they can become fonder of these times and the music soundscapes that revolved around them. The reach for nostalgia has shown itself in mainstream pop music on a wide scale, through artists like the disco and 80's-influenced hitmakers Dua Lipa and The Weeknd. However, with more accessibility to the music of the past, younger rock bands are also taking influence from a variety of different eras and sounds to bring back multiple trends at once.

All the songs featured, whether within their lyrics or through their sounds, evoke some sort of nostalgic feeling, which can be audibly attractive to Tiktok users at a massive level. For instance, Glass Animals' "Heat Waves" reflects on thinking about someone the narrator is estranged from at that point in his life. The adaptation of the song on Tiktok always tend to revolve around the lyrics "Sometimes all I think about is you", which users have played in the background of their own memories that they hold dear. There are also nostalgic sounds in many of the rock songs gaining popularity on TikTok and beyond. "Cloud 9" by Beach Bunny brings sounds of bright, 2000s pop-rock to the forefront, going along perfectly with the 2000s fashion that has been returning in droves. The lo-fi production, loud guitars, and garage-rock influences on songs by Vundabar and Surf Curse are reminiscent of the 1990s and the rock that dominated that era. These elements of each song tie into the fact that nostalgia has often been sought out by Generation Z, giving them a perfect opportunity to gain heaps of attention on TikTok.

The artist data carries a large weight as well, showing the immediate, short-term effects of a viral song on an artist's growth. The findings show that even a song that might be obscure for most of its existence can make a resurgence when it fits the current trends of today's music. This is true in the case of the songs by Surf Curse and Vundabar, both being released in the early

to mid-2010s and remaining out of the spotlight until 2021, when these songs boosted the artists' careers. What exactly goes viral online and when is a complete mystery: there is no way to predict the impact of a single song, especially by a relatively unknown artist. Every viral song is different, and no matter how hard an artist may try to get a viral hit, that effort may not come to fruition. However, in the event that it does gain traction online, the song can flock users to streaming and sometimes even help the artist accumulate new fans.

There is something remarkable about the pipeline from TikTok virality to acquiring playlist spots on music streaming platforms, like Spotify. All of the artists investigated ended up featured on Spotify playlists with at least one million likes, highlighting each of their popular tracks. With so many individuals of Generation Z looking to these platforms for playlists to give them song suggestions or to play in the background of their activities, the inclusion of viral hits in these playlists can keep these songs in the public consciousness after the initial snippet becomes a hit. At the same time, playlist placements like these can increase the likelihood that these trending songs reach those who do not use TikTok as frequently or at all. The same goes for radio play, which happens at differing degrees, possibly based on the overall success of the song. Though many Generation Z individuals do not listen to the radio as much as they once did, those who do can also capture these tracks outside of the online format.

Overall, it seems crucial for artists to capture the listenership of Generation Z, as this rising group that heavily resides on the Internet is a key tastemaker. With many of the survey participants utilizing TikTok as a means of music discovery, it is easier to access this generation and understand what their preferences are. In many cases, these users will be influenced by the music that they hear on the app, and make a push for the songs they like in any way they can, including trend creation and streaming it outside of the app. Generation Z also has a strong

presence across the major streaming platforms, as seen in the survey, so this generation's connection to music rising across the Internet is enough to bring any sort of success to the artists they are enjoying.

The biggest issue that the artist data suggests is that it is difficult for bands to keep new listeners' attention and convert those TikTok users discovering their songs for 30 seconds at a time into dedicated fans. The fan retention rates of all the artists mentioned were quite low compared to the millions of ears listening to them. Beach Bunny's was likely the highest because of the virality of more than one of their songs. The band's fan retention rate is 12.65%, making it almost double the amount that some of the other artists got. This large difference reflects the impact of two hit songs instead of one. Glass Animals, though seemingly the biggest band of the bunch, still had a low fan retention rate, likely from the many new listeners who have heard "Heat Waves" in the past month and have chosen not to listen further. The more garage-rock influenced bands mentioned, Vundabar and Surf Curse, are less saccharine and a little more niche in terms of genre, so their fan retention rates were lower to reflect that.

One can infer that it is difficult to tell exactly why all of the bands mentioned have not retained more fans because viral hits seem like they would make a bigger difference in an artist's number of fans than they do. Many times, the quick snippets on TikTok stay just as passing snippets that do not have any impact on most of the people who come across them and make videos with them. Only 58% of the survey respondents who were rock-listening TikTok users were going out of their way to enjoy these full songs. It is uncertain if these listeners turned into fans after listening to full songs because this fan retention-based observation never seemed apparent before. Though Gen Z can be open to new rock music now and is embracing it in the moment, the chance of these songs fading away is high.

Conclusion

After analyzing both artist data and the responses to the survey, there seems to be some sort of positive correlation between rock music and Generation Z. The often raw, cathartic nature of rock music has resonated with people of this generation as it has in the past, with lingering nostalgia fueling rock listening even more. It still might seem as if rock is dying out from an outsider's perspective, but the research of this study shows that to be far from the truth. Generation Z is embracing rock music, but it is not necessarily the most defining genre of the era, as seen by the many tastes highlighted in the findings of the survey. Pop music will always reign supreme, with rock not too far behind it reaching a wide audience.

As described earlier in the study, rock music has been the soundtrack of the youth for as long as it has been around. Though there has been a lack of hope in the genre's longevity at times, the genre seems to remain connected to younger generations in one way or another. The Internet is to thank for this accessibility of rock music, with more and more artists seizing the opportunity to reach this demographic and connect with them through social media.

TikTok and the embrace of rock music among Generation Z seem to go hand in hand, as the streaming rates of artists that have seen virality on the platform have increased dramatically. The impact that TikTok has had on smaller rock artists is undeniable, as these short snippets of songs got their music into the awareness of a receptive generation and have often led to major label pickup. However, these impacts coming directly from Tiktok sensation seem to only affect artists in the short term.

Recommendation

Given the observations described, record labels have further research to do to figure out how to ensure longevity for their artists and make sure viral artists don't just become a fleeting trend. Artists and the teams behind them must prove their worthiness of listening attention to get TikTok users with relatively short attention spans past that first snippet and then past that one viral song. With an overwhelming amount of music to possibly consume, it is necessary to stand out and convert casual listeners into devoted fans. There is also opportunity for artists to consider how to market themselves better to an Internet-savvy generation, such as using TikTok to their advantage. Though there is no set formula for success on social media, as anything can catch the ears of users, but artists should think about strategies that work for their individual selves to capture the crucial young adult audience that uses apps like TikTok so frequently. Strategy of this kind can also be useful for classic artists pushing to reach a new generation, seeing as rock artists of the past like Fleetwood Mac and Steely Dan are becoming appreciated by audiences who were not even alive at their career peaks. Knowledge of the preferences in genre amongst Generation Z, their listening habits, and the influence that TikTok has on them through the information provided in the previously described findings and analysis are essential for artists and record labels in developing an effective marketing plan.

With so much prevalent music in the Internet age, Generation Z is difficult to pin down in terms of absolute preferences. The trends and preferences that this generation latches on to are constantly evolving. In order for the music industry to progress and find success in artists outside of the top 1%, record labels need to put more resources into engaging with and understanding this generation that contributes so much to the listening of new music. During these past two years, a time that was extremely difficult for smaller artists, seeing the virality of some artists

that never saw widespread attention before was a sign of hope for rock music that it needed. It seems that the industry took note of this, recognized the opportunities for modern rock music that they have not reached thus far and started to push the genre forward with whatever they can.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Student Survey Questions

1.

a. How old are you?

Options: 18-19, 20-21, 22-24

b. What types of music do you listen to? Select all that apply.

Options: Rock, Pop, Hip Hop, Country, Other

2. Do you listen to rock music? If yes, continue to the next question. If not, skip to Question 10.

Options: Yes, No

3. Which outlets do you use to discover rock music? (select all that apply)

Options: Social Media (Tiktok, Twitter, etc.), Radio, Streaming Service Playlists (Spotify, Apple Music, etc.), Colleagues/Friends, Other (write your answer)

4. Based on #3, on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least and 10 being the most, how receptive are you to discovering new music through the outlets of your choosing?

5. If you use social media, do you use Tiktok?

Options: Yes, No

6. If you answered Yes to Question 5: On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being very little and 10 being a large amount, how much do you believe TikTok has influenced your music taste?

7. If you answered Yes to Question 5: After hearing any of the following rock songs that have gone viral on Tiktok within the past year (such as “Freaks” by Surf Curse, “Little Dark Age” by MGMT, etc.), have you listened to them on your own time?

Options: Yes, No

8. Is there any rock artist that you enjoy enough to see live in concert?

Options: Yes, No

9. Which of these subgenres of rock music are you most likely to enjoy?

Options: Indie Rock, Pop Punk, Alternative Rock, Punk Rock, Metal, Classic Rock

10. Do you believe that rock music is rising in popularity amongst your age group?

Options: Definitely, Possibly, Not Sure, Probably Not, Definitely Not

Figure 2: Question 1a of Survey Responses

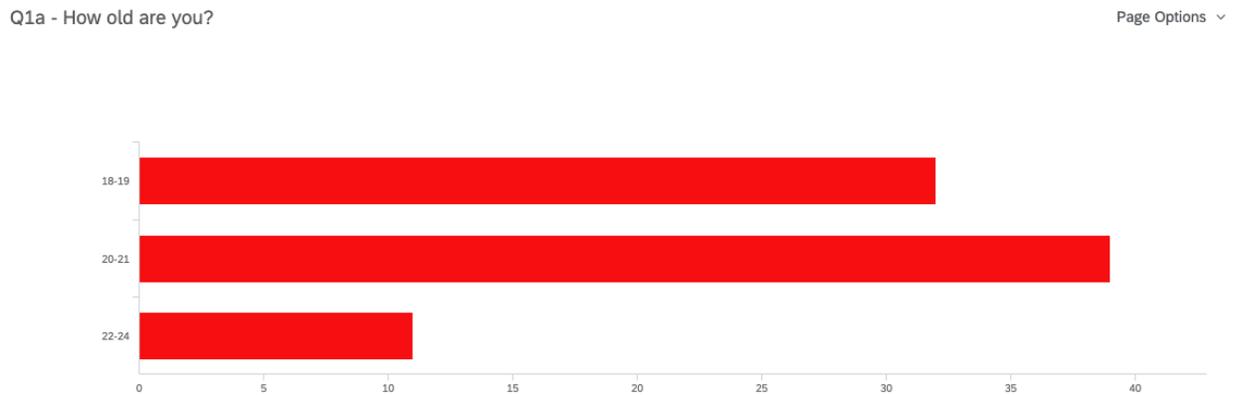
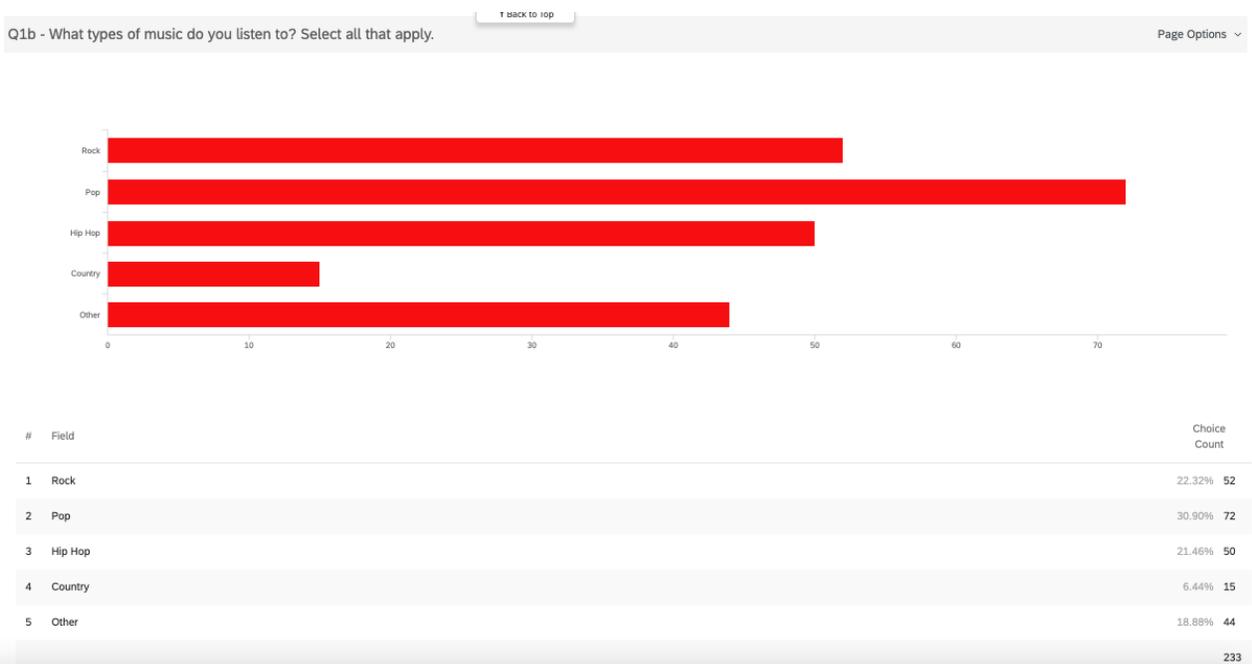


Figure 3: Question 1b of Survey Responses, Divided by Age



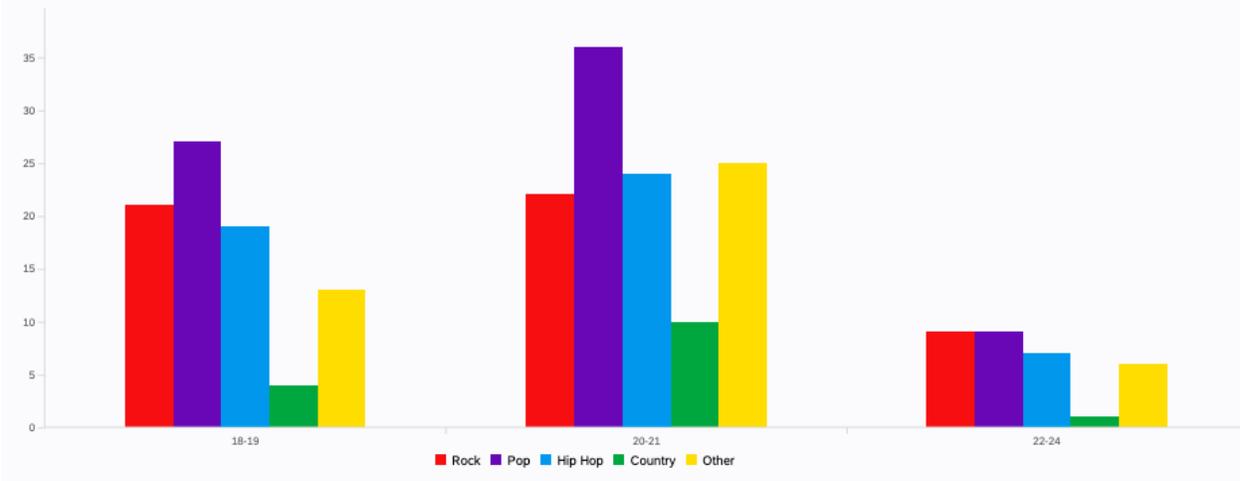
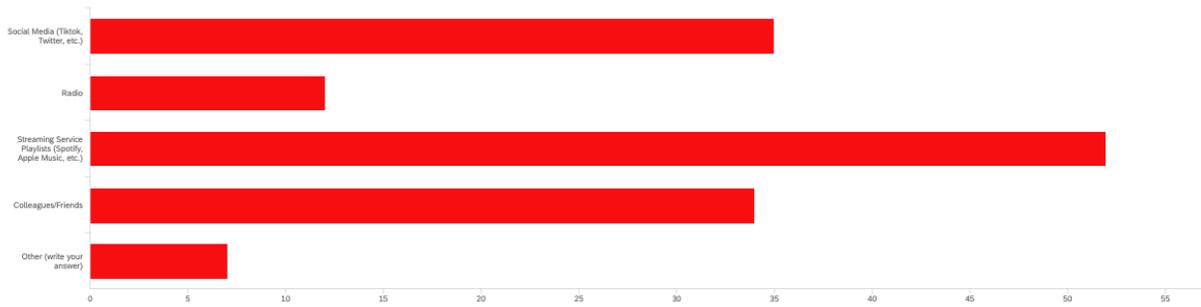


Figure 4: Question 3 of Survey Responses, Divided by Age

Q3 - Which outlets do you use to discover rock music? (select all that apply)

Page Options ▾



#	Field	18-19	20-21	22-24	Total
1	Social Media (Tiktok, Twitter, etc.)	45.71% 16	42.86% 15	11.43% 4	35
2	Radio	50.00% 6	33.33% 4	16.67% 2	12
3	Streaming Service Playlists (Spotify, Apple Music, etc.)	44.23% 23	40.38% 21	15.38% 8	52
4	Colleagues/Friends	35.29% 12	50.00% 17	14.71% 5	34
5	Other (write your answer)	28.57% 2	57.14% 4	14.29% 1	7

Figure 5: Question 9 of Survey Responses, Divided by Age

Q9 - Which of these subgenres of rock music are you most likely to enjoy?

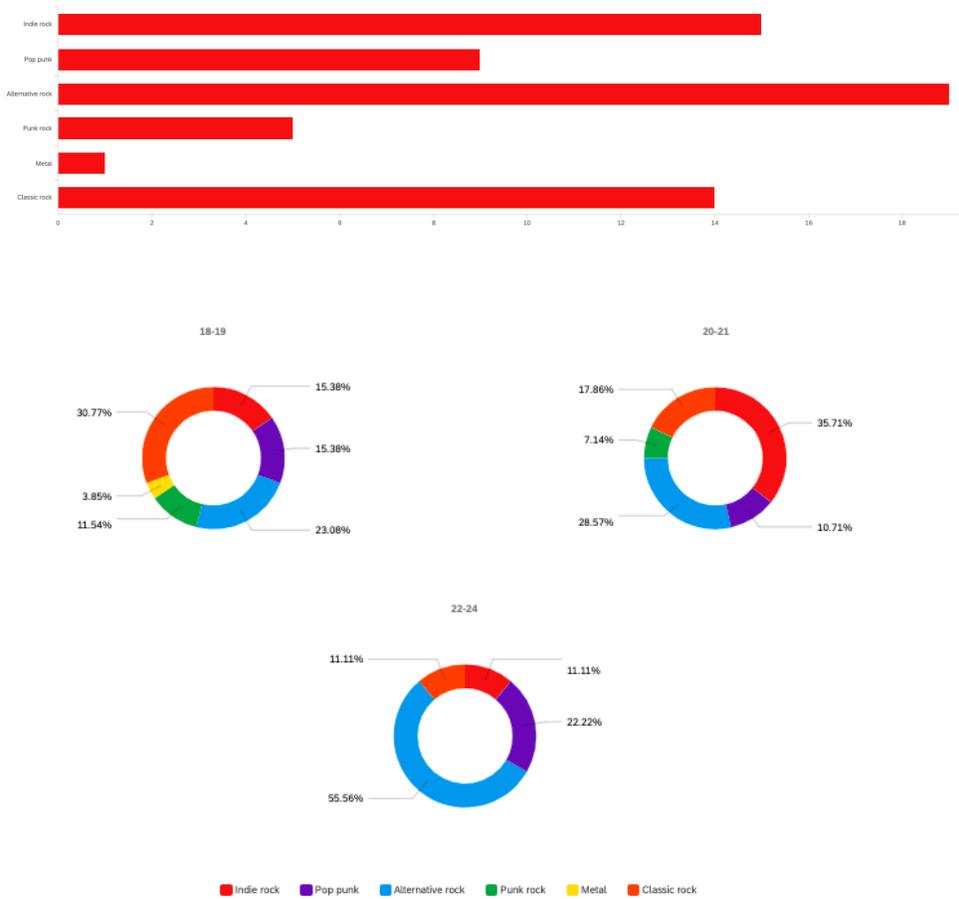


Figure 6: Question 5 of Survey Responses, Divided by Age

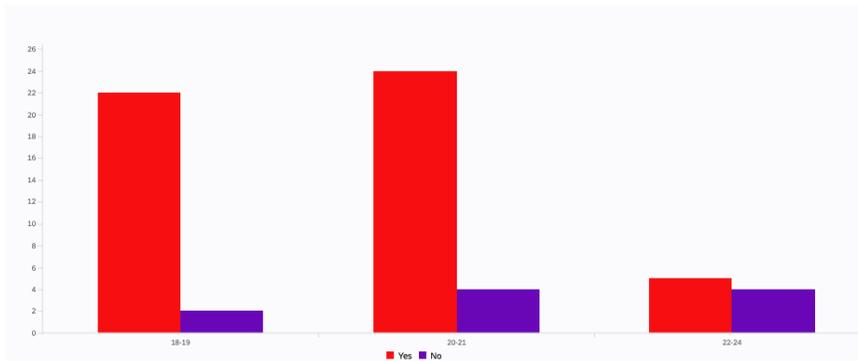


Figure 7: Question 7 of Survey Responses, Divided by Age

Q7 - If you answered Yes to Question 5: After hearing any rock songs that have gone viral on Tiktok within the past year (such as "Freaks" by Surf Curse, "Little Dark Age" ...

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Figure 8: Question 10 of Survey Responses, Divided by Rock Listeners and Non-Rock Listeners

Q10 - Do you believe that rock music is rising in popularity among your age group?

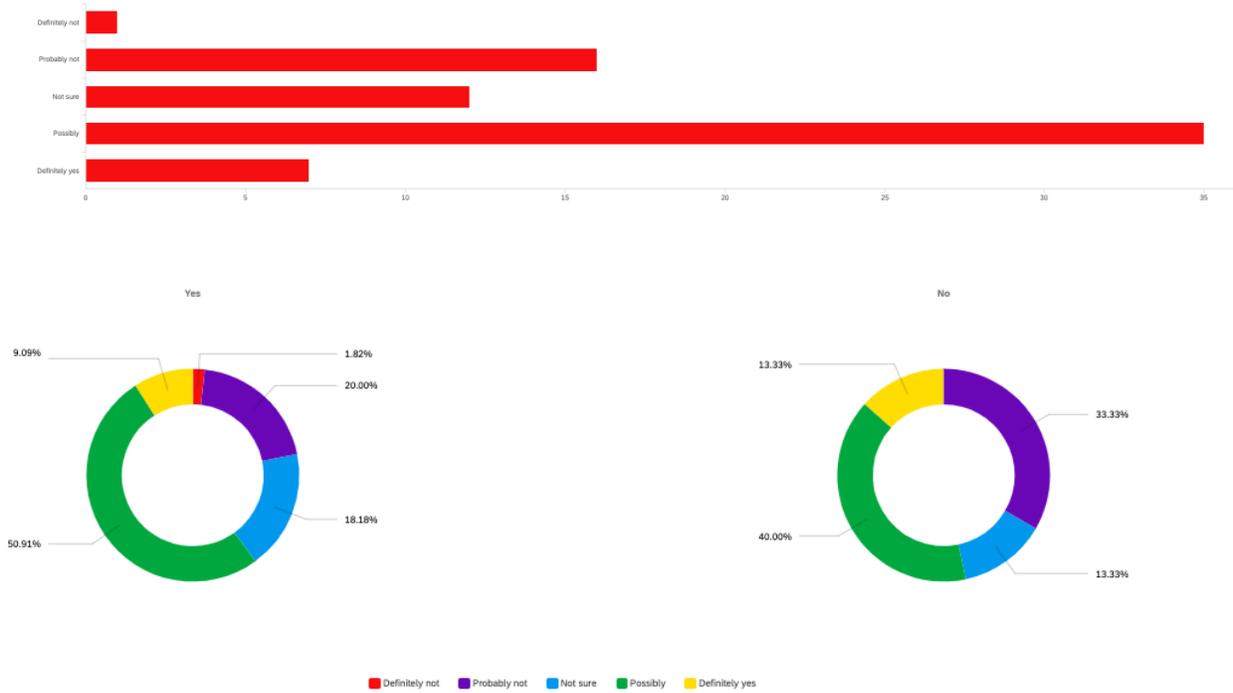


Figure 9:

Glass Animals Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	39,980,662
Spotify Followers	2,535,792
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	6.39%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	1,411,770
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	"Top 50 – Global" (16.5 million likes) "Today's Top Hits" (30 million likes) "Songs to Sing in the Car" (9.95 million likes)

Figure 10:

Beach Bunny Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	6,562,630
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Spotify Followers	830,146
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	12.65%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	825,000
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“Indie Pop” (1.6 million likes) “My Life is a Movie” (1 million likes) “2010’s Mix” (3 million likes)

Figure 11:

Vundabar Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	5,198,030
Spotify Followers	175,836
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	3.38%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	310,400
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“2010’s Mix” (3 million likes) “Indie Mix” (1 million likes) “Moody Mix” (1 million likes)

Figure 12:

Surf Curse Artist Data from SoundCharts as of March 12, 2021 (based on past month)

Spotify Monthly Listeners	8,925,550
Spotify Followers	670,037
Fan Retention (Followers/Monthly Listeners)	6.39%
Total Tiktok Videos (in past 90 days)	646,800
Notable Spotify Playlist Features	“Viral Hits” (2 million likes)